

**Victorian Healthcare Association**

**Climate change and gender inequality**

**22 March 2022**

**Presentation by Dr Debra Parkinson**

I, too, would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands from which we all meet and pay my respect to Elders past and present. It is the Dja Dja Wurrung people where I am.

This presentation focuses on women as the event is for IWD. Our research has a strong theme of working with LGBTIQ+ people in relation to disasters and emergency management, but the gender binary is actually a key point as we take up the harms of stringent gender stereotypes in disasters.

I'm going to highlight three critical timepoints, recognising that climate change is the cause of more frequent disasters like fires and floods, and has been linked to the COVID pandemic.

It's 2018, and domestic violence (DV) in disasters is documented across the globe.

In countries as diverse as Iran, Pakistan, Japan, and Australia— DV increased in disasters, and there were commonalities across the world of women's sacrifice, victim blaming, and excusing men's violence.<sup>1, 2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Sohrabizadeh, S. & Parkinson, D. \(2022\). 'Men's role in violence against women in Iran and Australia'. \*Australian Journal of Emergency Management\*, 37\(1\), pp. 65-71. <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/9177/ajem-2022-01.pdf>](https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/9177/ajem-2022-01.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [Parkinson, D. Gender-based Violence and Disasters. In Benouar, D. \(Ed.\), \*The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science\*. Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.390 Available: <https://oxfordre.com/naturalhazardscience/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.001.0001/acrefore-9780199389407-e-390>](https://oxfordre.com/naturalhazardscience/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.001.0001/acrefore-9780199389407-e-390)

Triggers, though not causes, of DV were identified. In disasters, there is a litany: unsafe or insecure housing; substance abuse; stress, trauma, grief and loss; relationship problems; unemployment and economic pressures; complex bureaucratic processes regarding grants and insurance; reduced informal and formal supports; restricted movement and transport; a changed community and a different life course.

**Less identified as an explanation for DV in disasters is the role of patriarchy and male privilege in allowing violence against women and children.**

At worker level, too, how service providers perceived DV before the event predicted their recognition and response (Wilson et al., 1998). Cultural acceptance of DV condemns women. A Bangladesh study found that 86% of mothers had been abused by their husbands during a flood (Biswas, Rahman, Mashreky, Rahman & Dalals, 2010, cited in Yoshihama, 2019, p. 863)

A Pakistani researcher, Falak Shad Memon interviewed women in the flood-prone area of Sindh in 2020, and writes:

What came out as astonishing was a majority of women's acceptance of this violence. [One respondent said] "I have nowhere to go. Besides if he will not take his frustration out on me, then on whom? I am his wife. I have to bear it." (Memon, 2020, p. 75)

After Black Saturday, women's sacrifice was also expected. A worker told us:

Not saying anything about DV is not the thing to do. But maybe people understood why it was happening and maybe that's why they didn't do anything.

One participant said:

... After the fires [he was] just taking it out on the person that he could and I was the strong one and I kept thinking, 'Better me than the kids'. (Madeline)

Australian ANROWS research indicated that 'Too many Australians are willing to excuse violence as part of a 'normal' gender dynamic; and that 1 in 5 believe DV is a normal reaction to stress'.

In this context, it was heartening to read Recommendation 22.5 from the Federal Government's 2020 Royal Commission into Disaster Arrangements to:

Develop nationally consistent ... recovery programs ... including ... DV

<https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2020-11/Royal%20Commission%20into%20National%20Natural%20Disaster%20Arrangements%20-%20Report%20%20%5Baccessible%5D.pdf> (pp. 479-480)

This was followed by their announcement three months ago of funding to extend the GAD Pod's training across Australia.

## Timepoint 2: It's the 6th of January 2020.

It's the height of the Black Summer fires. Australians witnessed horrific images of a coastline on fire and thousands of people displaced by the most devastating bushfires recorded in the world according to the Aust Academy of Science. ANU reported that 14% of Australians were directly affected, and 75% indirectly.

<https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/exposure-and-impact-attitudes-2019->

Without funding, we worked hard and fast to ensure our resources and training were available. We wanted to disrupt the trajectory we knew too well from the research, of suffering men and DV. It was critical communities and fire fighters knew heroic masculinity was unrealistic. They had not failed as men because they felt they failed as protector and provider.

We wanted women, recovery workers and communities to explicitly understand the ways women are co-opted into accepting violence from their partner after disasters.

A decade earlier, our Black Saturday research documented the systemic silencing of women to prioritise 'suffering' men, and community cohesion. We designed postcards, called 'disaster is no excuse for family violence' to challenge this. First printed in 2012, they are still in print, with thousands distributed, and now in 10 languages. Right now, we are distributing postcards and GEM Guidelines into flood affected Qld and NSW.

The postcard gives 4 simple steps to use to let women know we are willing to hear, because women do not speak easily of the violence against them.

In disasters, there is enormous pressure not to speak of men's violence. It comes from family members, friends, police, and even health professionals. The urgency of disaster response, the valorization of male heroism, and the complexity of post-disaster trauma compromise safety.

## Overlapping this disaster is another - COVID

With COVID, there is a greater willingness to address the increase in DV because we are not talking about fire-fighters and pillars of the community being violent. Try a google search of DV and COVID compared to DV and Bushfires. Yet, in both disasters, actual reports of DV decreased. DV experts report victims being unable to call safely while compelled to stay home with their abuser, or because they didn't want their children to overhear. Calling 000 wouldn't bring peace, so women appeased perpetrators until they could find a way out.

Australian research found that 25% of disaster survivors have serious mental health issues.<sup>3</sup> The 2020 survivors are affected even more harshly as the COVID response shut down many supports available in previous disasters.

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<sup>3</sup> Blashki, G., Wiseman, J., Reifels, L., Hayes, K., & Burke, S. (2018). Mental health in a changing climate. *Health and wellbeing*. Retrieved from <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/mental-health-in-a-changing-climate>

The ‘tyranny of the urgent’ can lead to regressive change. Early in 2020, there were already incursions into women's rights in the name of coronavirus – there were contraceptive supply shortages; attempts to curtail abortion in the US, ceasing monitoring of the gender pay gap in the UK; [https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-04-06/commentary-coronavirus-pandemic-may-set-women-back-decades-on-equality?src=usn\\_tw](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-04-06/commentary-coronavirus-pandemic-may-set-women-back-decades-on-equality?src=usn_tw) and in Australia rushing through changes to workers’ rights.

Timepoint 3: It’s now 2022. How are women are faring in Australia more than 2 years into a pandemic on top of the worst bushfires in recorded history?

Some stats:

- In regional areas, a staggering 41% of women had asked for financial help from family or friends in the previous year (YWCA National Housing, 2020).
- 80% of one-parent families are headed by women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).
- One third of single women over 60 live in permanent income poverty (Li & Lee, 2020).
- Older women are a fast-growing group in the homeless population increasing by 31% from 2011 to 2016 (Li & Lee, 2020).

Our 2016 research, *Living Longer on Less*, revealed that the closer women subscribed to the feminine script, the worse their circumstances. The expectation that women are primary carers for children and parents results in fewer hours of employment, career breaks for child bearing and raising, and lower superannuation balances - 23% lower than for men (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2022b).

Both income and super for women will decrease further as childcare and education infrastructure is often destroyed in disasters, exponentially increasing the care burden on women and fracturing careers. Think home-schooling!

Consider, too, that in the first months of COVID, women lost more jobs than men (8% compared to 4% (Wood, Griffiths, & Crowley, 2021) and many were forced into casual work. In May-Nov 2020, 60% of new jobs were casual, and women filled 62% of these (Pennington, 2021). JobKeeper excluded short-term casuals – and most were **women** (Wood et al., 2021). Gender discrimination was an early feature of recovery funding. More funds went to the male-dominated sectors of construction and energy than all other sectors combined (Wood et al., 2021).

Women are less likely to afford housing that is protected from the direct effects of climate change (e.g. with insulation, air conditioners, solar panels) or safe from the effects of flooding, cyclones and bushfires. Mould from flooding, and smoke or asbestos in bushfires also pose health risks, including to babies and children.

Through economic inequality women are more likely to live in high-risk areas where housing is cheaper to buy and rent, such as fire or flood zones. Insurance there is increasingly unaffordable so one disaster can financially destroy lives. After disaster, women are less likely to regain housing, especially as rental options are reduced and the cost soars (Li & Lee, 2020).

Rising food prices caused by climate change will hit women hardest – 27% compared to 18% of men experienced food insecurity in 2019. These women were more likely to have experienced DV and to have raised children alone (McCrinkle, 2019).

DV is a documented characteristic of post-disaster recovery the world over. It has its roots in the everyday. Disasters don't exist in isolation from the social and cultural constructs that discriminate against women.

## In conclusion

As healthcare professionals, you can help:

- (1) Be open to hearing women speak of DV and respond, e.g. use the 4 steps of the postcard: ASK, NAME IT, give referral numbers, and CHECK IN next time.
- (2) Stop expecting men to protect the home and provide - no matter what, and women to sacrifice their health and wellbeing. Identify these as outdated notions that put people's lives at risk.
- (3) Let men be vulnerable and give referral numbers. AND
- (4) Ensure women and children's right to live free from violence is unconditional – even after disasters.

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