

'The Way He Tells It...'

Relationships after Black Saturday

Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara

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Three years ago, we gathered in the office of WHGNE to consider what response our service could make to the unbelievable tragedy of Black Saturday. We determined to contribute in a sustained way by documenting women's voices, which are mostly absent from accounts of momentous events.

'The Way He Tells It', gives voice to women's experiences of the day and its aftermath. 76 people were consulted – 29 women and 47 workers in the Shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi. The research was not welcomed when we began in late 2009. This was a bushfire like no other.

The initial literature review showed that that, internationally, family violence increases after disasters. We saw that there was no published research in Australia. And we learnt - as weeks and months went by - that it was impossible to obtain conclusive statistics about FV after Black Saturday. Without data, the only evidence was anecdotal. How do you make a case without empirical evidence? And why were there no conclusive statistics?

The DHS Case management service reported 9 cases of family violence in the Hume region in the two years after Black Saturday. The Hume region covers a fifth of the State and includes 12 Local Government Areas. Explanations for this incredible figure are that it would reflect the taboo women face and that case managers were not qualified to work with family violence. (Names have been changed.)

Sonia, one of the women we interviewed said:

They didn't all have the exact same training. The case managers [were not] asking the question about domestic violence at any point ... People are suspicious but they don't ask. (Sonia)

Dianne : The case managers didn't even ask about it All they wanted to know is what people needed. (Di)

We were told that workers would have been sensitive in how they chose to record the presenting issues.

One worker spoke of a conscious decision *not* to record family violence as a way of being respectful to clients. She said:

A lot of people struggled with putting that sort of information down. ... and you know, somebody might have disclosed something to them ... it's just about how do you define that and how do you report that in your case notes ... Knowing what it is but actually respecting the client and recording it in their words. (Case management — 2 people)

Police statistics, too, although publicly available at Local Government Area (LGA) level were inconclusive due to population change, police inability to attend all FV incidents post-disaster, and privacy issues.

All of our attempts to quantify an increase were unsuccessful. Our final attempt resulted in advice from FAHCSIA that they were unable to provide any relevant data. The reasons for this absence were examined by Women's Health In the North and published in the current Australian Health Promotion Journal.

The lack of data is the first of many silences.

In the months after the fires, with ongoing grief and bereavement, homelessness, impassable roads and lost infrastructure, family violence was not prioritised at a systems level. Attention to it became secondary in the urgency of disaster recovery.

The postcard in the Conference pack gives the web link to our full report. Our research considers possible explanations for increased family violence - including 'hyper masculinity' which is identified in the international literature, and by the women and workers locally.

And we consider the role of gender. The way we construct gender roles creates different risks for men and women in disasters. It is these circumstances that must be taken into account and planned for – without the assumption that men will be tough and women will be protected.

We all draw on the myth that women will be looked after by men. Yet, this and other research has found that this is not what happens during disasters. When women's voices are heard, it is revealed that the 'knight in shining armour' during a disaster is equally likely to be a woman as a man. For many children being driven out of the fires on Black Saturday, their protector was a woman. Their mum saved their lives.

The focus of this presentation, however, takes two steps back to argue our case that family violence *has* increased. It is necessary to do this because initial responses to this research from state-wide disaster services and from local service providers suggested they needed more convincing before anything would change.

To be clear, these are unwelcome findings. We accept easily that violence against women increased after earthquakes in Haiti and cyclones in Bangladesh, but nobody wants to hear that men who embody the spirit of resilient and heroic Australia are violent towards their families. The theme of this presentation is the silencing of women.

So, what *is* our evidence of increased family violence?

From time to time, concerns were expressed. Increases were observed and anecdotally reported by agencies, recovery authorities and community leaders. Newspaper articles linked family violence directly to the bushfires, quoting top-level sources: the VBRRRA Chairperson, a Church leader and the Victorian Clinical Psychologist Consultant.

The opinion of workers informing our research was divided, yet increases in FV were reported in nine of the 12 consultations. The three quotes following were from the most senior people in state-wide roles.

One said: We're certainly ... seeing more family violence occur ... Our real problem, as always in this area, is trying to get any evidence around it. But I did get anecdotal evidence from police, from case workers ... saying that that's one of the major concerns . (Govt/ VBRRRA/Community Recovery)

And another: I'm hearing there's a lot of marriage split ups and I've heard anecdotally about domestic violence as well. A lot doesn't get confirmed with statistics. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)

And: My knowledge is only through police and second and third hand through workers talking about how worried they were. The issue came up three months after the fires. There was increased violence and conflict and domestic violence. (Mental Health Practitioner)

Managers of other state-wide services, and workers from regional and community services agreed that family violence had increased. A worker said:

The DV services in the area have definitely reported a spike in DV post-fires. That is definite.

Even more anecdotal evidence emerged as disaster workers enquired about this conference. One emailed, 'It's about time someone lifted the lid on this'.

Further silences around this research began almost immediately. We had to justify our presence and persuade workers of the value of this research. Some workers vehemently rejected the idea and one worker after another spoke of the heightened sensitivities. Many warned us not to add to the burden on vulnerable communities.

In the early days, the testimony of workers who stated that family violence was an increasing concern, even, 'very bloody obvious' kept us on task. Then as our interviews with women began, we *knew* there was a hidden disaster that needed to be named. The sensitivities and the silences had to be breached.

We had great difficulty recruiting women. Our previous research topic was partner rape, and even that did not present the same level of constraint and silence as did this. Knowledge about family violence tells us few women seek formal help and even fewer report – this is exacerbated after disaster.

It is, perhaps, extraordinary that any women took the risk of participating. The women's narratives revealed the pressure they felt to put their own needs last in the chaos after Black Saturday.

After reading the draft of this report, one woman said, 'When I walked away from the interview, I thought, 'Why did I do that?' Now,' perhaps seeing the possibility of change, she said, 'I know why I did it'.

The factors inhibiting women included risk to confidentiality and fear of inflicting hurt on loved family members and loved communities. Another was fear of retaliation from partners and their friends and family. It must be remembered, too, that this sample was drawn from a small population — made even smaller after the fires.

The more subliminal explanation for the silence is the magnification of all those reasons women don't report— exhaustion, self-blame, fear of not being believed, fear of escalating violence, lack of options, protection of now traumatised children, and protection of the violent - yet now vulnerable - man.

The women felt compassion for the men. Health professionals were compassionate and this sometimes blurred their ability to recognise and take action on family violence. We heard that police, too, 'were sensitive' to the circumstances. After all, the men had been through a lot and were acting out of character. Some had been heroes in the fire, some were unemployed, some had lost everything, some were suicidal.

Fear of tipping vulnerable men over the edge may have softened responses. One woman told us:

I didn't want him to break. I didn't want him to die. He was pretty fragile, he was pretty angry and I didn't want him to go and smash his car into a tree or something stupid like that. (Lisa)

The result is a feeling of disloyalty by women in speaking out, and a lack of attention to family violence by agencies. Disaster indeed magnifies the taboo.

One woman offered this explanation:

You're looking at someone who's been through a holocaust, doesn't know where they're going to live, got a wife who's hysterical, and everything's difficult ... and then you move back into a street where all the houses are burnt down and maybe 20 people have been killed in that street and you know them all. (Di)

and another said:

Because you've gone through a trauma, you'll continually make excuses for someone's behaviour and you'll actually feel helpless to escape the situation - because they're suffering. (Madeline)

A further complicating factor for this research was that 18 women spoke to us while they were still living with their partners and persisting with efforts to make the relationship work.

It all leads to a deafening silence.

The findings are unmistakable - family violence increased after this disaster. All 29 women spoke of increased community or family violence and 16 spoke of being

personally and badly affected— 14 in their own relationship, one in her close sister's relationship and one regarding her daughter. Of the 16 women, 15 were afraid of their partner. **Nine of the 16 relationships had no violence before the fires and seven of these** women spoke of settled and happy relationships that were disrupted in February 2009.

For six women, the violence had escalated sharply or had been an isolated incident many years earlier.

Our numbers are conservative. One woman assigned to the group of 'not personally affected by family violence', in a later email confirmed she in fact, had been, and had considered calling police. Another woman who we included in the 'not personally affected group' spoke gently throughout the interview, and mostly in euphemisms. She spoke, for example, of her husband's 'impatience' with her. Towards the end, she said:

He started shouting, 'Aren't you grateful, I've done all this work', and he had a meltdown really. There was a lot of shouting at me, and at any one who would try to speak to him – me, the kids, he would get like this (making fists) and he punched a door and made a dent in it. I was a bit afraid. The kids were ... I feel guilty saying these things about him and putting him down because he's my husband and my best friend.

For the 16 women who are noted as experiencing family violence since the fires, their accounts are unequivocal.

Jennifer :[He] just became impossible to deal with, like you couldn't appease him ... Oh yes, he'd scream. The goal posts just kept changing, no matter what you did... He was a very intimidating person ... no matter what you said, no matter how clearly you said it, he'd find some way of turning it around ... a couple of times he actually did, a push, a shove and a hit sort of thing.

Louise: Well that night he started punching his fist into the car when we got home, and then he was so drunk ... he could barely stand, so I think he threw his bottles at me a few times ... He tried to hit me but he was so drunk I just dodged him ... He's punched me here, pulled hair, stuff like that ... before it might have gotten bad once or twice a year but never to that point ... I don't want to go but I feel like it's just I'm on borrowed time.

Tanya: Anyway, I did, I said something and he pushed me onto the floor, like I'm a fairly strong person, bang on the floor. I got up and then he just pushed me and pushed me and pushed me, and I mean he was seriously scary ... my head opened the front door, and then he pushed me onto the ground ... cracking four ribs and the sternum ... if he'd been drunk I'd be dead. You just knew he was paying out on you.

Jeanie: He would yell and scream, push and shove, abuse, mental abuse, tell me how shit I was and how I ruined our marriage.

Shelly: When the fires started happening, he sort of took the opportunity to try to get back into my life ... Then a week and a half after the fires, he was verbally abusing me at my home, pushing and shoving me and not letting me walk out my back door - and hit me and choked me and things like that.

One worker poignantly captured the essence of why family violence can't be ignored after disasters.

There have been a lot of tragic things happening in [one] family since the fires, where dad has been quite irrational [... and] there is still a lot of misplaced anger, there were just horrific stories that mum was bringing to us, of dad [severely threatening the children] ... This man's violence towards his family was new, occurring after the fires ... [He] eventually committed suicide.

On reflection, the 'sensitivities' and the 'silences' cost women their safety, their freedom and their voice. They may equally have cost men. The harrowing details of this account have been removed to preserve confidentiality and avoid charges of being injudicious. Indeed, many participants, including workers chose to remove quotes, fearing reaction from others or to protect their partner.

Earlier this week, some professionals responding to this research first questioned the truth of the women's accounts, then said, 'All the services are here, it's up to women to help themselves', followed by the alarming question, 'Why doesn't she leave?'. We were shocked to hear this in 2012.

Women's fear of not being believed and fear of blame are patently real, as is their fear of escalating violence. It is not imagined by women. Half of all murders in Australia are related to family violence. When men say, 'If you leave, I will kill you [or the children]', this is clearly not an empty threat. We must stop blaming women for men's violence. If we don't understand why women don't leave, do some reading.

VicHealth have made it easy with their new document, "Preventing Violence Against Women".

There was enormous pressure on women not to speak of men's violence. The pressure came from family members, friends, police and even health professionals.

Women spoke of seeking help with no positive outcome. With family, they were ignored, accused of over-reacting, and blamed for not caring well enough for their men. The women told of health professionals failing to follow up on initial conversations, and willing to drop the issue if the man denied any violence; or simply being passed on to inappropriate services. Some women felt reprimanded by the person they confided in and this effectively stopped them seeking support. They feared they were just complaining and wastefully accessing services that others could be using.

This misconception was, surprisingly, reinforced by one woman's counsellor. She told us:

I said, 'You must get sick of people and their sob tales' and [my counsellor] said, 'You're pretty well off, I know ... couples that are so badly damaged there's no hope for them, and their kids are damaged and everything's a total mess. So you [two] are comparatively easy.' (Beth)

The comparatively easy situation was one where her partner choked her, only dropping her when she was gasping for breath, and breaking her kneecap on the tiled floor.

It was astounding that there was an expectation from professionals that women would be silent about it for the greater good. This confirmed to women they were unimportant after this disaster. Ultimately, some women gave up. One woman, after finishing our interview, said, 'I'll get out of here in a box', revealing her level of fear and surrender.

There was a strong sense that some professionals wanted to redefine FV post-disaster and excuse the men's behaviour because they knew the man and the stresses faced by survivors. Some welcomed this approach as sensible, fearing the effect of a police report on the wellbeing of already scarred men. Or fearing intervention would lead to men's suicide.

Yet others lamented the lack of action by police and the inference that women put aside their own safety for the good of the family. One case manager said:

... So many women have gone to police and been told , 'Things will settle down again'. (Case Management — 6 people)

This reaction echoes findings from a 2006 VicHealth survey that found a large proportion of Australians believed 'domestic violence can be excused if it results from temporary anger or results in genuine regret'. Disaster seems to offer a very good excuse.

Recent gains in understanding the dynamics of family violence appeared to be lost.

Victoria Police have a strong history over the past decade in turning around attitudes to family violence and breaking down the barriers to women reporting. The same task is required in a post-disaster context.

According to Western definitions of masculine behaviour, anger is more acceptable than tears. Women made the connection between the men's experience of Black Saturday, and the way they channelled their grief.

Many spoke of their partners' anger and the seemingly uncensored way they expressed it. Where, for some women there were indications in the past that their partner might be capable of violence, the fires seemed to dismantle their capacity to regulate behaviour.

Angela: Whereas he would hold it back if we were in front of people normally, he really embraced the whole, 'I can be an absolute prick to everybody and I can get away with it because I can say I've been through the fires and I'm traumatised'. (Angela)

Workers, too, observed some people responded to the stress they were under by becoming violent. One said:

It's not an excuse but people under extreme stress with a propensity to violence, that's how it's going to express itself. You can see the triggers for it. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)

There were immense pressures on everyone who survived the fires as they tried to re-establish their lives. Homelessness, unemployment and increased alcohol and drug

use were characteristic of the recovery period. This sits alongside our willingness to excuse, overlook and forgive after disasters.

It is critical we remember that women and children, too, were traumatised by Black Saturday.

The observations of the 76 people we consulted led to a number of recommendations. These are directed separately to agencies involved in Disaster Prevention; Response and Recovery. (These are in your conference bags.)

In a broad sense, FV must be a central consideration in policies that frame disaster planning and recovery, with ongoing involvement of family violence specialists.

Key recommendations from our report are:

- Establish Disaster Guidelines at National, State and Local levels that prioritise FV and require accurate recording of statistics
- Establish and promote a National Preferred Provider Register of disaster trauma practitioners who have a sound understanding of FV.
- Train human services workers in post disaster areas in how to identify FV and refer appropriately, e.g. CRAF training
- Include the likelihood of increased FV in Disaster and Mental Health First Aid courses
- Provide compulsory debriefing to emergency services personnel in the immediate post disaster period
- Employ local men and women in paid reconstruction efforts and offer a supported return to work
- Challenge expectations that men will behave in a defined masculine way by encouraging the expression of emotion.
- Research effective ways to engage men in support strategies
- Include women in all areas of disaster response and planning, and critically,
- Name – not excuse – men's violence and affirm women's and children's right to live free from violence after a disaster.

We see this Conference as a catalyst for change, and welcome your attendance and your input into this important day.