

**Rurality and Gender and Disaster Literature Review**  
**Prepared for Gender and Disaster Australia**  
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Australia has experienced a devastating number of catastrophic disaster events in recent times both slow-onset including the Millennium drought from 1996 to 2010, and rapid onset including the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, the Black Summer bushfires in several states in 2019-20 and the 2022 floods in northern NSW. Overlaid on these regular climate-induced catastrophic events in recent times has been a devastating pandemic causing widespread morbidity and mortality and constraining communities from finding mutual support in organised gatherings. While there is little doubt that Australia is at the forefront of major climatic disasters, the way we address these will determine how resilient Australians will be in the face of continuing major events. In this paper I focus on the gendered aspects of disaster experiences in rural areas to ensure that those with the capacity to address affected communities can respond with a clear understanding of the way gender shapes the disaster experience.

Gender refers to the social factors and opportunities that shape us as male or female. In a disaster context, UN Women (2023) defines gender as 'what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context at any given time. It determines opportunities, responsibilities and resources as well as power associated with being female or male.' Before, during and after disasters there can be differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities (UN Women 2023, p.1). While gender-based inequalities are universally accepted in disaster practice, what tends to be ignored are those who identify as LGBTIQ+ and that gender can be experienced across a continuum of experience. Further, critical to any nuanced analysis of gender are the intersectional factors that shape and extend gender vulnerability including poverty, Indigeneity, ethnicity, age, income, ethnicity, ability, education, marital status, occupation, religion, and location (Djouidi, Locatelli, Vaast et al., 2016) all of which can accentuate the gendered complexities of the disaster experience.

While gender shapes the lives, experiences and patterns of behaviour adopted by women and men, gendered impacts can differ across time and geography with, for example, rural areas often identified as more overtly male dominated. Campbell, Bell and Finney (2006, 5) state that 'rural life is typically highly patriarchal'. Pini (2005, 401) reinforces this, noting that there is often a particularly clear divide between men's and women's roles and activities in rural settings. Kinnval and Rydstrom's (2019, 5), contemplating similar gender inequalities after the 2010 Haitian earthquake noted that 'a catastrophe does not land in a socioeconomic and political void'. Rather it lands in a social system where inequalities and disadvantage are already firmly established, and these inequalities can be further cemented if disaster responders accept these inequities and operate within their constraints. Alternatively, disaster response actions can provide the basis for challenging and reshaping gender relations providing not only much needed relief but also activating more equitable gender arrangements.

While the way gender is enacted can appear differently in various societies, in the context of disasters, hypermasculinity can be accentuated and implicit hegemonic masculinity is often reinforced (Knuttila, 2016). In studies undertaken across the world in a diverse range of disasters including the New Orleans flood disaster (Enarson, 2012), floods and cyclones in Bangladesh (Rezwana and Payne 2020; Alston 2015), droughts in Australia (Whittenbury, 2013), and fires in Australia (Parkinson 2019) and Canada (Drolet, 2019), women and girls are shown to be particularly vulnerable in this hypermasculine context, and their vulnerability and the uneven gendered power relations that reinforce these, reduce access to resources including information dissemination, leadership roles and resource access. Further, women are more likely to be rescuing children and looking out for aged relatives, making them particularly vulnerable to sudden onset disasters.

In studies conducted across rural Australia in a variety of climate disasters including the Millennium drought (Alston & Kent, 2004 & 2006), bushfires (Alston, Hazeleger & Hargreaves, 2014), reduced water in the Murray-Darling Basin (Alston, Clarke and Whittenbury 2018) and currently following the Lismore floods (Foote, Alston and Betts in press), we have uncovered a range of factors that impact on women during and after disasters. These include:

- Financial instability, leading to a need for women to work off-farm or to increase their work hours;
- Stress over the juggle between off-farm / out of home-work and increased on-farm work replacing hired labour;
- Emotional distress resulting from financial instability;
- Increase in violence experienced or experiencing violence for the first time;
- Significant concern about husband's mental health at same time as ignoring own health;
- A lack of accessible services;
- Ongoing closure of critical services including accessible birthing services (Dietsch et al 2008);
- Concern for children's health and worry over education particularly when financial circumstances result in boarding school being financially inaccessible for remote families;
- A lack of government financial and other support for women's community efforts before, during and after disasters;
- Burnout resulting from significantly increased voluntary work following disasters;
- A lack of recognition and leadership roles for women in community preparedness and post-disaster initiatives.

In summary, gender is a critical factor shaping the disaster experience. The particular vulnerability of women and girls is recognised in research from across the world as well as in UN policies and practices. As a result, achieving gender equality in disaster responses is recognised as a fundamental human right and a critical approach in disaster planning and management (UN Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner 2023). Gender equality is also recognised as a major goal (goal 5) of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Women 2023) because of its critical importance to health and wellbeing and the building of resilience, and in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR 2015). In fact, gender equality in the context of climate disasters is recognised as the most significant sustainable development goal (UNDRR 2023a). Australia's Disaster Preparedness Framework also recognises the need for a 'gender and child-specific lens' when undertaking disaster evacuation and support (Australian Office of Home Affairs 2023, 13). This international and national recognition of gender as a critical disaster response factor, and the overt practice of gender mainstreaming adopted at international and national levels in the context of disasters is a very positive step to gender equality. Ensuring that this becomes more than a tick a box response at all levels from international to local, and through all phases from disaster preparedness to disaster rebuilding remains a work in progress.

### **Disaster preparedness**

Put simply, disaster preparedness refers to the process of being ready for whatever disaster might occur. The Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction (UNDRR, 2023b) highlights that the overall goals of disaster preparedness actions are to reduce mortality as well as the numbers of people affected. These goals are mirrored and expanded in the Australian Framework. Essentially international and national efforts are designed to ensure communities prepare for disasters by adopting mitigation and adaptation strategies that ultimately build the resilience of both people and landscape.

Local governments and community organisations now consider having their own disaster preparedness plans as essential. It is critical that gender is mainstreamed in these plans in both the preparation for disasters and in composition of disaster preparedness committees. Making

sure they include women, men and representatives of the LGBTIQ+ community is essential to comprehensive good practice. These bodies might also ensure they have mapped their areas for potential vulnerability to particular catastrophic events, that they have addressed potential infrastructure weak points and, if they do not have this already, that they build a vulnerability register. These registers are designed to collect information on people and households that might need assistance during a disaster allowing emergency responders to particularly check on them if necessary. Further, local governments and community groups might include in their plans the targeted sites where shelters will be opened – this might be the local school or hall – and have detailed plans on how these will be staffed and managed.

Questions to ask when formalising plans for designated shelters and to ensure gender inclusivity include: are there separate designated areas for women and children when required? Do they have access to sexual and reproductive health? Do women living in rural and remote areas have access to health care including sexual and reproductive health care and maternity services? What strategies are in place to ensure women and girls will be safe? Are there separate toilets? Are there safe places for members of the LGBTIQ+ community? Are there confined areas for risky behaviour such as drinking and drug taking? Are there safe needle disposal facilities? Are police and emergency workers briefed about the need for 24 hour policing of shelters? Are pharmacists ready to provide emergency medication for people who have fled their homes with few possessions? Will women have access to sexual and reproductive health in times of disaster? And how will all of this occur in a hurry?

How then could disaster preparedness have a gender dimension? There are in fact quite significant gender consequences to adaptive measures – for example in our work with farm families we have discovered that one of the central adaptive strategies on farms is the sourcing of off-farm work usually by women (Alston, Clarke & Whittenbury, 2018). This often involves a lengthy commute and, for some, the need to live away from home during the week. Our work also confirms the increasing roles women are playing in on-farm work as the amount of hired labour is scaled back (Alston, Clarke & Whittenbury, 2018). These gendered work role changes, together with significant advances in technology are assisting farming families to adapt to potential disasters. This increase in women's farm workload has been largely unnoticed in this process but is one of the very evident outcomes of climate adaptation.

For families themselves, having a disaster plan in place to be acted upon if a disaster occurs is also a critical factor in ensuring survival. As we have discovered in disasters such as Black Saturday, lives were lost because of the uncertainty around staying to defend property (which was the preferred male position) and fleeing (the preferred female position). The stay or go dilemma cost lives because families were conflicted about their position, often resulting in women and children leaving too late. As became standard practice in Canada following wildfires (Drolet, 2019), Australian families might be encouraged to have their own plan and documents ready with a firm commitment to when they will leave should a disaster occur. Having a central point/container in the home where all documents including birth certificates, passports, health details, prescriptions, insurance documents, photo albums and other valuables are stored ready to be grabbed quickly in an emergency reduces stress at a later date, saves time when fleeing, and reduces problems associated with proof of ownership of homes and insurance details. Family plans should also include noting a central point where the family can meet if separated. These types of plans are becoming standard practice in many disaster-prone areas of the world.

Critical to survival during a disaster, and as demonstrated in many disaster sites, are adequate early warning systems. Yet the poor internet connections across rural Australia are endangering lives before and during disasters. Ensuring that warnings are given early and often is critical to saving lives – particularly of the elderly, women with young children, those living with a disability and others who need time to prepare. Observations undertaken in rural areas of South Africa and with communities in Vanuatu (Alston, Fuller & Kwarney, 2023) and Bangladesh (Alston, Whittenbury & Haynes, 2014), indicate that training women in climate information services and

early warning dissemination has a significant impact on the survival of the women and children in their communities. It also ensures that women are employed at the centre of the disaster preparedness and response. There is evidence of this in Ferny Creek in Australia.

### **The disaster**

Disasters hit without warning and may be of a scale that has not previously been experienced leading to widespread chaos, loss of life and high levels of mortality and morbidity. In this environment rapid responses are essential. Studies from across the world have indicated that a battle mentality takes over (see for example Enarson, 2012). During the Lismore floods of 2022 when the official government response was shockingly delayed, men and women took to kayaks and boats to rescue people. Several researchers have noted that the immediate post-disaster space is very much a hypermasculine space where a 'command and control' mentality is enacted (see for example Duncan, Parkinson, Archer & Keech, 2018) and where men are expected to be authoritative, stoic, brave and, above all to defend their family and property (Alston, 2012). The unruliness of the post-disaster space can make this difficult to achieve.

Tyler and Fairbrother, in referring to the 'command and control' mentality that takes over in extreme circumstances, note somewhat facetiously that bushfires are 'men's business' (2013). As noted, in a disaster crisis, men are most likely to want to stay and defend their property while women are more likely to be risk averse, wanting to leave with their children (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013). This is a significant point of difference that shapes the chances of survival for those involved. The consequences of these acts can result in ongoing mental health concerns and a steep increase in male suicide and suicide ideation (Alston, 2012).

Critical factors shaping the rural gendered disaster experience where traditional gender stereotypes persist include – for women an increase in caring roles', increase in voluntary and paid work, issues relating to finding shelter during a catastrophic disaster, experiences of increased violence, being safe, health consequences, financial instability, greater need for paid work and outmigration. For men the disaster can result in an increase in workloads, greater likelihood of experiencing mental health issues, These changes are likely to continue well beyond the disaster period. Further, while women are a significant part of first responder teams, they are more evident in supporting community members through setting up of shelters, offering social work and welfare services, organising food, responding to the traumatic stories of survivors, keeping people safe, organising clothing and other goods and generally providing a safe space. It is these community development tasks that occur behind the scenes that may be overlooked in preparation for, and analyses of crisis responses. Yet these actions provide the safety needed for people to face the trauma they have experienced.

During disasters, for those who must flee, emergency evacuation centres provide the haven required to achieve a feeling of safety. These shelters, usually established by community service organisations and local government, are crucial in a dire situation as they provide shelter, clothes, a bed and warmth. However in studies from across the world and including Australia, it is very clear that shelters can be unsafe for women and children and for those identifying as LGBTI. Bradshaw and Fordham (2013) and Enarson (2012) note that unsafe conditions have led to violence and rape in shelters that are not properly policed, a situation that has also occurred in Australia. Further, there are instances where women who have experienced violence and have taken out AVOs before the disaster, find themselves in the same shelter as their perpetrator (Foote, Alston and Betts in press). A lack of twenty-four-hour policing and gender-blind administrative procedures can cause women to be unsafe in areas that have been set up to protect them.

Additionally, LGBTIQ+ people may also view shelters as unsafe and fear going to them. They may also feel discriminated against by faith-based organisations set up to assist people in the recovery phase and feel excluded by the nature of the registration documents required to enter

the shelter. They may experience mental health issues from the threat of having their private lives exposed and many experience harassment in shelters and uncertain access to relief services and funds (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray & McKinnon, 2018).

When a disaster goes on and on as in the case of drought, there are new dynamics that shape gendered experiences. Farming family members may be engaged in heartbreaking and physically demanding tasks of feeding animals, destroying frail animals, carting water and generally coping with the devastation of watching the barren and eroding landscape die by inches. A sense of stoicism demonstrated by men in the face of these events can have damaging impacts on mental health (Alston, 2012). As a result, men are more likely to be locked into the farm becoming more isolated and depressed (Zara, Parkinson, Duncan & Joyce, 2016), while women are more likely to be interacting in the community, monitoring the health of their family, ignoring their own health and well-being and working off-farm to source the much-needed income to survive (Alston, 2011, 65). In these circumstances relationships suffer and can turn violent. For example, Whittenbury (2013) found that violence escalated in Australian rural communities affected by drought and peaked when three monthly bill cycles were due.

### **Post-disasters**

Following disasters, international research from across the globe and from a diverse range of disaster sites reveals that violence against women escalates in the aftermath of disaster. This has been documented in a number of post-disaster areas including following Hurricane Katrina in the United States (Enarson, 2012 and 2009); the Australian drought (Whittenbury, 2013); the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch where numbers of women seeking refuge from violence in the first month after the disaster nearly doubled (Lynch, 2011); and the Black Saturday bushfires (Parkinson and Zara 2013). In many of these cases, women had not experienced violence in their relationships prior to the event. Similarly in our work with communities five years after Black Saturday, respondents reported that many relationships had broken down in the years after the disaster with several citing the issue of men being unable to come to terms with the fact that the fire had 'beaten them' (Alston, Hazeleger & Hargreaves, 2018). In the post-disaster phase international research suggests that women will have increased workloads, a greater vulnerability to sexual assault and harassment, and be less likely to be included in disaster management activities (Eastin, 2018; Pearse, 2017). Health consequences for women during and following disasters may include emotional, physical and sexual health impacts, and these are compounded by a lack of services, including birthing services.

There are extensive reports of declining mental health for men after a disaster. As noted elsewhere (Alston, Hazeleger & Hargreaves, 2019), the destabilisation of hypermasculinity and their inability to protect their families or save their homes can result in reduced mental health and increased social isolation. This is not helped when local men are actively excluded from community clean ups as was the case in some communities post-Black Saturday. In these areas the clean-up was undertaken by contractors brought into the small rural communities from outside the area leaving local men being actively excluded from helping and this had a profound impact on men's health. Zara et al (2016) note that men may become vulnerable through their loss of control of their circumstances, a reluctance to seek help and an internalisation of their fears for the future. Critically in post-disaster situations where jobs and businesses may have been destroyed, men may also 'outmigrate' or take jobs elsewhere in fly-in flyout positions in mines for example. This disruption can have significant impacts on family wellbeing and stability. The health outcomes of these changes are evident in declining mental health, as noted in relation to farm men but also to women carrying the emotional burden of care for family, and, in the case of farm women, taking off-farm work and juggling farm work, book work and community interactions. Women also report more physical ailments resulting from their farm work, particularly when women increase their work hours in dairies (Alston, Clarke & Whittenbury, 2018). Increased paid and unpaid labour are part of women's post-disaster experience and all

add to women's vulnerability. In commenting on post-disaster women's work and the significant expectations on women to undertake extensive community work setting up community hubs, providing food, counselling and support services, often unpaid and with little or no government funding, Bradshaw (2015, p. 554) argues that while attention to women is laudatory, in the context of disasters, this shouldn't mean a transfer to a 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation.' There is extensive evidence of women setting up and managing community services, drop-in centres, food distribution and donations (our current research in Lismore following the 2022 floods demonstrates this very clearly (Foote et al unpublished). This work is largely unpaid and often ignored despite the vital significance of the work and often leads to burnout..

Women's post-disaster work also includes active community work. For example, following the 2022 Lismore floods, women in Lismore have established a community hub that continues to operate providing a safe place for people to have coffee, access services and, for some, to have a safe place to spend time (Foote, Alston & Betts, in press). This raises a significant issue relating to ongoing funding. These community led initiatives may have significant difficulty accessing funding, space and credibility despite the support of the community. This leads to significant burnout amongst volunteers working for their communities. Post-disaster funding should target these initiatives which are often staffed by community women who have their own disaster experience. In a post-disaster situation, women and girls may also experience less access to post-disaster training, less institutional support, less freedom of association and fewer positions on decision-making bodies (Alston, Whittenbury & Haynes, 2014). Their responsibilities for the aged, children and the sick or injured may also increase.

### **Limitations**

Space has limited my appraisal to a broad-brush representation of critical experiences. What is missing is a nuanced assessment of the way intersectional factors further shape experience. For example, the experiences of Indigenous women in disasters remains largely and shockingly undocumented. So too do the experiences of people from CALD backgrounds, older women and those living with a disability. Nonetheless understanding the gendered complexities of disasters and the intersectional factors that sharpen vulnerability, provides insight into the experiences of those living through disaster. Extending this knowledge through an examination of intersectional factors is essential. Having a comprehensive analysis of these factors will ensure that Australia and its citizens are prepared for the disasters that may lie ahead.

### **Conclusion**

Gender is now recognised by governments, NGOs, researchers and community groups as a critical determinant of the disaster experience. The issues affecting women and girls, men and boys outlined above are particularly pertinent to the shaping of resilience in the disaster context. In the rural and remote context there are extensive consequences for women and men during and following disasters. These include health consequences, both mental and physical, an increase in workloads, financial insecurity, and a lack of adequate services, including IT, health and other support services. Increased violence against women has been noted in rural studies across Australia and beyond, as well as relationship difficulties. For women there are the added burdens of additional care tasks, increased workloads and declining access essential care such as birthing facilities and sexual and reproductive health services. Addressing the increase in disasters and their aftermath requires strong leadership at local and national levels. This leadership will be ineffectual without the input of women.

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