

THE RELEVANCE OF GENDER IN DISASTER RISK

¹ See full report, 'The Way He Tells It' at www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice

Women's experiences during the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires were researched by Women's Health Goulburn North East (late 2009 to 2011).¹ This research provided new insights about how to keep women and children safer during disasters. These are the findings regarding determining role of gender – in a nutshell.

THERE ARE DIFFERENT VULNERABILITIES IN DISASTER DEPENDING ON GENDER

Disasters are managed in a gendered way. We see the role of men as protector and women as protected. In the most obvious example, women's place is seen as being at home with the children while men's place is seen as being primarily at the frontline fighting bushfires. Although historically more men have died than women in bushfires, until Black Saturday the gap between male and female deaths in Australian bushfires was closing, and in two fires, had actually reversed (Haynes et al., 2008).

Q. What's the relevance of gender to disaster planning?

A. The way we construct gender roles creates different risks for men and women in disasters. It is these circumstances that must be taken into account and planned for – without the assumption that men will be tough and women will be protected.

'WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST' IS EXPOSED AS A MYTH

In a disaster, we all draw on the myth that women will be looked after by men. However, research has found that this is not what happens during disasters. We are not insisting that men risk their lives for women – men have an equal right to be human and flawed. Rather, we urge inclusion of women's experiences and recognition of the important role women play in disasters.

Q. What does this have to do with disaster planning?

A. Disaster planning that assumes a set of characteristics of men and another of women is predicated on inaccuracy. When women's voices are heard and documented, it is revealed that the 'knight in shining armour' during a disaster is equally likely to be a woman as a man. For many children being driven out of the fires on Black Saturday, their protector was a woman. Their mum saved their lives.

A DIFFERENT GENDERED APPROACH TO DISASTER IS NEEDED – ONE THAT IS BASED ON THE REALITY OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES.

We know that, especially with bushfire, women are often left with the responsibility of home and children as mostly men join efforts to fight the fire. Indeed, their vulnerability was highlighted in a report two months before Black Saturday (Haynes, et al., 2008). One woman captured the consequences of believing men can protect women and children when she said, 'He was my fire plan'. As a result, she almost died. He was unable to leave the fire front and any plans for protecting her had to be abandoned due to the magnitude of the disaster.

Q. What needs to change in planning for disaster?

A. Women must be included equally in all levels of disaster planning and recovery planning, and this planning must address the



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reality that women alone or with children are likely to be trying to protect properties or trying to escape.

GENDER ROLES MEAN WOMEN ARE CONSIDERED TO BE THE PRIMARY CARER OF CHILDREN. THIS DISADVANTAGES WOMEN IN THE AFTER-MATH OF DISASTERS.

After the fires, it seemed that society expected women to care for children – no matter what. This same expectation was not levelled at men.

Q. Why was this a problem?

A. Financial stress is a major consideration after disasters like bushfires that destroy homes, properties, cars and belongings. If women are unable to work because the father of the children is not sharing their care, then women are financially disadvantaged. This situation occurred both in separated couples and those still together. Women felt their children needed careful parenting because of the trauma they had experienced and often, the loss of friends and life as they knew it. If fathers were physically and/or emotionally absent, they felt pressure to take on this role full-time. The lack of options for women returning to work after the fires was compounded by the physical burning of schools, kindergartens and child-care premises.

SOME MEN DISPLAYED A KIND OF 'HYPER-MASCULINITY' DURING AND AFTER THE DISASTER.

The magnitude of the fires was unexpected and overwhelming to those who survived.

'I AM A MAN, AND I CAN DO' HAS BEEN DEFEATED IN SO MANY MEN. THINGS THEY

COULDN'T DO AND THEY COULDN'T BE AND SO MUCH WAS LOST.

(RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)

Some men sought to regain a sense of control of their environment through extreme behaviours. Women described a kind of hyper-masculinity displayed by their partners both during and in the aftermath of the fires.

Q. What do you mean, 'hyper-masculinity'?

A. Hyper-masculinity refers to the acting out of exaggeratedly masculine characteristics by some men. The atmosphere of impending disaster seemed to excite some men, who took themselves into the danger rather than away from it. Women described their partners as wanting to do something and feeling frustrated. They appeared to take unnecessary risks. In the weeks and months afterwards, for some men, other risk-taking behaviours became commonplace.

IT WAS LIKE BOYS' OWN ADVENTURE. ... WELL, HE SEEMED TO BE IN HIS ELEMENT.

(RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Recognise that the way men and women act is often the result of social conditioning and these gendered roles can leave women at a disadvantage both during and after disasters.



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