

FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENT

A three-year initiative intended to make measurable positive difference and lay foundations for future improvement.

Aim of the initiative

The Victorian Emergency Management Gender and Disaster Taskforce ('the taskforce') aims to reduce the compounding effects of gender on disaster impacts, through achievement of the following seven objectives:

1. To transform the work environments and practices of emergency service organisations so that women find working in them to be welcoming and inclusive.
2. To transform the work environments and practices of emergency service 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 ESOs 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, and 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 foundational document.

Participation, governance and resources

The initiative is lead on behalf of government by the Emergency Management Commissioner with a working group that includes community members, emergency service organisations and specialist groups:

- Participating emergency service organisations include CFA, MFB, SES, DEPI, and include where appropriate Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, VicForests, Parks Victoria, local government, community and remainder of government.
- Specialist groups include Women's Health Goulburn North East, Women's Health in the North, Monash Injury Research Institute, Deakin University School of Health and Social Development, Monash University GLASS research unit, and Save the Children Australia.

A core part of the initiative is the taskforce and reference group. Emergency Management Victoria will provide the secretariat function for meeting logistics.

The project will request modest cash contributions by key agencies, along with in-kind contributions in terms of senior staff time and commitment.

Intended benefits

The project intends to result in the following benefits:

- better functioning of communities before, during and after fires and emergencies
- better functioning of fire and emergency agencies, including improved support for employees/volunteers
- a gender lens is embedded in emergency management doctrine, including policies, plans, procedures and training manuals
- reduced violence particularly against women and children by men
- better men's health including reductions in substance abuse, depression and suicide
- better opportunities and conditions for women in fire and emergency organisations and disaster affected communities
- better sustaining of livelihoods (including employment) after disasters, and
- widespread understanding of gender and disaster issues, underpinned by evidence.

Strategy

In the interests of using its resources effectively the initiative will:

- directly influence fire and emergency service agencies through senior leaders setting directions, determining behaviours, and improving policy, plans, practice and training.
- link with and influence existing organisations, community groups and initiatives to reduce the inequitable effects of gender on disaster outcomes
- model gender-aware behaviours through the leadership and conduct of the task force
- include affected participants across the plan-do-review cycle rather than 'do solutions to them'
- prioritise actions that offer early successes, are systemically desirable, and will bring a lasting desirable effect, and
- help other initiatives by endorsing relevant proposals.
- Use and build the evidence-base to inform workplan actions that meet the objectives.

Rationale

A rationale for the initiative is outlined below, with the aim of showing the connections between the aims and the actions that contribute to achieving them. An early stage of the initiative will be to expand and shape the rationale into a Workplan.

Agencies

1. The human/people element is the key to fire and emergency services. Traditionally the services have been male-dominated, and would benefit from the equal contribution of women.
2. The people involved in the services are also part of the community. Improvements with the services will bring benefits in the wider community too.

3. Evidence shows that increases in the involvement of women in the agencies have stalled. This is particularly at more senior levels and in traditionally-male roles.

Perpetuation of social difference

4. The power structures of agencies have come to be masculine. As in wider society people use their power to reproduce the differences they value. Transforming those structures requires more than simply placing women within them – other actions are needed so the masculine ways yield, the women don't need to adopt masculine ways, and women and men with alternative ways don't become pushed out.

Masculine behaviour

5. Evidence shows that living up to the expectations of traditional masculinity, with its focus on being strong and silent, is harmful to men and to those around them:

When looking at all incidents of homicide in Australia in 2007-08, of known offenders, 87 per cent were male. Historically, males have comprised more than 80 per cent of all known homicide **offenders** since data collection first began in 1989-90 ... In 2007-08, 78 per cent of **victims** of domestic homicides by an intimate partner were female. However, when looking at all forms of homicide, more victims were male (59 per cent male versus 41 per cent female). Male victims were more likely to have been killed by an acquaintance or stranger (84 per cent) than by someone with whom they shared a domestic relationship (35 per cent). (Figuring violence, *DVRCV Quarterly*, No. 1, Autumn 2011: 20)).

“In the field of masculinities, there is also a recognition that patriarchy ultimately destroys men who conform to its requirements (Connell, 1995; Kahn, 2009; Kimmel, 1998). Men's entitlement, dominance, and privilege (particularly as it affects relationships) has been a source linked to both physical and mental health concerns. While male dominance comes with social advantages for some men, it also takes its toll on those who receive those benefits including higher rates of depression (Mahalik & Rochlen, 2006), poorer body image and self-concept (Benjamin, 2001; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Light & Kirk, 2000; Mahalik, Pierre & Wan, 2006), problems with alcohol use (Peralta, 2007), loneliness (Blazina Settle, & Eddins, 2008), poorer nutritional choices (Levi, Chan & Pence, 2006) and overall psychological distress (Mahalik et al., 2006) amongst several others.” (Kahn, 2011, p. 69)¹

6. The idea that males and females behave differently (in 'masculine' and 'feminine' ways respectively) because of innate biological differences is almost universally believed. However, research shows that behaviour differences result almost entirely from social conditioning from birth. Men and women reproduce that conditioning from generation to generation, even though they may wish to behave differently to the cultural norms.

¹ Kahn, J. S. (2011). Feminist therapy for men: challenging assumptions and moving forward. *Women & Therapy*, 34(1 2), 59.

Change and stability

7. All people are intrinsically biased. They naturally evaluate the perspective of others through their own subjectivity or worldview – they view the world through a lens of what they already value.
8. Perceiving one’s own biases is difficult; and accepting that those biases are not privileged to be ‘right’ is even harder. This makes changing social norms even more challenging. An important antidote is processes (such as learning through conversation) that truly embrace the perspectives of others.
9. 'Like reproduces like' – which retards change. For example, those who write position descriptions or determine interview panels have power to decide what is valued and what isn't. In turn successful job applicants formally and informally shape future policies, cultures and programs.
10. Senior leaders of agencies can influence (but not determine) cultural change in their agencies via the decisions they take in allocating resources and reward, recruiting and modelling, and attending to symbols, routines, rituals, controls, power and stories.
11. Agencies and their people are part of the community and wider society. The people from agencies influence their communities. In turn the people from communities influence the people in agencies and in some cases ‘are’ those people. Desired and undesired change are both promoted and retarded by those connections.
12. Existing male health programs can be influenced to include the disaster impact in an educational and proactive approach to improving awareness and understanding.
13. Sustained and effective change comes not from edict or education – though these may indeed be important. It comes from sustained modelling of desired behaviours, searching for and confronting truths, supporting local initiative and conversation, and continually portraying a vision of a better future. It requires top-level leadership, and a willingness of those leaders to reflect on themselves and their biases, learn, personally change.
14. An initiative that aims to achieve a different balance of participants in a culture means doing exactly that. The action of changing who participates (in this case by gender) is itself core, not just an effect of other actions.
15. A decision to collect data is a powerful change action that validates the reality that there is an issue of significance to collect data about. Collecting disaster data that identifies sex and age will result in the issues receiving better attention.
16. The themes of ‘gender and disaster’ fit in the realm of so-called ‘wicked problems’. The ways of systems thinking and practice offer effective pathways into improving such situations.