

Embedding gender equality in emergency management planning

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Disasters affect people of different genders in different ways. Yet, for too long, women have been overlooked in the design of emergency management policies, services and responses.

Research evidence and lived experience tell us that disasters are gendered. Norms of ‘heroic’ masculinity can often place men in harm’s way, defending their homes and confronting disasters head on.¹ Social constructions of femininity and patterns of precarious work that disproportionately affect women can find them bearing the brunt of the economic fallout, post-disaster.² LGBTQIA+ communities may experience marginalisation and discrimination, or may fear for their safety in the context of disaster evacuation and rebuilding.³ The stereotypes, expectations and inequalities placed on different genders can influence patterns of disadvantage experienced. These patterns are further shaped and exacerbated by other forms of discrimination including ability, age, class, indigeneity, race and other intersecting attributes.⁴ Disasters are also known to exacerbate family violence, racism, homophobia, transphobia and various forms of social unrest and oppression.⁵

Despite these divergent experiences, emergency management policies, services and responses have traditionally been led by men without consideration for the diversity of experiences. Women and gender-diverse people have rarely had a seat at the table. When they have, they have often experienced overt or systemic discrimination.⁶ The lack of representation of women has flow-on effects for gender equality in response and recovery, and presents challenges, such as the disproportionate impact of disasters on women’s financial security.⁷ At the same time, masculine stereotypes have traditionally shaped emergency management approaches to the detriment of men’s physical and psychological safety.⁸

But emergency management failures predicated on gendered assumptions are preventable. To avoid unequal outcomes, planning, at its earliest stage, should include a gender-impact assessment

(GIA). These assessments drive equality under the ground-breaking *Gender Equality Act 2020* (Vic). Under the Act, public sector entities (including universities and local councils) are required to conduct GIAs for all new and renewing policies, programs and services that directly and significantly affect the public.

A GIA entails reviewing the context and content of a program, policy or service in terms of how it may affect, or be experienced by, people of different genders, to ensure it does not reproduce or deepen inequalities. A GIA will expose gender inequality and allow for adjustments before a program is rolled out. GIAs help public sector organisations drive gender equality both within the workplace and through public-facing commitments.

Considering gender through these assessments is imperative in a sector where effective preparatory work is vital so that decisions made in pressured situations do not exacerbate inequalities. For example, it is well documented that men’s violence against women—including domestic and family violence and sexual violence—as well as other forms of gender-based violence affecting women and the LGBTQIA+ community, increase in the post-disaster context. In the US, according to reporting from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, approximately 31% of incidences of sexual violence occurred in evacuation shelters; over 93% of those experiencing violence were women and over 93% of those using violence were male (with the remainder unspecified).⁹

In the chaos of a disaster, sexual violence may also be trivialised in favour of challenges deemed ‘more important’. According to Thornton and Voigt (2007)¹⁰, during Hurricane Katrina ‘when a rape was reported to a first responder such as a police officer, an official statement was not taken

because of other life-threatening priorities'. These patterns have been repeated across countless events globally in the intervening years with similar reports emerging from the US Gulf Coast in September 2021 following Hurricane Ida.¹¹ Australia is not immune, with spikes in the rates of domestic and family violence often reported post-bushfires.²

An assessment of emergency response processes and services can account for and mitigate gendered risks. GIAs are a way to factor in the safety and economic security of women and gender-diverse people to immediate response efforts and long-term recovery processes to reduce gender-based violence and inequality. However, to effectively address these gendered aspects, the emergency management sector must also advance cultural change. This entails increasing women's decision-making responsibilities and challenging masculinised cultures of command and control. When diverse voices meaningfully participate in leadership, the approaches and programs that emerge better reflect the rich and varied experiences of communities and better meet community needs.

The *Gender Equality Act 2020* facilitates these changes. The Act identifies tools to integrate the experiences and needs of different genders in emergency management planning and promote gender-equal workplaces. It also requires organisations to make meaningful progress towards gender equality. This progress is assessed through the requirement under the Act that organisations evaluate progress towards gender equality through regular workplace gender audits that identify areas to improve. Audits are coupled with gender equality action plans that identify activities and measures that support positive change. The requirement to make meaningful progress guards against simple box-ticking exercises or the risk of organisations 'making noise' about gender equality initiatives without delivering substantive change. The transparency requirements of the Act facilitate the sharing of good practice and allow public, government and academic scrutiny of progress towards gender equality in public sector organisations.

Emergency management is a vital part of the public sector. The changing climate and extreme weather it causes, in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic, point to the importance of emergency management and also that we are more likely to require greater assistance in the future. Making emergency management organisations gender-equal, ensuring safe work environments that are free of sexual harassment and ensuring disaster preparedness and response account for the different experiences and needs of different genders are more important than ever. The Act provides the tools, structures and motivation to achieve these goals.

Endnotes

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