

Women and Disaster

Relationship violence, child abuse and divorce have increased in the wake of **overseas** disasters. **In the US**, a 2009 study¹ showed a four-fold increase in intimate partner violence following Hurricane Katrina. The increase was driven by first-time occurrences of violence amongst displaced people.

New Zealand police reported a 53% increase in callouts to domestic violence incidents over the weekend of the Canterbury earthquake on 4.9.2010.²

In **Australia**, there is **no** published research on relationship violence and disaster, yet Australians have a **1 in 6** estimated lifetime exposure to natural disaster.³

It is hard to acknowledge relationship violence when a man may have acted **heroically** or is traumatised and is now struggling, perhaps with unemployment or suicidal thoughts.

Relationship violence is a **taboo** subject. It's always been hard for women to report, but this is taken to a new level after a disaster. We have heard that women are **sacrificing** their own needs 'for the greater good'. 'Other people's needs are greater than mine.' And of course, after a disaster, support **services are stretched**.

In this context, relationship violence, may be **unrecognised and unrecorded** during and in the aftermath of disaster.

Yet, some women *have* experienced violent behaviour from their partners post disasters, and recovery workers need to be alert to the possibility of abuse, isolation and exclusion of women.

Abuse may be **psychological, financial, physical or sexual abuse**, and may include **property damage and stalking**. Where researchers have noted the link between disaster and increased violence against women, they attribute possible **causes** to heightened stress through homelessness, depression, PTSD, financial problems and alcohol abuse.

¹ Anastario, M., Shehab, N. & Lawry, L. (March, 2009). "Increased Gender-based Violence Among Women Internally Displaced in Mississippi Two Years Post-Hurricane Katrina." *Disaster Med Public Health Preparedness* 3(1): 18-26.

² Houghton, R. (2010). Christchurch Earthquake and Domestic Violence. In Gender and Disaster Network [GDNET-L@GROUPS.PREVENTIONWEB.NET]; on behalf of; Maureen Fordham [maureen.fordham@NORTHUMBRIA.AC.UK] (Ed.) (Email ed.). Christchurch: Gender and Disaster Network.

³ Caruana, C. (2009). Life in the aftermath: A summary of the literature on individual and family functioning following natural disasters. *Family Relationships Quarterly*, 14, 3-7.

A leading US disaster researcher, Elaine Enarson, wrote that from Peru to Alaska, **men cope** through **alcohol abuse and aggression**.⁴ Another, Duke Austin, wrote of a kind of '**hyper-masculinity**' that emerges from the stress and loss that can lead to increased levels of violence.⁵

Community attitudes continue to excuse this violence. A 2006 VicHealth survey found that a large proportion of Australians believed 'relationship violence can be excused if it results from temporary anger or results in genuine regret'.⁶ Such violence may even be seen as legitimate, and excused because this is 'the way men behave'. After a disaster, all kinds of behaviour is excused as existing social structures and norms are put on hold while a community recovers.

Alongside this, **demands on women** - caring for children and the elderly, looking out for community members, volunteering and increased workloads - can be excessive and increase the stress on individuals, families and communities. Lack of services and difficulty in accessing services because of **childcare and transport** restraints can further endanger and isolate women.

Single women, lesbians, widows, single mothers and divorced women can be overlooked in the recovery process and become further isolated from mainstream services and support, including financial aid.

As workers in communities planning for disasters or in disaster recovery, what can we do?

- ❖ Ask women if they feel safe. Support them to access appropriate services.
- ❖ Be aware that women are at increased risk of violence and male control over resources. Ensure caseworkers are aware of this and services are available.
- ❖ Engage women in the recovery and disaster planning process – not every woman needs to make sandwiches. Think leadership, non-traditional skills programs and decision-making. Resist stereotypes.

⁴ Enarson, E., & Phillips, B. D. (2008). Invitation to a new feminist disaster sociology: integrating feminist theory and methods. In B. D. Phillips & B. H. Morrow (Eds.), *Women and Disasters: From Theory to Practice* (pp. 41-74). USA: International Research Committee on Disasters.

⁵ Austin, D. W. (31.7.2008). Hyper-Masculinity and Disaster: Gender Role Construction in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting. Retrieved from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p241530_index.html

⁶ VicHealth. (2009). *National Survey on Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women 2009 Changing cultures, changing attitudes – preventing violence against women: A summary of findings*. Carlton: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

- ❖ Compensate women for their participation in planning and recovery and provide support for their participation, such as childcare and transport.
- ❖ Do not overburden them.
- ❖ Tap women's knowledge about their community. Identify sex-specific needs. Use existing women's networks.
- ❖ Collect data and get the facts on women, men and children.
- ❖ Track where relief funds go - or don't go.

(Suggestions adapted from the work of Elaine Enarson.)

This information is drawn from a literature review by Women's Health Goulburn North East for a study of women's experience of violence after disasters. For the full document and references, see www.whealth.com.au