Gender and Disaster

Literature Review

Introduction

The bushfires that affected so many communities in the Shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi were unprecedented. The ferocity of the fires, the total devastation of whole communities, the individual tragedies were a new and traumatic experience for the people living and working there. While some research has looked at what happens in the disaster recovery phase, very little Australian disaster research is gendered.

The emergency stage after disasters necessarily attends to primary needs of food, water and shelter, and the recovery and reconstruction stages may include attending to grief and loss, and individual psycho-social needs. The international disaster literature indicates that physical and sexual violence against women increases following disasters, yet it appears there is no published research to date on whether this happens in Australia.

In line with other disaster research, this literature review has excluded disasters relating to war and terrorism, instead focussing on natural disasters such as bushfires, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes and cyclones.

How gender is implicated in disasters

Disasters magnify both the strengths and the weaknesses in society so the way gender is constructed influences how women are affected by disaster (Domeisen, 1998).

> Disaster phenomena necessarily involve all the basic dimensions and processes of social life. It is after all an old saw in common sayings and philosophical musings that crises lay bare the essence of personal and social life. (Quarantelli, 1994, p. 4)

Mortality

Disasters affect men and women in different ways, with greater impacts on women and children (Dasgupta, Siriner, & Partha, 2010). Across the globe, women are at greater risk in disasters than men (Alston, 2009; Domeisen, 1998; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007; B. Phillips, Jenkins, & Enarson, 2009), with a higher disaster mortality rate for women than men in developing countries (Domeisen, 1998; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007). The risk exists during the disaster and in the recovery period that follows (Alston, 2009). Phillips, et al. (2009) wrote that the common factor in recent tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes has been that, overwhelmingly, most victims are women, children and other vulnerable groups.

Historically, too, the figures are stacked against women's and children's survival. For example, 'Considerable excess mortality occurred amongst adult females' in both the 1948 and 1966 Russian earthquakes. In one, the Ashkabad earthquake, of the 33,000 who died, only 18 per cent were men: 47 per cent were women and 35 per cent were children. In the second, in Tashkent, 20 per cent more women died than men (Beinin, 1981 cited in Rivers, 1982, p. 257).

Such differential mortality rates are most probably the result of gender determined roles with their separate expectations and exposures to risk (Molin Valdés, 2009; Rivers, 1982). One explanation offered was women's responsibility for children hampering their escape, but Rivers (1982) goes further to state that choices made during various disasters impact on who dies. Her example questions the veracity of the notion of 'women and children first':

- In 1879, when the *Atlantic* steamship sank between Liverpool and New York, all but one of the 295 women on board died, compared to 187 of the 636 men.
- Forty per cent of survivors of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 were men, including over half the crew, leaving 30 per cent of the women and children on board to go down with the ship.

The disaster literature reveals other examples:

> In [one] Indian earthquake, more women and children [than men] died, with women aged 25-29 most affected (Parasuraman 1995). In this disaster, men's work and schooling had taken them out of the village when the earthquake hit. In an earthquake in Guatemala, more women were injured than men (Glass et al. 1977), and in an earthquake in Cairo, Egypt, more females were killed or injured than males (Malilay et al. 1995). In the Bangladesh Cyclone of 1991, 42% more females died than males (Chowdhury et al. 1993). (Fothergill, 1998, p. 18)

In the more recent Indian Ocean Tsunami, 80 per cent of the 300,000 deaths were women and children from 13 nations (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008).

Although known death rates after Hurricane Katrina were almost the same for males (50.6%) and females (49.3%) (Jonkman, Maaskant, Boyd, & Lloyd Levitan, 2009, p. 696), in every country where studies have focused on gender, it has been clear that women are affected differently by natural disaster than men (Alston, 2009; Domeisen, 1998; Fothergill, 1998; Neumayera & Plümperb, January, 2007; Phillips, Jenkins, & Enarson, 2009). Although the effect of disaster on women is easier to observe and document in under-developed countries, the differential effect is evident in the developed world too. For example, there is some evidence from the US to suggest the situation is reversed and that more men than women are killed in disasters caused by severe weather events (Fothergill, 1998). While Fothergill (1998) listed lightning, thunderstorms, flash floods and hurricanes, this is equally true for bushfires in Australia, where the Black Saturday bushfires killed 100 males and 73 females.[1] One explanation is that men take greater risks than women, and are more likely to be involved in outdoor activities (Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007).

This example illustrates that the impact of a disaster is affected by the way a society is structured. There are different impacts on individuals depending on gender as well as class, ethnicity, disability. Fothergill (1998) echoes this premise, writing that 'social processes ... are more visible in times of a disaster' (Fothergill, 1998, p. 12). Gender inequalities in personal freedom will be exacerbated in a disaster, and access to information and resources will be limited for many women, creating what Enarson and Morrow (1998) term 'gendered disaster vulnerability'.

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[1] http://royalcommission.vic.gov.au/commission-reports/final-report/volume-1/chapters/the-people-who-died

Discrimination: disasters echo society

The concept of disaster as a magnifying glass for society (Domeisen, 1998) is useful in understanding the gendered effects of disaster. In societies with a history of human rights abuses against women, the discrimination is stark:

> There are no reliable statistics on the great Chinese famine of the early 1960s, but the account given by a surviving Chinese peasant woman is revealing: "Families tried to pool their rations and often the husband would rule that any female children should be allowed to die first…" (Becker 1996, cited in Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007, p. 8)

Two other examples indicate palpable discrimination against women. In the Bangladesh cylone of 1991, 'one desperate father, unable to hold on to both his son and daughter, let go of his daughter, acknowledging that he did so because his son had to carry on the family line (Haider at al, 1991 cited in Finlay, 1998; Fothergill, 1998, p. 18), and Rivers (1982, cited in B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008) reporting on a famine, provided a local man's quote: '[S]top all this rubbish, it is we men who shall have the food, let the children die, we will make new children after the war' (p. 28).

Vulnerability to disaster occurs also as a result of women's poverty. For example, as women are poorer than men across the globe, they are more likely to live in areas that are more susceptible to disaster and housing that is poorly constructed (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007; Scanlon, 1998). They are less likely to have the resources to escape if a disaster threatens (Henrici, Helmuth, & Braun, 2010).

While women in the developing world are at greater risk of death, women in the developed world have increased risk of economic insecurity; increased workload; increased conflict in the home, the community and the workplace and fewer supports for workforce participation (E Enarson, 2000; B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). Economic recovery post-disaster is predominantly directed to employers or projects involving male labour, while women in disaster-prone areas are often employed in low status jobs (Elaine Enarson, 2006).

> Low wage women employed at the lowest rungs of the tourist industry and as beauticians, child care workers, home health aides, servers and temporary office workers will not be helped back on their feet by economic recovery plans geared to major employers in the formal sector. (Elaine Enarson, 2006, para. 6)

Economic insecurity and patriarchal social structure both contribute to increased vulnerability for women in a time of disaster as women's financial situation is hindered further by caring responsibilities and inequitable access to financial aid (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008).

Women 'are treated differently to men at every step from the initial warning period when women and children are pressured to leave, but men are often allowed to stay behind; through the immediate post-impact period when men may leave their families to assist others ...; to the relief and recovery period when women, especially single parents, may be left out of the relief process' (Scanlon, 1998, p. 46). Other studies confirm that disasters affect women more acutely than men and that men are favoured by recovery efforts and funding allocation (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Molin Valdés, 2009). It may be summarised this way:

> First, women's economic insecurity increases, as their productive assets are destroyed, they often become sole earners, their household entitlements may

decline, their small-businesses are hard-hit, they lose jobs and work time, and gender stereotypes limit their work opportunities. Second, women's workload increases dramatically. They 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 organizing; and have expanded responsibilities as caregivers. Third, women's working conditions in the household and paid workplace deteriorate, for example through lack of child-care and increased work and family conflicts. Fourth, 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. (E Enarson, 2000, p. viii)

Dobson identified a 'new social order' operating after the Charleville flood in Queensland (1994, p. 11). One where demands on women were excessive. They were expected to work harder in all arenas – women's and men's work, paid and unpaid work (Dobson, 1994). Women who are outside the 'protection' or 'control' of a man in our patriarchal societies are even more vulnerable to financial insecurity as single mothers, widows, divorced women and lesbians 'conspicuously lack access to male-controlled relief and recovery resources' (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008, p. 51)

The gender differential operates even in apparently equal societies. Susanna Hoffman, an anthropologist who survived the 1991 Oakland firestorm in California where 25 people died and 6,000 were left homeless, five years later reflected on the social impact, particularly regarding gender.

> The Oakland Firestorm survivors to a large degree represented the pinnacle of modern sexual definition .... The women of the community were independent, men equitable, couples by and large egalitarian. People of both gender occupied the same segments of space, public and private arenas, hours of day and night. But for many, progress in carving out new gender behavior suffered a fifty-year setback. In the shock of loss both men and women retreated into traditional cultural realms and personas ...The return of old behaviors and the loss of new was so swift, so engulfing, and so unconscious, few understood what occurred. Many unions, long and short, broke apart. (Hoffman, 1998, pp. 57-58)

She described the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, as they tried to reassemble homes, families and friendships. Her experience was that friendships dissolved. Extended families, perhaps once distant, came to the fore, bringing goods, photos, mementoes to replace those lost. But along with this, came a responsibility to manage these family relationships.

> Friends grew impatient, proved unsympathetic, disappeared... [and] the return of kinship became, as it had customarily been in our traditional society, women's job to facilitate...and women experienced pressures in dealing with kin that men, who had removed themselves from the domestic scene, did not. (Hoffman, 1998, pp. 58-59)

The gendered roles were accompanied by age-old gendered slurs, as fire-affected women sought to rebuild their lives. Negotiations with officials were impeded as women – lacking the import of men - were dismissed, and their concerns disregarded.

> The more insistent women were with insurance officials, the more we were promoted to the second level of the 'difficult' category... By deeming women 'difficult' or more,

> of course, one removes them from individuality and places them in a grouping where their complaints are rendered meaningless, and thus dismissible ... Over time not only insurance officials, but architects, contractors, and workers, stereotyped us in this old cultural fashion and devalued our voice. (Hoffman, 1998, p. 60)

This dismissal of women by officials was echoed by the wider community reaction to the firestorm victims, and particularly those who were women.

> In rather rapid course, disaster victims were also grouped into an oppositional category by the outside community ... At first the outside community saw us with sympathy. Eventually, when recovery took longer than the day, week or month they envisioned, they came to view us as greedy whiners and undeserving receivers of pots of gold ... Of course, since ancient times, the brimstone of criticism in our culture has been more directed at women than men. More venerated men are rarely swiped at with petty assault, and with their more decorous business times, male survivors barely endured comment. Women survivors had little choice but to turn inward and seek solace among those who were devoid of envy, other survivors, and thus isolate themselves further. (Hoffman, 1998, p. 60)

After disasters, governments and non-government organisations move to rehouse people and reconstruct communities. Their large-scale actions in the name of efficiency (or perhaps necessity) mean that individual men and women are less able to make decisions for themselves about their lives (Proudley, 2008). Social networks shrink, as friends and family have moved away, or through strained relationships resulting from a reliance on them for accommodation. Stress overwhelms family stability, and efforts to restabilise is slow and must be sensitive to the emotional and psychological vulnerability of family members (NYCAASA (New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault), Undated). Gender influences both reaction to the disaster and ongoing stresses and it influences coping styles (Dasgupta, et al., 2010).

The media, too, joined the ranks of officials and community in stereotyping women. After Hurricane Katrina, the media ignored any considered coverage of gender influencing how men and women experienced and were affected by the disaster, instead focussing on archetypal characteristics of womanhood and linking it to helplessness, while celebrating male heroes. As Enarson (2006) writes, 'needy women and strong men' were presented. The images ranged from the 'old, infirm, heavily pregnant or paralyzed' (Boisseau, Feltey, Flynn, Gelfand, & Triece, 2008, p. viii); to the vociferous with mothers' outbursts against the conditions their children were forced to live in; and then to blaming women for their inability to rescue those in their care from the disaster and its aftermath. Boisseau et al. (2008) noted that female medical staff 'who remained behind with patients were vilified for "murdering" the patients who did not survive' (Boisseau, et al., 2008, p. viii). For some women in New Orleans, their frustrations post-disaster led to activism and the establishment of various women's groups to improve responses and bring change (Tyler, 2007).

Clearly, the way gender is interpreted in a society determines disaster actions from risk management policy and practices through emergency management and to post-disaster recovery and reconstruction (E Enarson & Fordham, 2001; Elaine Enarson & Meyreles, 2004).

Women home alone: the isolation of women in the Australian bushfire context

Gendered vulnerability in the Australian bushfire context is, perhaps, most recognisable when women are left alone or with dependents in the home. Valent (1984) documented his personal observations in two communities over a seven

week period immediately after Ash Wednesday in 1983, and wrote that people felt guilty and ashamed at not living up to roles expected of them. Many people, including women alone, thought they were going to die, and '...as fear set in among those at home, intense longing was felt for the absent protectors, which led to frantic telephone calls and more direct calls through tears and screams' (Valent, 1984, p. 293).

> [I]n many cases women recounted they relied on the knowledge of their partners. If household members with more bushfire knowledge and experience are away at the time of the fire, women are left to face the incident not knowing what to do or how to operate equipment. (Gilbert (2004) cited in DeLaine, Probert, Pedler, Goodman, & Rowe, 2003)

Often women were left with the sole responsibility for the family and property because socially determined roles mean that women are likely to be separated from a male in a disaster (Honeycombe, 1994; Raphael, Taylor, & McAndrew, 2008). A male partner is often fighting fires while a woman cares for dependents.

The tendency of women to evacuate with dependents may put them at greater risk according to a 2007 report which stated that most women perish while sheltering in the house or attempting to flee and that late evacuations still accounted for most deaths. The same report noted that the deaths of women from bushfires has increased over the past 30 years (Haynes, 2007, cited in DeLaine, et al., 2003).

In her consideration of female mortality in disasters worldwide, Fothergill (Fothergill, 1998) provides explanations from the literature for their higher mortality than men. Her question as to whether more women died because 'their husbands had the decision-making powers and they did not dare leave without their husband's permission' and that 'women were left responsible for property and [could have been] afraid of blame and punishment' could perhaps equally apply to the Australian bushfire context (Fothergill, 1998, p. 18).

Violence against women and disaster

> [T]here is a suggestion that the stress of disaster may lead to increased violence, making battered women greater targets than at other times. However … it was difficult to acquire empirical data to demonstrate that this was the case, and impossible to document it. (Scanlon, 1998, p. 5)

This was written in 1998 and a decade later, little had changed:
> ...the research on woman battering in post-disaster communities is still almost non-existent. In the disaster research community, many question whether rates of woman battering increase in a disaster. Thus, although this question has been frequently asked, it remains largely unanswered. (Fothergill, 2008)

Some researchers report that violence against women increases following disasters (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Elaine Enarson, 2000; Molin Valdés, 2009; Palinkas, Downs, Petterson, & Russell, 1993; Wilson, Phillips, & Neal, 1998) and that the evidence to support this is growing (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). While most apparent in developing countries, there appears to be increased violence against women post-disaster in industrial countries too.

A 1998 review of approximately 100 studies, situated in both developed and developing countries, addressed gender in disaster scholarship (Fothergill, 1998). The

review found several studies that indicated an increase in domestic violence following disaster, along with an increase in divorce rates and child abuse (see also Dasgupta, et al., 2010). For example, after Hurricane Andrew, analysis of domestic violence helpline statistics showed a 50 per cent increase (Fothergill, 1998). There was an increase in demand for refuge accommodation, and court cases for injunctions increased by 98 per cent (Wilson, et al., 1998). In the first four months following the earthquake in Dale County, reports of domestic violence increased by 600 per cent (Wilson, et al., 1998).

A study of 77 Canadian and U.S. domestic violence programs a decade later echoed these findings, finding that violence against women increases in the period following disasters (E Enarson, 1999). Another ten years on, 46 cases of sexual assault were reported in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and over the following seven month period, sexual assault cases increased by 45 per cent. It was calculated that this represented a 95 per cent increase when factoring in the reduced population as people had left the devastated city (Austin, 2008) .

In addition to Anastario at al's (2009) findings that sexual violence increased amongst internally displaced people living in trailer parks following Hurricane Katrina, their research also found an increase in physical intimate partner violence (IPV):

> When we sub-classified physical IPV in our random sample, women showed a lifetime prevalence of 34.7% and a postdisaster rate of 7.7% in 2007, suggesting that IPV in this population is particularly high for a disaster-affected population in the United States. Such increases in our sample reflect alarmingly elevated rates of new violence, which did not settle back to baseline during the two years following displacement, escalating from a lifetime estimate of 3.1/100,000 per day to 9.4/100,000 per day in 2006 and up to 10.1/100,000 per day in 2007. (Anastario, Shehab, & Lawry, 2009, p. 22)

In 2010, it was reported that domestic violence calls from Louisiana to the national hot line increased by 20 per cent in the first two months after the oil spill (US Gender and Disaster Resilience Alliance, 2010). In Haiti, gender based violence 'dramatically escalated' after the earthquake, with an estimated 230 rapes of women and girls in 15 of the camps in Port-au-Prince, and with *Doctors Without Borders* treating 68 rape survivors in one facility in the month of April (Bookey, 2010, pp. 7-8).

Most recently, New Zealand police reported a 53 per cent increase in callouts to domestic violence incidents over the weekend of the Canterbury earthquake on 4.9.2010 (Houghton, 2010).

Disaster research in Australia which takes a sociological perspective seems to focus on what happened to people in a literal sense; the stresses and challenges they faced; the effects in terms of finances, work, housing; the practical aspects of individual and community recovery; communications and media; and evaluation of system responses. One study following the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983 investigated the human reactions using a 'temporal' and 'biopsychosocial' frameworks (Valent, 1984). While it speaks of tensions and stressors and mentions that 'Many families, especially those in which relationships were previously strained, suffered badly, and even split up' (Valent, 1984, p. 295), it does not report on violence against women. Research into individual and community recovery from the 2003 Canberra bushfires reported on relationships with family, friends and community, and health and well-being issues, but it did not ask respondents about domestic violence or other forms of violence against women. While 22.4 per cent of

the 482 respondents said the bushfire had a lasting effect for the worse on relationship with family, none spoke of domestic violence (Camilleri et al., 2007). The only reported comment that approximates this is:

> One person interviewed told of a major and rather frightening family fight about a week after the fire, which they saw as the result of the stress of the whole experience, but also said that after the fight, everyone settled back to being very close and supportive. (Camilleri, et al., 2007, p. 48)

This kind of interpretation was predicted a decade earlier, when Bolin, et al. wrote that gender is largely absent from concepts of the family in disaster research and how, 'The only hints of postdisaster discord in families are framed as role strains, suggesting that such occurrences are out of the ordinary' (Bolin, Jackson, & Crist, 1998, pp. 32-33).

This research underscores Phillips et al's (2009) assertion that some violence, including domestic violence, is un-recognised and un-recorded in the context of disaster (B. Phillips, Jenkins, & Enarson, 2010).

The under-reporting of violence against women in disasters

Any assessment of the levels of violence against women in the aftermath of disasters must begin with an understanding that violence from intimate partners and sexual violence is grossly under-reported at any time. Women's reluctance to report violence against them is a further factor compounding gender blindness in times of disaster.

> One of the characteristics of GBV [gender based violence], and in particular sexual violence, is under-reporting. Survivors/victims generally do not speak of the incident for many reasons, including self-blame, fear of reprisals, mistrust of authorities, and risk/fear of re-victimization. Acts of GBV evoke shaming and blaming, social stigma, and often rejection by the survivor/victim's family and community. Stigma and rejection can be especially severe when the survivor/ victim speaks about or reports the incident. Any available data, in any setting, about GBV reports from police, legal, health, or other sources will represent only a very small proportion of the actual number of incidents of GBV (Inter-agency standing committee, 2005, p. 4).

Post-Hurricane Katrina, Anastario et al. (2009) made the interesting point that rates of sexual violence - based on reporting - decreased at the same time sexual violence incidents actually increased substantially (Anastario, et al., 2009, pp. 22-23). Their 2006 and 2007 pooled data showed that sexual violence increased by 27 times the pre-disaster rate in Mississippi before the disaster. They wrote:

> ... the lifetime rate of reported SV [sexual violence] decreased in prevalence 8.5%. It is possible that common issues associated with violence reporting such as fear for personal safety, sensitivity to questioning, and protection of the perpetrator resulted in underreporting ... ' (Anastario, et al., 2009, pp. 22-23)

They theorise that women suffering violence from an intimate partner may seek care for the physical and mental results of the violence against them, but are unlikely to draw attention to the violence itself, thereby leading to under-reporting (Anastario, et al., 2009, p. 23).

A report from Women's eNews[2] on 23.9.2005 stated that despite evidence of an increase in the number of rapes following Hurricane Katrina, a lower than the usual low rate of sexual assault reporting was expected because of the 'unfathomable chaos of Hurricane Katrina', and because of computer difficulties in the police department. The evidence included witnesses who reported seeing rapes and being unable to intervene for their own safety and reports of support services turning women away because of a lack of resources. The Rev. Toby Nelson of First Presbyterian Church of Hayward in Castro Valley, California was reported as saying on 20.9.2005, 'There were so many rape victims, and we had to turn (most) of them away because they had life-damaging, but not life-threatening, wounds' (Cook Lauer, 2005, para. 17).

Australian under reporting of violence against women

For most of the world's history it appears that 'domestic violence' has at best been ignored, and at worst upheld as a man's right to subjugate 'his' woman by whatever means were necessary. Current legislation introduced only in 2009 in Afghanistan, permits Shia men 'to deny their wives food and sustenance if they refuse to obey their husbands' sexual demands' (Boone, 2009). This individual example has its parallel at societal level in other countries, too, and throughout history. For example, in Victoria prior to 1985, it was not a criminal offence for a man to rape his wife.

In Australia, the legislation in the 21st century is ostensibly free from such gendered discrimination as it relates to violence against women. Yet, the letter of the law is not necessarily what is enacted in the judicial system, and, as stated in *Time for Action*, 'Attitudes and beliefs about gender are learned, and society often teaches deeply held sexist views'. (Flood, 1998, cited in The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009).

Australian research in 2004 indicated that only 12 per cent of women report sexual violence to police, 19 per cent report physical violence, and 15 per cent report physical or sexual violence from a partner (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004, p. 102).

Of the few women who do report, even fewer make it to court or to a conviction. The lowest proportion of all principal offences proven guilty are sexual assault cases (63%), and sexual assault cases have the highest rate of case withdrawal (22%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, p. 11; see also Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004). Lievore, in her 2005 study of prosecutorial decision making in sexual assault cases, also found a 'relatively large degree of case attrition' with 38 per cent of cases in the sample withdrawn, and only 44 per cent of cases that were prosecuted resulting in a conviction. This figure includes guilty pleas (Lievore, 2005, p. 5). Similarly, a 2007 estimate by the Australian Institute of Criminology suggested that less than 20 per cent of the sexual assaults where women do report to police are investigated and result in charges (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2007). The low level of sexual assault reporting in Australia may reflect community attitudes of women bearing the blame for such violence. Indeed, it seems that '[m]ost societies tend to blame the victim in cases of sexual violence' (Inter-agency standing committee, September, 2005, p. 4).

The under-reporting of physical violence against women, too, is apparent.

> Too often intimate partner violence is trivialised in our society as somehow being less serious than violence committed in other contexts; as a matter to be resolved in the

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[2] Women's eNews is a non-profit daily Internet-based news service that has operated from New York since 2000.

privacy of the home [yet]... It is the leading preventable contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15–44, being responsible for more of the disease burden than many well-known risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking and obesity. (VicHealth, 2004, pp. 8, 10)

Disaster theorists posit that whatever rate of violence against women pre-existed the disaster, it will be magnified after. Australian research showed a litany of attitudes that blamed women and excused men in violent situations. In 2009, only 53% of Australians viewed 'slapping or pushing a partner to cause harm or fear' as 'very serious' (VicHealth, 2009, p. 4) and 18 per cent 'believed that domestic violence can be excused if it results from a temporary loss of control'. Even more (22%) believed domestic violence was excusable 'If a perpetrator truly regrets what they have done' (VicHealth, 2009, p. 36).

Australians' attitudes to violence against women clearly included victim-blaming and complicity with the violent man at the time of the Black Saturday fires. In accordance with the generally accepted theory of disaster researchers, these victim-blaming, perpetrator-excusing attitudes would have increased in the aftermath of this disaster.

Explanations for increased violence against women

The UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee ((2005, p. 1) noted that 'the most immediate and dangerous type of gender-based violence occurs in acute emergencies' and theorised that the increased risk emerges as personal resilience - afforded by protective structures, both individual and community - are compromised (Inter-agency standing committee, 2005).

Indeed, vulnerability in disasters is increased by a range of factors. There is psychological strain resulting from grief and loss for both women and men. A prevailing 'private domain' of domestic violence and sexual violence (Inter-agency standing committee, 2005) is compounded by empathy for the abuser and excuses of 'out of character' behaviour. This may result in under-recognition of violence against women and lack of validation by service providers.

> Natural disasters do not exist in isolation from the social and cultural constructs that marginalize women and place them at risk of violence. In fact, there is evidence that violence against women increases in the wake of colossal disasters and that the increased risk is associated with gender inequality and the limited representation of women in disaster responses. (Rees, Pittaway, & Bartolomei, 2005, p. 1)

Phillips et al. (2009) theorised that reasons for the apparent increase of domestic and sexual violence after disasters include threats to the male provider and protector role; loss of control; increased and possibly forced contact between the couple; and loss of options as support services for women are reduced. They wrote that, following Hurricane Katrina, some women evacuated with their violent partner to ensure the safety of their children while escaping the disaster (B. D. Phillips, Thomas, Fothergill, & Blinn-Pike, 2009, pp. 296-297). Enarson suggested that relationships are pressured; disruptions to services mean women cannot call for help or transport is reduced; and women who have violent partners are often isolated and disaster exacerbates this (Enarson, n.d., cited in Renzetti, 2002).

> Moreover, the police and other service providers are usually busy responding to other calls or emergencies that are deemed more pressing, so "domestics" become a much lower priority ... It may be possible, then, that the decline in the incidence of

domestic violence reports following Sept. 11th are a combination of women simply not calling for help because they see their own "personal" problems as unimportant, and the police not responding as they had prior to Sept 11th. (Renzetti, 2002, p. 6)

In 2006, Enarson wrote of silent men, suicidal men, unemployed men, men feeling 'unmasked and unmanly', concluding that some will turn to some combination of drugs, alcohol and aggression, endangering those around them (Elaine Enarson, 2006, para. 4).

It is apparent that disasters and their aftermath increase the vulnerability of people – some more than others. A 2009 literature review of the effects of relocation post-disaster on physical and mental health reported that three of the seven studies that considered gender found women to be at increased risk of adverse outcomes. Being relocated increases the burden due to 'psychological stressors, healthcare disruption, social network changes and living condition changes' (Uscher-Pines, 2009, p. 17).

In Australia, although there appear to be no published studies investigating increased rates of violence against women in the wake of a disaster, some papers mentioned the link. In 1994, Councillor Beth Honeycombe from the Burdekin Shire Council in Queensland wrote a short article on the 'Special Needs of Women in Emergency Situations' for *The Macedon Digest* where she stated, 'An increase in domestic violence is repeatedly found in post-disaster situations' (Honeycombe, 1994, p. 31)[3]. In the same edition, Narelle Dobson's presentation to the *Women in Emergencies and Disasters Symposium* in March 1992 is reproduced. Dobson reflects on the period following the 1990 Charleville flood and her role in the recovery as a social worker[4]. She noted that in the wake of the flood:

> Human relations were laid bare and the strengths and weaknesses in relationships came more sharply into focus. Thus, socially isolated women became more isolated, domestic violence increased, and the core of relationships with family, friends and spouses were exposed. (Dobson, 1994, p. 11)

Threats to women's safety extend beyond the direct impact of the disaster to 'vulnerability to unchecked male violence and aggression' (Williams, 1994, p. 34). Where researchers have noted the link between disaster and increased violence against women (E Enarson, 1998; Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008; Fothergill, 1998; Jenkins & Phillips, 2008; Morrow, 1999; Palinkas, et al., 1993), they hypothesise that this increase is due to a number of factors including heightened stress, alcohol abuse, and lapses in constraints to behaviour offered by legal and societal expectations (Bradshaw, 2004, cited in Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007). After floods in Queensland, Dobson wrote, 'It was as if the balancing influences were removed and life became very raw and stark' (Dobson, 1994, p. 11). Homelessness and changed living circumstances would be another factor (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). Enarson and Phillips wrote that from Peru to Alaska, men cope through alcohol abuse and aggression (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008, p. 51).

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[3] Although Honeycombe has been cited by Fothergill (2008, p. 133), Honeycombe's article is not based on original research, but draws on two Queensland based research projects which appear to be unpublished. They are: Parmenter, V (1992) The Special Needs of Women in Disaster Situations' and Butterworth, Eric, et al. (1989) The Effects of Cyclone Aivu on the Burdekin Shire: Interim report. Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland.
[4] Also quoted by Fothergill (1998, p. 20).

Austin (2008) observed that disasters temporarily remove the societal institutions that regulate masculinity.

> I argue that a form of hyper-masculinity emerges from the stress and loss, which can lead to increased levels of violence and discord in heterosexual relationships. Men are likely to have a feeling of inadequacy because they are unable to live up to the expectations of their socially-constructed gender role ... The presence of these conditions unfortunately influence higher numbers of partnered, heterosexual men to act in violent and abusive ways toward the women in their lives. (Austin, 31.7.2008)

This accompanies a community attitude that excuses such violence. In a 2006 report on Australian attitudes to violence against women, a large proportion of the community believed that 'domestic violence can be excused if it results from temporary anger or results in genuine regret' (Taylor & Mouzos, 2006) Such violence may even be seen as legitimate, and excused because this is 'the way men behave' (Atkinson, 2002, p. 4). Violent men often use situational factors to excuse their violence, and their experience of disaster may be perceived by themselves and others as reason enough for 'losing control' (Fothergill, 2008). Indeed, it seems this violent behaviour is excused by embedded cultural and economic factors too:

> In every country where violence against women is high, cultural and economic factors play a critical role in promoting and condoning violence as a legitimate way to resolve conflict. (AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness, 2008)

Women who have suffered violence from their partner *before* a disaster may experience increased violence in the aftermath and other women may experience it as a new event or pattern following a disaster. In disaster situations, domestic violence may well be buried even further beneath public consciousness, as attention is focussed elsewhere. The women and children subjected to this abuse 'suffer doubly when large-scale catastrophes strike - even as large numbers of volunteers turn out to respond, donors overwhelm local communities, and people open their hearts to those in need' (Jenkins & Phillips, 2008, p. 49).

The way communities respond, and whether disaster recovery is set up to recognise and address violence against women, seem to depend on how well it was done before the disaster (Fothergill, 2008). If violence against women was recognised as a problem before the disaster, it was more likely to be part of the recovery strategy. At worker level, too, how individuals perceived violence against women before predicted their recognition and response to it in the aftermath (Wilson, et al., 1998). It may also be influenced by specific programs established to counter the increase of violence after a disaster. Following Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua, a 1999 multimedia campaign was promoted with the slogan, 'Violence against women: a disaster that men can avoid'. It was aimed at men living in areas most affected by the disaster and used billboards, radio and television along with a series of workshops to convey the message that men could 'unlearn machismo'(Welsh, 2001).

Interestingly, disasters can offer women new options in leaving a violent partner. Women were afforded these opportunities though new confidence in their own ability brought about by the way they coped with the disaster (Fothergill, 2008) or

new roles in recovery efforts within the community; or by using grants or insurance payouts to leave (Fothergill, 1998; Jenkins & Phillips, 2008).

> Disasters can provide, both financially and psychologically, an opportunity to leave an abusive relationship. (Fothergill, 2008, p. 151)

Indeed, disasters can be a force for social change for the better (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Quarantelli, 1994).

> ... we would do better by using the semi-Darwinian model of evolutionary change. It would force us to consider the more positive effects of disasters (all but impossible to consider in a social problem context that focuses on the negative). We would necessarily need to think about and look at both the functional and dysfunctional aspects if we see disasters as part of the evolution of social systems. (Quarantelli, 1994, p. 13)

Women in disaster management

There is a perception amongst emergency managers that women are less competent than men after a disaster (Scanlon, 1996). Scanlon identifies three persistent disaster myths: that people panic, that victims are likely to be confused and unable to care for themselves, and that looting follows. He suggests that emergency personnel generally attribute greater panic and confusion to women than men and that this is unfounded. He points to early academic writings to show that this idea was promulgated by 'the first scholar in the field of Sociology of Disaster, Samuel Henry Prince' who wrote about the 1917 Halifax explosion which killed 2,000 and injured 9,000 people.

> 'His most-quoted source was an unpublished manuscript by his friend, Dwight Johnstone. Johnstone provides examples of women staying on the job despite the risk, and women taking part in the post-impact response. He also provides examples of men and women fleeing when there were rumours of a second explosion. Prince quotes Johnstone extensively but omits all the positive references to women and the negative references to men.' (Scanlon, 1996, p. 4)

Scanlon writes that it is essential for women to become involved in local level politics to effect change. Such roles inevitably mean some level of decision-making power in disaster response which, hopefully, would not assume the same kind of gendered assumptions that have characterised much post-disaster response.

Recognition of gendered vulnerability can improve disaster planning and response and reduce their adverse economic and social effects (B. Phillips, et al., 2009; Williams, 1994), particularly when each step in recovery addresses the inherent power structures at play in the community (E Enarson & Fordham, 2001).

> Indeed, we have seen women lead some of the nation's most effective recovery organizations, but have even more frequently seen their contributions thwarted. (Krajeski & Peterson, 2008, p. 207)

It seems that women are essential to volunteer and professional organisations but are not in positions of power (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). There is evidence of ongoing inequity (Garcia, 2005) and situations where men predominantly take charge of disaster management 'systematically excluding women, their needs,

competences and experiences from contributing to these efforts' (Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007, p. 12).

In Australia:

> Scant attention is paid to women and their roles in the emergency management landscape. This is particularly relevant in the field of community bushfire preparedness and mitigation. The culture of emergency management remains a very masculine field with the command and control system continuing to dominate and influence the roles and processes of emergency events. (Proudley, 2008, p. 37)

The public/private dichotomy of men's and women's work was echoed after the Charleville floods in Queensland, where 'the most public aspects of the clean-up were a male affair' and the emergency services - including police and the military - were mostly men (Dobson, 1994, p. 12). Women's recovery work was far less visible and usually contained within households (Dobson, 1994). The concept of keeping the family unit together is not recognised, nor is the responsibility for its emotional, spiritual and physical well-being (Honeycombe, 1994). The heroes were public and they were male, and this portrayal has been challenged as misleading (Fuller, 1994). As Dobson stated:

> I believe that there were many heroines among the women who held their families together, who carved out a home from the mire, and continued to contribute through their community and professional work. (Dobson, 1994, p. 13)

In addressing the male domination of disaster planning, Fuller identified the need to increase the number of women involved at all levels, and further, that some form of affirmative action be taken to achieve this. In her 1993 paper on outcomes from the Symposium on Women and Disasters in Queensland, Fuller reported:

> It was considered that the traditional route of promotion of operational through to management was neither necessary nor always appropriate. Women with necessary skills should be able to be employed at senior levels without specific operational experience. (Fuller, 1994, p. 26)

Research gap in disaster and gender

> The implicit grounding of disaster theory in men's lives affords a partial view which must be challenged through a woman-focused gender analysis. (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008, p. 41)

Internationally, the literature has only emerged since the late 1990s. In 1994, Quarantelli (1994) included gender as one of a number of disaster phenomena that warrant researchers' attention, and the early forays into disaster and gender scholarship were forged in 1998 by key researcher, Elaine Enarson (Elaine Enarson & Morrow, 1998) and her colleagues (Bolin, et al., 1998; Domeisen, 1998; Fothergill, 1998). Yet, ten years on, Fordham (2008) wrote that this body of research was still small and mostly located within 'Third World' studies.

Internationally, Neumayera and Plümperb (2007, p. 4) claimed that their research report was 'the first systematic, quantitative analysis of gender differences in natural disaster mortality'. They described it as addressing 'one important, yet hitherto relatively neglected aspect' of disaster scholarship (Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007, p. 2). Likewise, Anastario, et al. writing in 2009 about Hurricane Katrina, claimed 'the first evidence-based study to show an increase in rates of GBV [gender based

violence] in a population of women displaced by a disaster' (Anastario, et al., 2009, p. 22).

Gender and disaster researchers lament both the scarcity of research on gendered patterns of decision-making, and the absence of women's voices from the discourse (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008).

> Feminists have argued that women's meanings and experiences have been epistemologically excluded in mainstream literature and a search of disaster literature confirms this claim ... Disasters have, in the main, been represented as gender-neutral and women have been portrayed rarely and negatively. (Finlay, 1998, pp. 143, 149)

Yet, disaster researchers point to the learnings that can be gained by hearing from women and their significance to disaster response.

> We show that by listening to the voices of victims in post-disaster contexts, new insights can be gleaned as to how to make all women safer during disasters. (Jenkins & Phillips, 2008, p. 49)

In Australia too, there is very little research into gender and disaster and the specific vulnerability of women in this country (DeLaine, et al., 2003; Williams, 1994) despite the fact that Australians have a one in six estimated lifetime exposure to natural disaster (Caruana, 2009). Several Australian researchers have called for more research into disaster that considers social and gendered aspects. One specifically emphasised the need for qualitative research and wrote about the potentially significant role that women could play in disaster preparedness and response if more was known about how everyone in the community is affected by disaster (Williams, 1994). Another (Proudley, 2008) pointed to the lack of research into the role of women in bushfires, the impact of disaster on families, and how decisions are made in emergency situations.

In 1992, Australian researchers were encouraged to look at post-disaster stress in the context of both the individual and the family (Gordon, 1992, p. 15). Few had responded to this call by 2009, when Caruana (2009) wrote that despite a vast literature on the psychosocial effect of disasters on individuals, little was known about the effect on families. Even more broadly, some advocated engaging whole communities in reflecting on their disaster experience, due to its therapeutic value as well as adding to the research base (Camilleri, et al., 2007).

Despite these calls since the 1990s, there appears to be very little existing literature in Australia that considers the gendered aspects of disaster. While two studies involved interviews with women about social and health aspects of their disaster experiences (Finlay, 1998; Wallace, 1983), the question of whether violence against women increases in the wake of a disaster in Australia appears not to have been addressed in any published research to date.

Yet, clearly, implications of gender infiltrate every aspect of disaster experience. Gender focussed research is a pre-requisite to moving beyond the one-world view that has too often characterised disaster research.

Along with a gender focus, internationally, disaster researchers are urged to look beyond the negative aspects of disaster, which often dominate the discourse, to consider their positive effects, suggesting they contribute to the way society evolves (Quarantelli, 1994). Picking up on this, Dasgupta wrote, 'It is important to understand that women are not only victims of chance, but also agents of change' (Dasgupta, et al., 2010, p. 5).

Conclusion

Internationally, women are at greater risk of mortality in a disaster, and increased violence against women is characteristic of a post-disaster recovery. While there is a growing body of evidence into gender and disaster, there appears to be little gendered Australian research, and no published research to date on the link between disaster and violence against women in Australia.

Violence against women, particularly within the private domain, has been a taboo subject, despite work in recent decades to address this issue. It seems that this lack of recognition may be taken to a new level in a post-disaster context where stress levels are high, perpetrators may have been 'heroes' in the fires, and where men are often unemployed and sometimes suicidal. The resources of support services are over-burdened with primary and fire-related needs in the aftermath of a disaster and this serves to exacerbate a willingness to overlook violence against women.

Data from the research on 'Women's experience in the aftermath of the Black Saturday Bushfires' will be analysed with a view to drawing on these theories.

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