

## ABSTRACT

This paper outlines aspects of gender disparity in disasters and emergency management captured in Australian research and the resulting establishment of the Victorian Gender and Disaster (GAD) Taskforce. The achievements and learnings of the collective, collaborative and broad-based GAD Taskforce over its three-year tenure (2014–2016) are discussed. The primary aim of the GAD Taskforce was to reduce the compounding effects of gender on disaster impacts. Its success was due to initial high-level membership, inclusion of women's health and other broad-based organisations, regular well-attended meetings and willingness of members to present a gendered analysis of their organisation. Existence of the GAD Taskforce facilitated access to a critical mass of professionals with gender and disaster expertise. Limitations to achievements of the GAD Taskforce emerged from new members not having decision-making authority and notable gaps in representation from the senior management of emergency management organisations. This paper and other documents can be used by subsequent groups working on gender or diversity to build on the achievements of the Taskforce. It will be important for such new groups to consider the threat to gender equity that 'diversity and inclusion' intrinsically holds.

# Victoria's Gender and Disaster Taskforce: a retrospective analysis

Debra Parkinson<sup>1,2,3,7</sup>, Alyssa Duncan<sup>2,3,7</sup>, Susan Davie<sup>1,4</sup>, Professor Frank Archer<sup>1,7</sup>, Angela Sutherland<sup>5</sup>, Steve O'Malley<sup>6</sup>, Judy Jeffrey<sup>7</sup>, Professor Bob Pease<sup>8</sup>, Andrew A.G. Wilson<sup>9</sup> and Martijn Gough<sup>10</sup>

1. Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria.
2. Women's Health Goulburn North East, Wangaratta, Victoria.
3. Women's Health In the North, Thornbury, Victoria.
4. Victoria State Emergency Service, Melbourne, Victoria.
5. Red Cross Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria.
6. Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Melbourne, Victoria.
7. Gender and Disaster Pod, Melbourne, Victoria.
8. University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania.
9. Emergency Management Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria.
10. Aither, Melbourne, Victoria.

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## Introduction and background

*If not for the Taskforce we wouldn't have the National GEM [Gender and Emergency Management] guidelines, the Lessons in Disaster training package and certainly the attention of the emergency services organisations and the realisation of the necessity to factor gender as the main consideration on the journey to culture change.*

GAD Taskforce member 2016

The GAD Taskforce was created for a three-year term in 2014 and was co-chaired by the Victoria Emergency Management Commissioner and the Executive Officer of Women's Health Goulburn North East. It was resourced by Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the GAD Pod.<sup>1</sup> Over the three years, the Taskforce met 14 times with an average attendance of 18, including local government, women's health, academics, community members and senior managers from the emergency management sector. Emergency sector membership spanned organisations such as Victoria Police, the Country Fire Authority, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, DHHS, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA), the Victorian State Emergency Service, Victoria Red Cross, Save the Children and others.

The aim of the Taskforce was to reduce the compounding effects of gender on disasters. The first two objectives related to transforming the work environments of emergency services organisations to welcome women and discourage harmful masculine stereotypes. These and other objectives relating to embedding a 'gender lens' to organisational culture, systems and the Taskforce itself, is where most of the work was focused. Other

<sup>1</sup> The GAD Pod is an initiative of Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE), Women's Health in the North (WHIN) and Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative.

aims related to improving gender-specific and diversity-specific support and respect. Three foundation documents were collaboratively written and accepted; a foundational document with aims and objectives, terms of reference and a work plan.

The objectives and work plan were ambitious and a great deal has been achieved. Having completed the initial work plan, a broader Diversity and Inclusion Framework was introduced in Victoria to develop these themes into the future.<sup>2</sup>

## Objectives

The seven objectives were collaboratively developed with input from 11 taskforce members:

1. To transform the work environments and practices of emergency services organisations so that women find working in them to be welcoming and inclusive.
2. To transform the work environments and practices of emergency services organisations so that men feel encouraged to work against harmful, destructive, conscious and unconscious masculine behaviours to self and others, and feel less pressure to engage in them.
3. To improve the gender-specific support that men and women in emergency services organisations and other EM organisations receive after disasters.
4. To achieve the Objectives 1-3 in ways that improve respect for the needs of diverse groups, for example culture, sexuality, age, in relation to how it intersects with the issue of gender.
5. To improve the gender-specific support that men and women, along with boys and girls, throughout the community receive after disasters.
6. To embed a gender lens across culture and systems relating to disasters to improve community outcomes following future disasters.
7. To ensure efficient and responsive Taskforce planning, reflective of gender equity and representative of the principles of the foundation document.

## Why gender matters

The need for a body such as the GAD Taskforce became apparent following research on men's experiences of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfire and the Just Ask: Experiences of Men After Disasters conference in 2013 where it was launched (Parkinson & Zara 2016, Zara & Parkinson 2013, Zara *et al.* 2016).<sup>3</sup> The research found that men were expected to 'protect and provide' even when this was clearly not possible on Black Saturday and in its aftermath. High expectations of men to cope and not admit any weakness led to reluctance to seek help, and career penalties for those who did.

There is great strength in speaking through the voices of the people most affected. A year earlier, research exposing increased violence against women after Black Saturday was launched to a packed conference: Identifying the Hidden Disaster (Parkinson 2012, 2017; Parkinson Lancaster & Stewart 2011; Parkinson & Zara 2013; Sety 2012). The findings resonated with delegates, with one writing, 'It's time the lid was lifted on this'. At these two conferences—a year apart—research participants spoke eloquently and connected emotionally with those present. The effects on women and men of the worst recorded bushfire in Australia were raw and unsettling and had to be addressed. The GAD Taskforce was an important first step.

Alongside this, understanding of the differential experiences of disaster by women and men had been deepening through an expanding body of research in New Zealand (Houghton 2009a, 2009b) and Australia. Australian research traversed portrayal of women and men in the literature (Findlay 1998), gendered bushfire knowledge, firefighting skills and risk perception (DeLaine *et al.* 2008, Eriksen 2013, Goodman 2010), women's decision-making in bushfires (Proudley 2008) and increasing numbers of women dying in fires (Haynes *et al.* 2010). Financially, women suffer setbacks from disaster more profoundly. They disproportionately bear the responsibility of family and community emotional recovery (Parkinson 2011, Shaw, van Uren & Lang 2013). In the community, cultural norms risk women's lives. Men are seen as head of the household (Alston 2005) and, in an emergency, this affects women's freedom to evacuate (Tyler & Fairbrother 2013).

Gendered analysis of aspects of the emergency management sector are explored in relation to the experiences of female volunteer firefighters (Maleta 2009) and aspiring professional firefighters and leaders (Parkinson, Duncan & Hedger 2015). Also explored are gender-blind policies, data reporting and recovery planning (Hazeleger 2013), the gendering of men in disaster management and responses (Pease 2014, 2016) and male privilege in emergency management (Eriksen 2014). As Eriksen (2014) writes:

*Be it in the sizing and cut of uniforms, protective behaviour based on perceived physical weakness, the power dynamics in mixed gender settings, organisational structures that place hours on the fireline as a prerequisite for attendance of training courses that, in turn, are a requirement for being on the fireline in the first place, or (white) masculine privilege hidden in the disguise of 'the norm'; it all contributes to the undermining of confidence and the obscuring of competence.*  
Eriksen 2014, p. 146

2 Equity and Diversity Framework. At: <https://files-em.em.vic.gov.au/public/EMV-web/Emergency-Management-Diversity-and-Inclusion-Framework.pdf>

3 The foundational research on women and men was conducted by organisations that later became the Gender and Disaster Pod: Women's Health Goulburn North East, Women's Health in the North and Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative.

In the emergency management workforce, gender disparity is stark. Australia's gender-gap rank among 144 countries is rapidly dropping; now at position 48, down from 24 two years ago (World Economic Forum 2017). There is a persistent pay gap of between 15 and 19 per cent over the past two decades (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2017).

A recent report provided comprehensive sex-disaggregated employment and volunteer figures for 2014 across emergency organisations in Victoria. Of paid Metropolitan Fire Brigade staff, 90 per cent were men. Of paid Country Fire Authority staff, 71 per cent were men. Of DELWP (and networked organisations, e.g. Parks Victoria), 62 per cent were men. Of CFA volunteers, 79 per cent were men and of Victorian SES volunteers, 70 per cent were men (Parkinson *et al.* 2015). In 2014 at DELWP, men held 72 per cent of accredited fire and emergency roles and 80 per cent of strategic, incident and team leadership roles (*ibid.* p. 4) and 85 per cent of seasonal firefighters in 2014-15 were male (*ibid.* p. 7).

The report found that women have fewer role models and networks than men and face barriers in accessing training and release for deployment. The culture is male, described as 'a boys' club' and 'blokey' (Parkinson *et al.* 2015), echoing previous research (Ainsworth, Batty & Burchielli 2014).

Despite such examples of gender discrimination both within and outside the emergency management sector and differential experiences of disaster by women and men, there was little appreciation of the relevance of gender to disaster when the GAD Taskforce was first established in January 2014.

## Gender relations context 2014-2016

The existence of the GAD Taskforce spearheaded gender as an issue for a male-dominated sector. Its successes and its shortcomings reveal much about gender politics at the time. The broader context equally tells this story. Australia had an extremely effective Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, the Prime Minister announced \$100 million to stop domestic violence, a YouTube clip demanded respect for women in the military from (then) Chief of Army Lt. Gen. David Morrison that went viral with 1.7 million views and the advocacy of Rosie Batty confronted men's violence against women.

During 2014-2016, there was a focus on both gender equality and violence against women in Victoria. VicHealth had earlier noted that a key determinant of violence against women is gender inequality (VicHealth 2011). There was a Royal Commission into Family Violence (Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016), a Victorian Gender Equality Strategy Consultation and a Premier of Victoria who announced a target of 50 per cent of female appointments to government boards and courts (including emergency organisations such as the Country Fire Authority).

The Premier's leadership on issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people is another indicator

of a changed environment for equality. Other initiatives include:

- the 'Independent review into sex discrimination and sexual harassment, including predatory behaviour, in Victoria Police' (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission 2015)
- the formal review and report on the resourcing, operations, management and culture of the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board and Country Fire Authority (O'Byrne 2015) and the ministerial working group to consider its recommendations
- the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission 'Independent Equity and Diversity Review of the Country Fire Authority and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade'.

In addition were new equity measures for emergency management organisations. A leading example is the Victorian DELWP that, after initiating a research report into barriers for women in fire and emergency leadership roles (Parkinson, Duncan & Hedger 2015) instigated sustainable and structural gender equity measures (MacDonnell & Parkinson 2016).

Overarching these achievements, the Victorian Government Gender Equality Strategy aims to change attitudes and behaviours to reduce violence against women and achieve gender equality. One approach is to measure progress against 50 per cent targets for women, for example, among executives in the Victorian public sector, among councillors and mayors in local government and in new appointments to paid boards (Victorian Government 2016).

However, 'evidence of progress is not evidence of success' (Summers 2013) and opposition to gender equity measures remains strong. The Metropolitan Fire Brigade's 2015-16 recruitment drive to increase female firefighters to five per cent by June 30 2018 is a case in point (Metropolitan Fire Brigade 2016). Although 293 women applied in 2015-16 with many paying the \$150 cost to sit the exam, only 45 passed the exam and none passed the physical aptitude test. This lack of success by the Metropolitan Fire Brigade against its target for female representation indicates the need to carefully consider what diversity means. There were only three female applicants eligible for the 2017 recruitment course (Personal communication, Metropolitan Fire Brigade 14 December 2016). In contrast, soon after Christine Nixon was appointed as Victorian Police Commissioner in 2001, Victoria Police removed the 'wall and beam' test from pre-entry physical tests as this had prevented women from joining the force (Sugden 2003). Statistics from June 2016 showed 27 per cent of police and 40 per cent of recruits are female (Victoria Police 2016). The positive effects of more female recruits have been recognised, including for the ability of many women to de-escalate violence and for a reduction in corruption (Gutierrez-Garcia & Rodríguez 2016, Metz & Kulik 2008, Schuck & Rabe-Hemp 2007, Van Ewijk 2012).

Although a Victorian-based initiative, this paper has national implications. The achievement of Fire and Rescue NSW of 50 per cent women in their December

2016 graduating class was a historic and significant achievement (Hoh 2016). Equally, it has relevance to the international drive for gender equality in emergency management. The work of the GAD Taskforce shows consistency with international trends in coordinating bodies. For example, the United Nations Global Protection Cluster's *Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action* (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2006), the Minimum Standard Commitments to Gender and Diversity in Emergency Programming (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2015). GAD Pod initiatives were included in a United Nations publication on *Women's Leadership in Risk-Resilient Development* (Parkinson & Zara 2015).

The 'two steps forward and one back' movement towards gender equality has characterised the past three years.

## Lessons

Male privilege not only thrives in Australian society (Pease 2010) but is ingrained in many parts of emergency management organisations. The dominance of men in numbers, in leadership roles and in frontline positions is evidence of this.

The research that highlighted the need for the GAD Taskforce presented the lived experience of men and women in the context of disasters and used participants' own words to describe the damage of stringent gender stereotypes and gender inequality. The narratives were from men and women in the community and from the emergency management sector.

Although recent policy directions appear to favour looking outside organisational functioning to focus on communities, there is much crossover between both groups. The original focus detailed in the first two objectives is still critical; to transform 'work environments and practices ... so that women find working in them to be welcoming and inclusive' and so that 'men feel encouraged to work against harmful, destructive, conscious and unconscious masculine behaviours ... and feel less pressure to engage in them'. Consequently, the principal recommendation would be to keep this important focus.

## Key achievements

The GAD Taskforce has a number of achievements:

- Increasing understanding and personal change spoken of by senior men who were members of the GAD Taskforce.
- Influencing changed policies and practices to incorporate gender awareness and reduce gender inequality by participating organisations, e.g. annual review of ESTA policies and training regarding gender equity.
- Success in externally competitive national research funding with sequentially funded projects resulting in

the publication of articles in both the peer reviewed literature and professional literature and a number of book chapters (Enarson & Pease 2016, Parkinson, Zara & Davie 2015, Parkinson & Zara 2015, Parkinson & Zara 2016, Pease 2014).

- Research Report by the GAD Pod, *'Women in Fire and Emergency Leadership Roles: How can we improve the balance?'*<sup>4</sup> A reference group headed by then CFA Chief Euan Ferguson extended the learnings. This has been followed with 10 workshops with greater than 200 DELWP staff.
- International conference presentations in Yokohama, Tokyo and Copenhagen and numerous national conferences and state and local forums.
- The Annual Claire Zara Memorial Oration on gender and emergency management as part of the Victorian Emergency Management conference with nationally respected speakers, Elizabeth Broderick, David Morrison and Dominic Lane in 2015, Professor S. Caroline Taylor AM in 2016 and Mary Barry in 2017.
- Facilitating and support of key projects including the DHHS and GAD Pod roadmaps resource, the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines and the Lessons in Disaster education project with more than 80 middle managers from the emergency management sector.
- Education of GAD Taskforce members by leaders in the field, including Dr Christine Eriksen, Professor Bob Pease, Dr Stephen Fisher, (then) Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick and Lt. General David Morrison (rtd.).
- Leaders including Craig Lapsley, Steve Fontana and Adam Fennessy in videos promoting gender equality in the sector.

## Enablers of success

*Attending meetings gave me space to focus on issues relating to gender and it has changed the way I think about my role in the emergency management sector. The meetings highlighted how far we've still got to go!*  
GAD Taskforce member 2016

The success of the Taskforce was due in a large part to its senior membership, including the Emergency Management Commissioner as co-chair. The fact that the other co-chair was the Executive Officer of Women's Health Goulburn North East signalled a willingness to share power and recognise gendered expertise. The co-chair arrangement immediately gave the Taskforce credibility and symbolised a different approach, diverging from traditional hierarchy.

The initial funding to the GAD Pod enabled the Roadmaps on the GAD Pod website and the broad-based distribution list for the monthly GAD Communiqué.

<sup>4</sup> Women in Fire and Emergency Leadership Roles: How can we improve the balance? At: <http://delwp.vic.gov.au/about-us/women-in-fire-and-emergency-leadership>.

The seed funds from DHHS and EMV were augmented by project funding from NDRGS (Natural Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme), DELWP and NEMP (National Emergency Management Projects). Success in submissions to NDRGS and NEMP was greatly facilitated by support letters from the chairs of the GAD Taskforce, representing more than 20 key organisations.

While the GAD Pod led progress towards the objectives through funding from the DHHS and EMV, individual taskforce members and organisations also instigated change. A critical characteristic of the GAD Taskforce was that it resourced members to improve gender awareness in their own contexts and provided an authorising environment to champions of gender equity. GAD Taskforce members commented that their membership gave them the authority and confidence to raise gender issues at the highest levels within their organisation.

Contributors to success:

- The regularity of meetings (14) with five well-attended meetings in each of the first two years gave momentum and quickly built cohesion in the founding group. This was strengthened by equally regular Advisory Group meetings (10).
- A regular 'Around the Table' agenda item prompted members to share their successes in progressing the work plan, thereby creating cross-pollination of strategies.
- Networking between emergency services organisations and across the emergency management sector, local government, academic and non-government sectors was generative of ideas and collaborative action.
- The willingness of emergency services organisations to present a gendered analysis of their organisation. The act of compiling in-house gender statistics drew attention to the facts and stimulated meaningful discussion. One Taskforce member stated she appreciated hearing senior leaders discuss the issue transparently. Another felt more confident to call out sexist behaviours in her workplace.
- The existence of the GAD Taskforce enabled easy access to a critical mass of professionals with gender and disaster expertise. One example was the 'Paper in a Day' led by the Municipal Association of Victoria. It was convened to bring a diverse group together to write up a number of key resources for use by emergency management practitioners. The '16 Days of Activism Statement of Commitment' in 2015 was another way to raise awareness and produce resources effectively. Joint authorship of journal articles and shared conference presentations emerged from the Taskforce.
- Significant projects, like DELWP and the GAD Pod's research into barriers for women in fire and emergency roles, were a direct result of conversations and new connections made through the GAD Taskforce. Inclusion of the Annual Claire Zara Memorial Oration in Victoria's Emergency Management Conference was championed by the GAD Taskforce (especially Metropolitan Fire Brigade

members) and ensures ongoing first-hand connection with the sector. Close collaboration with Monash University through the Taskforce and Advisory Group meetings extended the reach of the gender lens to participants from across Australia's emergency management sector who attended Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative forums. Organisations made internal changes as a direct result of awareness from GAD Taskforce participation. For example, ESTA established an annual review of gender equity policies and training and compilation of family violence data through Triple Zero calls.

Most of the work in the first years focused on Objectives 1, 2 and 4, which relate to transforming the work environments and practices of emergency services organisations. Objectives 5 and 6 refer particularly to community and culture in disasters.<sup>5</sup> Key achievements of online training modules and the 1800 RESPECT partnership that developed the ABC community service announcement about violence in disasters on ABC television and radio are wide-reaching and on target. Objective 7 relates to the GAD Taskforce modelling positive change. It sought to do this through diverse membership. Community members, specialist non-government organisations and academics were included along with leaders from the emergency management sector. The original concept was to disrupt the normal hierarchy of emergency management meetings, leading to robust discussion.

A critical component was inclusion of the Gender Dynamics Observation. It began following an early presentation from Taskforce member, Professor Bob Pease, entitled 'Reflecting on Privileged Positions in Gender Inequality'. Within the presentation, it was noted that women were not often heard in workplace organisations, even when part of management teams; that men hear more easily from other men and are less comfortable being led by women or sharing leadership with women; that women have to work really hard to be heard and that being the lone female voice in leadership at senior levels of emergency management is disempowering. Members were keen to replicate the rich discussion that followed this presentation. This regular agenda item provided a unique opportunity to raise and discuss observations of gender inequality. As a result, the meetings reflected the aims of the Taskforce through disrupting usual or typical gendered dynamics and encouraging participants to be aware of unconscious biases and gender disparities in engagement. It became apparent that the terminology and concept of gender was often misunderstood in policy forums. Addressing gender issues required more than just addressing the composition and representation of women and men.

After two years of the gender dynamics documentation system, it was observed that the problem of power imbalances remained present, reinforcing that women can only challenge if they feel men are open-minded and are willing to listen.

<sup>5</sup> Objectives are available at: <http://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/GADT-Workplan-achievements-2014-2016.pdf>.

## Barriers to success

Command-and-control organisations are necessarily robust and the extent to which disruption to the status quo was achieved is debatable. Challenging discussion was mostly limited to members outside the hierarchy of emergency management. There were missed opportunities for equally valuing and learning from those with community or gender expertise. A clear example of this was the absence of senior leaders from the emergency management sector at the presentation by Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick and Lt. Gen. David Morrison. The absence of some members of the GAD Taskforce and the loss of key staff with gender expertise or knowledge of this work limited success.

In 2018, membership of the GAD Taskforce became problematic with new members not in senior roles to make decisions on behalf of their organisations. Decisions about criteria for membership were delayed. This began about halfway through the GAD Taskforce, disempowering the group and stalling its progress as a united and focused body. Ongoing problems with teleconferencing meant that rural members stopped phoning in to meetings. This especially limited contributions from community members and those from more distant locations.

## Recommendations

An opportunity exists for EMV's Diversity and Inclusion Framework to build on the achievements of the GAD Taskforce and to take the initiative further by learning from the challenges faced over the past three years. In particular, the threat to gender equity that a diversity and inclusion approach intrinsically holds when it omits the word 'gender'. It is important to recognise that gender should be prioritised, as half the population is women and women are part of every 'diverse' or marginalised group. Discrimination against women is socially constructed and must not be secondary to cultural sensitivities. This structural gender discrimination is intersectional and is more complex than 'respect' between individuals. Further, the incorporation of the National GEM Guidelines is expected to progress gender equality in emergency management.

Other recommendations for the Diversity and Inclusion Committee are to:

- include the Gender Dynamics Observation to ensure it goes beyond numbers, airtime and 'respect', to report on the gendered power dynamics observed
- incorporate people who bring specialist expertise in gender
- include community members and pay them to support their attendance
- address membership issues early
- hold regular presentations of gender analyses by leaders of emergency services organisations

- devote time to identifying how change happens. One GAD Taskforce member suggested it has happened over the past three years by:
  - diverse people working together in trusting ways
  - making issues visible
  - connecting with personal emotions.

## Conclusion

In an environment where shifting research into practice is challenging, the GAD Taskforce has proven it is possible. Achievements against the work plan is evidence of this. Taskforce members indicated their 'head to heart' change and a deeper understanding of how their day-to-day work influences gender politics.

In reflecting on the three-year tenure, GAD Taskforce members spoke of the challenging nature of addressing gendered issues, particularly in the emergency management sector. Yet equally, they remained hopeful, pointing to incremental steps, sustainable changes and indeed, the leap in awareness by emergency services organisations of the centrality of gender. Unfortunately, this new gender awareness appears to have been accompanied by fear and a shift away from naming it. Issues must be identified and named to be acknowledged and addressed.

*No change is achieved without struggle. A founding GAD Taskforce member wrote: 'Until each of us feels personally confronted by the concept of gender, and comes to embrace it, we'll each reinforce gender and disaster problems rather than alleviate them'.*  
GAD Taskforce member 2015

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The establishment and achievements of the GAD Taskforce would not have happened without the insight, intellect and persistence of Claire Zara. We remember and miss her.

The Foundation document, terms of reference and work plan are available at [www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/gender-disaster-taskforce](http://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/gender-disaster-taskforce).

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## About the authors

**Debra Parkinson** is an adjunct research fellow with Monash University and manager of research, advocacy and policy for Women's Health In the North (WHIN) and Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE).

**Alyssa Duncan** is a Juris Doctor from Monash University and researcher for the Gender and Disaster Pod. She has worked in women's health since 2012, helping conduct research projects.

**Susan Davie** is Manager, Community Connections, with the Victoria State Emergency Services. She is a PhD candidate at Monash University.

**Professor Frank Archer** is an Emeritus Professor at Monash University and heads the Monash University Disaster Resilience Initiative.

**Angela Sutherland** is State Manager, Emergency Services Red Cross Victoria. She has worked in emergency management since 2008.

**Steve O'Malley** AFSM is a leading firefighter and the Multicultural and Indigenous Liaison Officer Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade. He has been an operational firefighter for more than 28 years, is a graduate in human rights and a life and Board member of Women and Firefighting Australasia.

**Judy Jeffrey** is a consultant for the GAD Pod and has a background in education, information technology, community development and local government.

**Professor Bob Pease** is an Adjunct Professor in the University of Tasmania and an Honorary Professor at Deakin University. His research interests are men's violence against women, the critical interrogation of privilege and critical social work practice.

**Andrew A.G. Wilson** is an operational planning manager with Emergency Management Victoria. He has worked in the Victorian Government for 30 years in roles relating to research, systems, bushfires, knowledge and learning.

**Martijn Gough** has expertise in disaster risk reduction through his career with the Department of Treasury and Finance, the United Nations Development Program and the Municipal Association of Victoria. He initiated the local government Gender and Emergency Management Advisory Group and represented councils on the GAD Taskforce.