


Victoria's Gender and Disaster Taskforce

Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara, Women's Health Goulburn North East and Women's Health in the North, and Susan Davie, Save the Children, present progress on the Gender and Disaster Taskforce. 

ABSTRACT

Victoria is modelling an innovative way to mitigate the impacts of disaster on individuals, communities and emergency services organisations through its Gender and Disaster Taskforce. This may well be the first of its kind in the world. The Taskforce was established in 2014 and is led by the Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner, Craig Lapsley, and Susie Reid, Executive Officer of Women's Health Goulburn North East.

It brings together the energy and commitment of Emeritus Professor Frank Archer from the Monash University Injury Research Institute and Professor Bob Pease from the University of Tasmania, together with other high-level players from Victorian emergency services organisations, local government and the community. Representation includes the Department of Health and Human Services, Country Fire Authority, State Emergency Services, Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Victoria Police, Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority as well as community consultants, Municipal Association of Victoria, and Save the Children.

Why consider gender?

'Don't talk to me of gender, we have an emergency on our hands!' Has this thought ever crossed your mind? Leading U.S. disaster researcher, Elaine Enarson, writes:

Historically based in civil defense and in jobs and occupations dominated by men, the emergency management culture of practice is response-oriented, fostering a climate in which the 'tyranny of urgency' (Baden and Masika, 1996) prevails. The concerns of sex and gender, like those arising around age or ability, are seen (if at all) as secondary distractions. (Enarson 2012, p. 168)

The irony is that disasters are currently managed in a wholly gendered way. The way we construct gender roles creates different risks for men and women in disasters, and these must be planned for without the assumption that men will be tough and women will be protected (Eriksen 2014). An Australian study (Parkinson 2012, Parkinson & Zara 2013), reported that one woman almost died as a result of her belief that her husband could save her, saying, 'He was my fire plan'. 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.

We persist in imagining the role of men as protector and women as protected. This is the case, even though in the 50 years leading to Black Saturday in Victoria in 2009, 40 per cent of deaths from bushfire in Australia were females with the gap between male and female deaths closing in two Australian bushfires (Haynes *et al.* 2008). In the 2005 Wangary Fire in South Australia, for example, three of the nine people who died were women and four were children (DeLaine *et al.* 2008). In the Lara fires of 1969, 72 per cent (13) of those killed were female (Haynes *et al.* 2008).

Given that the great majority of professional and volunteer firefighters on Black Saturday were men, the fact that 73 females died appears disproportionately high. This is 42 per cent of the total deaths. A postal survey of 1314 Black Saturday survivors found that 62 per cent of men and 42 per cent of women did not evacuate—either to defend property (83 per cent) or because it was too late to leave or leaving was unsuccessful (12 per cent) (Whittaker *et al.* 2013). DeLaine and colleagues' conclusion in 2008 that 'there are clear gender differences in bushfire knowledge, fire fighting skills and risk perception [and that] lack of interaction with fire agencies by women remains an issue' is equally true in 2015.

The consequence of men's perceived 'failure' to protect families on Black Saturday reverberated for some men in displays of hyper-masculinity, violence and risk-taking in the disaster's aftermath, and, for some others, in harmful behaviours turned inwards—mental anguish denied and repressed leading to shame, isolation, depression, anxiety and suicide (Zara & Parkinson 2013). The male culture in emergency services sometimes undermined support services

on offer, such as counselling. Men spoke of their reluctance to reveal to others that they were seeking help, fearing this would be seen as a weakness that could hinder their career paths:

People would be worried about the confidentiality, whether there was any feedback that came around the back saying, 'Keep this guy away from big fires'. (Matthew)

When the Works Coordinator was away [I used to be on higher duties]. When I took that month off, which I took off as stress leave, ever since then there's been nothing. (Stuart)

Background to the Taskforce

The Taskforce builds on evidence collected in the aftermath of the devastating Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009. The Just Ask conference in Melbourne in 2013 and two key research reports prompted this innovative approach to emergency management. Parkinson (2012) showed an increase in family violence after the 2009 bushfires, and Zara & Parkinson (2013) documents how men spoke of their ongoing struggles with mental health issues including anger, isolation and drugs and alcohol. For some men this was the first time they had shared their experiences from the day of the fires and in the following months. Many said they did not experience symptoms until one or two years later and some spoke of violence between men in community settings that shocked them, with repercussions felt to this day.

There were quite a lot of angry accusations flying about that, and that's to a degree still going ... We had an incident two months ago ... where two guys got into a punch-up. (Chris)

I was about that far from assaulting somebody one night, I just was ready to drag him across the table at a meeting in public and beat the crap out of him. (Scott)

Verbal abuse and physical abuse as well. I can remember walking from the big tent to the main street with a person who I'd known for the best part of 10 years. I was challenging him on a particular issue that he was taking a leadership role in, and that exploded into violence. (Paul)

The lack of timely and appropriate services and a fear of stigma were key themes. The men's narratives show that a culture of masculinity (and an absence of women in emergency services) can contribute to men's harmful behaviours—both to themselves and to those around them (Beatson 2005, Pacholok 2013, Scanlon 1998, Tyler 2013a, Tyler & Fairbrother 2013). For example, Ainsworth, Batty & Burchielle (2014) found that masculine workplaces like the Country Fire Authority in Victoria celebrated 'qualities such as physical action, detachment from others and competition' (p. 41) and reported women experiencing volunteer firefighting workplaces as hostile and threatening. Indeed, the link between support for traditional masculine and feminine stereotypes and male violence has been identified by

VicHealth, as summarised by Council of Australian Governments:

Evidence shows that key predictors of violence against women relate to how individuals, communities and society as a whole view the roles of men and women. Some of the strongest predictors for holding violence-supportive attitudes at the individual level are low levels of support for gender equality and following traditional gender stereotypes. (Council of Australian Governments 2011, p. 18)

In emergency management historically, a sharp delineation between the jobs of men and women was evident and continues to be reflected in statistics. In NSW, a gendered division within the Rural Fire Service is evident as men overwhelmingly fill frontline and leadership roles and women are represented in greater numbers in non-operational volunteering such as communications and catering (Eriksen 2013). This is reflected across Australia, with women comprising less than a quarter of rural fire service personnel—primarily in support roles (Tyler 2013b). As Mae Proudley writes:

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)

Competency is associated with masculinity and, as Huppatz & Goodwin (2013, p. 300) write, 'it may simply be a case of men being seen to have "the right body for the job"'. Segregation of women and men in emergency management, as in other employment areas (Dowd 2010, Noble & Pease 2011), works to discriminate against women and ensure higher pay and status for men. Often rationalised as natural, a leftover from 'breadwinner' imagery, the notion that men are more deserving of higher status jobs and promotions persists (Seguino 2015, Marra 2015). This male sense of entitlement may result in resentment and even violence against women (Scanlon 1998).

The Chief of Army, Lieutenant General David Morrison presented to the Taskforce in 2014 and gave the anecdote that, following reforms to address sex discrimination in the Army, women who are promoted within the military are said to have been 'Brodericked'¹. This alludes to the then Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, and indicates male resistance to losing their previous privilege in the workplace. Such a 'backlash' against special temporary measures may manifest in discrimination against women continuing through differential treatment and interpretation of behaviour (Deutsch 2007, Noble & Pease 2011). Vigilance beyond equal representation of women and men in emergency management is therefore essential.

1 Video available at www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice/gender-disaster-taskforce.html.

Aims, objectives and benefits

The Gender and Disaster Taskforce is charged with setting firm goals including tackling the dearth of women in leadership positions within emergency services organisations and changing a culture that rewards men for risky behaviour to one that supports both men and women.

All documents are available at www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice/gender-disaster-taskforce.html and can be included and adapted by emergency management practitioners in other parts of Australia.

The Taskforce is a three-year initiative intended to make a measurable, positive difference and lay foundations for future improvement. The primary aim is to reduce the compounding effects of gender on disaster impacts, through achievement of seven objectives:

1. To transform the work environments and practices of emergency services organisations so that women find working in them to be welcoming and inclusive.
2. To transform the work environments and practices of emergency services organisations so that men feel encouraged to work against harmful, destructive, conscious and unconscious masculine behaviours to self and others, and feel less pressure to engage in them.
3. To improve the gender-specific support that men and women in emergency services organisations and other emergency management organisations receive after disasters.
4. To achieve Objectives 1-3 in ways that improve respect for the needs of diverse groups, for example culture, sexuality, age, in relation to how it intersects with the issue of gender.
5. To improve the gender-specific support that men and women, along with boys and girls, throughout the community receive after disasters.
6. To embed a gender lens across culture and systems relating to disasters to improve community outcomes following future disasters.
7. To ensure efficient and responsive Taskforce planning, reflective of gender equity and representative of the principles of the foundation document.

The work plan includes a number of approaches to support achieving each objective and suggests a multitude of ways that emergency planners and responders can adopt to address the negative and compounding effects of gender stereotyping on disaster. The benefits of focusing on gender issues in emergency management and disaster include:

- improved functioning of communities before, during and after fires and emergencies
- improved functioning of fire and emergency agencies, including increased support for employees and volunteers
- greater accuracy in emergency management doctrine by applying a gender lens to policies, plans, procedures and training manuals



Gender and Disaster Taskforce members represent a range of academic and government departments, non-government organisations and community members.

- reduced violence, particularly against women and children by men
- improved men's health including reductions in substance abuse, depression and suicide
- increased opportunities and conditions for women in fire and emergency organisations and disaster-affected communities
- better sustaining of livelihoods (including employment) after disasters
- widespread understanding of gender and disaster issues, underpinned by evidence.

Although the Gender and Disaster Taskforce was established in response to research findings following disasters in Victoria, it has wider applicability. Each Australian state and territory has its own context and its own emergency management challenges, yet human responses and behaviour are shaped by the same cultural gender norms, both urban and rural. The work completed by the Taskforce in its first 12 months of operation offers a blueprint for others to adopt and adapt to ensure that gender issues are considered in all aspects of emergency management practice.

Evaluation

Since its inception, evaluation of the Gender and Disaster Taskforce has included a standing agenda item entitled, 'Use of gendered power and language'. At the beginning of each meeting, the Chair invites a taskforce member to observe the meeting and offer comments at its conclusion on the extent to which gendered power was evident and the use of gendered language. These comments on observed dynamics are open for a wider discussion from all taskforce members. This has proved a useful, revealing and sometimes surprising part of the meeting.

A second standing agenda item is a 'Round the table' invitation for members to report on initiatives their organisation has undertaken to address the Gender and Disaster Taskforce work plan. This inclusion allows members to share their good practice and works as a prompt to consider the ideas in the work plan. A new initiative is for members to present more formally on their organisation's performance from a gender perspective. The first presentations prompted rich

discussions that revealed the ways in which gender is implicated in emergency management. These segments will be documented due to their potential to add to the sector's understanding of this central issue.

An in-depth 'Reflection and self-evaluation' questionnaire is being trialled and will be used twice-yearly to allow measurement of satisfaction with the process of the Taskforce and assess benefits for member organisations.

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About the authors

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