

# THE HIDDEN DISASTER

## FAMILY VIOLENCE FOLLOWING NATURAL DISASTERS

<sup>1</sup> See full report, 'The Way He Tells It' at [www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice](http://www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice)

Women's experiences of the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires were researched by **Women's Health Goulburn North East** (late 2009 to 2011). This research provided new insights into keeping women and children safer during disasters.<sup>1</sup> These are the findings regarding family violence – in a nutshell.

For further information about family violence – also in a nutshell – see the **Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse** website:

[http://www.adfvc.unsw.edu.au/fast\\_facts.htm](http://www.adfvc.unsw.edu.au/fast_facts.htm).

### FAMILY VIOLENCE INCREASES IN THE AFTERMATH OF DISASTERS.

**Q.** What evidence is there for increased family violence after disaster?

**A.** See Snapshot 1 and read the executive summary or full report at: [www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au).

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Plan ahead to prevent it. Develop strategies to prevent and respond to family violence in your community post-disaster.

### WOMEN ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO FAMILY VIOLENCE AFTER DISASTERS.

**Q.** Why?

**A.** Women's increased vulnerability financially, practically and emotionally, combined with post-traumatic stress and increased relationship tensions may contribute to a partner using violence.

**Q.** Why are women more reluctant to seek help?

**A.** After Black Saturday, there was unspoken, yet enormous pressure on women not to be 'disloyal' and not to speak about men's violence for many reasons – 'what the men had been through', 'how heroic they had been', 'how they were acting out of character', 'it was just the alcohol' or 'they were depressed or unemployed, or feeling suicidal'. Yet, women themselves were traumatised, with uncertain futures and often with responsibilities for the emotional welfare of children.

For many who survived, the fires remain raw and traumatic.

YEAH, IT WAS A DAY. BUT I KNOW THAT FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE TRAUMATISED FROM THIS, THAT HAVE LOST THEIR FRIENDS OR EVEN SEEN HORRIFIC STUFF, THAT'S GOING TO FEEL LIKE YESTERDAY TO THEM, FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS. (RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Before, during and after disasters, challenge expectations that men will behave in a defined 'masculine' way – encourage safe expression of emotion. Give women options for referral and support.



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2 Parkinson, D., Lancaster, C., & Stewart, A. (2011). A numbers game: women and disaster. Health Promotion Journal of Australia, 22 (December), 42-45.

WHEN WOMEN HAD THE COURAGE TO SPEAK ABOUT THEIR PARTNERS' VIOLENCE AND SEEK HELP, THE COMMUNITY SEEMED MORE LIKELY THAN EVER TO EXCUSE MEN AND PREVENT ACTION TO PROTECT WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

**Q.** What happened when women did ask for help?

**A.** With family, some were ignored, accused of over-reacting and blamed for not caring well enough for their men. Friends and work colleagues did not want to get involved, fearing violence or confrontation themselves, and leaving the woman unsupported. The women told of trying to get help from different services, different workers. They spoke of health professionals failing to follow up on initial conversations, and willing to drop the issue if the man denied any violence or simply passing the woman on to some other service. Ultimately, many 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.

**WHAT CAN WE DO?**

Name it: say the word 'violent' and not 'stressed' and 'angry', and give options for referral and support.

**RECOVERY WORKERS WERE RARELY QUALIFIED TO WORK WITH FAMILY VIOLENCE.**

Recovery workers need to be able to identify family violence and respond effectively with referrals.

(THEY) DIDN'T EVEN ASK ABOUT IT (FAMILY VIOLENCE). ALL THEY WANTED TO KNOW

WAS WHAT PEOPLE NEEDED. THEY DIDN'T ALL HAVE THE EXACT SAME TRAINING (AND WERE NOT) ASKING THE QUESTION ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AT ANY POINT ... PEOPLE ARE SUSPICIOUS, BUT THEY DON'T ASK.

(RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)

**WHAT CAN WE DO?**

Ensure everyone working in human services post-disaster has undertaken the Common Risk Assessment Framework (or similar) training to identify and respond to family violence.

**FAMILY VIOLENCE WAS NOT RECORDED SYSTEMATICALLY.**

It is clear and uncontroversial that accurate statistics should be kept so that disaster planning and response is based on evidence. This did not happen after Black Saturday.

**Q.** What's your evidence that data was not recorded?

**A.** All attempts by the researchers to quantify an increase from official sources were unsuccessful. See [www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice](http://www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice).<sup>2</sup>



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Q. Weren't health professionals, counsellors and police just being sensitive to traumatised men?

A. Family violence is a crime at any time. Women, too, were survivors of Black Saturday and they should not be expected to suffer further assaults.. Men's trauma is no justification for their violence. If men use violence, they are violent men and this cannot be simply excused and ignored.

HE SAYS, 'I NEARLY DIED, SO I SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO WHATEVER I WANT' WHICH I CAN UNDERSTAND, BUT IT TOOK ME MONTHS AND MONTHS TO WORK OUT THAT I NEARLY DIED TOO.

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'.

(RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)



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Q. Why is it so important to record family violence?

A. All health planning demands a solid evidence-base for funds to be committed. Unless the increase in family violence following disaster is quantified with clear and consistent recording, data will remain unconvincing to policy makers and funding bodies, and responses to family violence will remain inadequate.

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Devise methods for compiling accurate statistics on family violence, such as including a 'family violence' tick-box in data collection forms of all disaster recovery support workers so it is not hidden beneath other presenting issues, and train staff in the importance of accurate recording.

MEN WERE RELUCTANT TO ACCESS THE COUNSELLING THAT WAS OFFERED AFTER BLACK SATURDAY.

Q. The counselling was there for men, wasn't it?

A. Men were overwhelmingly reluctant to seek help for any personal problem – especially mental or emotional. The women consulted occasionally spoke about the inadequacies of the help their partners were offered, but more often they spoke about their partners' refusal to access formal support services.

The very male cultures in emergency services undermined offers of support. Where debriefing was offered, it seemed that men had to reveal to others that they were seeking help, and this was seen as a weakness – at least initially. The consequences of lack of appropriate support for men can be devastating. Two women interviewed in this research called the police when their husbands attempted suicide. One woman knew of three suicide attempts amongst her husband's crew and suggested it was commonplace.

EVERY TIME YOU HEAR ABOUT SOMEBODY, IT'S A MAN, IT'S ALWAYS MEN, READY TO CHECK OUT RATHER THAN FACE ANOTHER DAY. SOMETHING'S GOT TO CHANGE. (RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Provide Mental Health First-Aid courses (tailored to include disaster trauma and family violence) to communities in disaster-prone areas. Investigate mandatory counselling for emergency services workers in the immediate post-disaster period – particularly in male-dominated organisations. Investigate alternative ways of supporting men in the aftermath of a disaster.

#### THERE WAS A SUDDEN AND APPARENTLY WIDESPREAD RELIANCE ON ALCOHOL AND DRUGS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE FIRES.

The impact of the fires, compounded by major life stresses such as unemployment and homelessness, perhaps led to this reliance for both men and women. For some men, alcohol changed their personality, endangering those close to them.

I MEAN HE HAS HIS GOOD MOMENTS AND HE CAN TAKE ONE MOUTHFUL OF

ALCOHOL AND THAT'S IT, HE CHANGES.

(RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)

THE MEN REALLY STARTED TO DRINK. THE WHOLE STREET ... THEY WERE GETTING TOGETHER AS BLOKES. IT WAS PROBABLY ABOUT TEN BLOKES.

(RESEARCH PARTICIPANT)

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Ensure alcohol-free and family friendly community events are included in recovery planning and include responsible drinking advertising in community spaces.

#### DISASTER SURVIVORS NEED SUPPORT TO RETURN TO WORK.

**Q.** There was plenty of work after the destruction left by the fires wasn't there?

**A.** There was no shortage of unpaid – and overwhelming – work in clearing and rebuilding. Paid work was another issue. For some, the fire had literally destroyed their livelihood both in a material sense and psychologically. Attempts to find other paid work were thwarted, too, by demands that were excessive for traumatised people with no concession for easing in to a full time workload. There were few options for a gradual return to work that would support physical and mental recovery and growth of confidence such as paid work on a part-time basis.



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Contact Women's Health Goulburn  
North East for more information:  
[www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice](http://www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice)

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

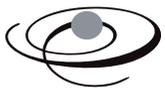
Employ local men and women in paid reconstruction efforts, and offer a gradual and supported re-entry to the workforce.

#### IT IS CRITICAL TO INCLUDE WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE IN DISASTER PLANNING AND RECOVERY.

Our intention with this research is to inform practitioners, policy makers and funders, leading to improved current service delivery, and more inclusive post-disaster planning. It will fill a gap in considering the unique experience of women, thereby giving a gendered account of the dynamics of this disaster – with clear implications for other Australian disasters.

#### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Include women at all levels in disaster prevention, response and recovery.



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