

Towards a More Disaster Resilient and Safer Victoria

Green Paper September 2011

Response from Women's Health Goulburn North East

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is the government funded specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. We are dedicated to promoting the health and well being of all women and to improving the delivery of health and community services for women in our local community.

Part B: Issues and Challenges

Governance Arrangements:

The Victorian Government has a target of 50% participation of women on government boards and committees.

Emergency management structures in Australia largely reflect the traditional western culture of male Anglo-Saxon decision makers. The benefits resulting from greater diversity in decision making groups is now acknowledged and accepted in government and business (Chief Executive Women (2009:1).

The lack of women in leadership positions in rural areas was highlighted as an issue of great concern to rural women in a study by the National Rural Women's Coalition (2005: 7-8). It is felt that leadership opportunities are not as accessible to rural women due to infrastructural and social restrictions such as lack of accessible child-care, lack of mentoring or female role models and stereotypical issues in rural Australia.

Overwhelmingly, rural women want to influence policy that affects their quality of lives. Top heavy, silo-based service delivery models within government have resulted in limited access to real policy development for 'grass roots' individuals. Too often the people whose lives will be most affected by policy initiatives, particularly women, have the least say in the development and implementation of these policies.

Recommendations for Emergency Management Governance:

- a. Undertake a gender audit of the Emergency Management governance structures relating to committee leadership (Figure 2: p12) and governance and emergency management bodies (3.6 p17).
- b. Set a 50% target for all governance structures in the emergency management

Service Delivery Performance:

- a. Violence Against Women

WHGNE has undertaken a review of international disaster literature (www.whealth.com.au 2011) which indicates that physical and sexual violence against women increases following disasters.

The 'Women and Disaster' fact sheet (attached) provides a summary of key findings and includes strategies relevant to the reform of emergency management service delivery.

b. Gendered nature of disaster planning, preparation, relief, recovery and research

There is increasing evidence from across the globe that women and men take different roles in planning and preparing for disasters (Enarson 2009:4). Women are more likely to be responsible for the practical preparation of the household, informing family members, storing food and water and protecting family belongings. Men are more likely to liaise with government officials, prepare the outside of buildings, make decisions about evacuation and timing, manage water resources, distribute emergency relief and receive and disseminate early warnings to the community (Alston, 2010:9).

Australian and international research has shown that women's and men's decisions in times of crisis differ along risk-taking lines, use and type of coping strategies, adaptability, and advice taking and information seeking behaviours. Existing gender roles and inequalities shape responses so that new challenges and changing conditions can magnify and create new inequities and vulnerabilities. (Women's Health Victoria; 10 Point Plan, 2010: 7).

Government investments to support economic recovery post disasters often focuses on physical infrastructure replacement and largely creates jobs in male oriented sectors.

The UN Commission on the Status of Women (Issues Paper 2009) called on Governments to incorporate gender perspectives into all economic policy making and increase participation of women in economic governance structures and processes to ensure policy coherence and adequate resources for gender equality and the empowerment of women. Policy responses should focus on gender sensitive employment creation, public investment in care services that reduces women's unpaid domestic and care work, and policies that promote equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men. It is crucial to ensure that policy responses [to financial crisis] take into account the differential priorities and needs of women and girls and do not undermine the policies and plans that promote gender equality and women's empowerment. In the context of the financial crisis gender responsive budgets are increasingly important for ensuring adequate resources for gender equality and women's empowerment.

c. Volunteers

Regional Victorians show higher rates of volunteering than people in metropolitan Melbourne and women are more likely to be volunteers than men (20% compared to 16%). Almost one in four women between the ages of 35 and 44 is a volunteer. (Volunteering Census 2006, DPCD Info Sheet 4)

A review of CFA volunteering statistics and programs in the Loddon Mallee region post the Bendigo and Redesdale fires (2009) resulted in a number of women's focus groups and subsequently women centred fire preparation groups. It was found that many women were not aware of variety of volunteer roles open to them in the CFA and a number of CFA buildings were not user friendly for women i.e. no female toilets. Women found attending CFA programs difficult because of caring responsibilities (family) and they reported wanting

to ask different questions re: risks and preparation. This program is an example of the value of women specific activities that could be extended to benefit emergency management in Victoria.

d. Inclusive Emergency Management

The Inclusive Emergency Management Project (p30) mentioned in the Green Paper has the potential to address a number of issues relating to the gendered nature of disasters.

Women make up approx 50% of the Victorian population but are under-represented on the vast majority of government decision making bodies. Women's unique perspectives within families, communities, businesses are not effectively utilised to shape service delivery in key areas of government services such as emergency management.

International and Australian research has shown clearly that there are gender differences in the way women and men receive and use information about emergencies and their attitude to 'risk' as well as the roles they generally undertake in response and recovery.

The demands on women, including caring for children, looking out for community members, volunteering and increased household workloads; can be excessive and are compounded by difficulty in accessing appropriate services during times of disaster e.g. child care. Unless the specific vulnerabilities faced by women during disasters are recognised and taken into account service delivery can further endanger and isolate women.

e. Research

Gender disaggregated data enables effective assessment of impacts and provides a sound evidence base to develop more targeted and effective emergency management strategies.

Recommendations for Emergency Management Service Delivery:

- a. Be aware that women are at an increased risk of violence and male control over resources and ensure caseworkers are aware of this and appropriate services are available. Implement the disaster planning and recovery strategies outlined in the 'Women and Disaster' fact sheet.
- b. Ensure economic recovery measures include gender sensitive employment creation, public investment in care services that reduces women's unpaid domestic and care work,
- c. Review and develop women centred volunteer programs in emergency management.
- d. Extend the Inclusive Emergency Management Project to establish a partnership with Women's Health Services throughout Victoria to improve Municipal Emergency Plans, and State plans where relevant, by identifying and responding to gender differences and thereby increase emergency management effectiveness.
- e. All disaster and emergency management data to be gender disaggregated and analysed by gender to identify differences in the impacts of disasters and develop gender responsive strategies.

Government working with communities to build resilience

Women are resilient and their knowledge, experiences and social roles function to build community strength following a disaster (Women's Health Victoria Climate Change Submission, 2010:2). Women's community organisations have insight, information, experience, networks and resources vital to increasing disaster resilience.

Yet gender blindness is the norm even in outreach to the family, where disaster resilience must begin. International researchers (Enarson 2009:10 - attached) have found women to be more significantly affected by gender considerations, including higher fatality rates, greatly increased domestic labour, slower recovery, higher reported post-disaster stress rates, and increased exposure to gender violence. Gender-responsive planning is one way to ensure that scarce resources are used well, that they are useful in the ways intended, and that they find their way quickly into the right hands. When gender issues are addressed in crisis contexts, all people benefit. Gender-responsive programming is an investment in the disaster resilience of the nation.

Recommendations for building resilience:

- a. Include women's perspective in the development of disaster risk, response, recovery and resilience products and services
- b. Fund women centred disaster risk and resilience programs to access and develop the capacities of women's groups to contribute to disaster resilience.

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Enarson, E. (2009) Gender Mainstreaming in Emergency Management: A Training Manual for Emergency Planners, Women and Health Care Reform, Canada

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