

# **‘The way he tells it ...’**

Relationships after Black Saturday



**A research report in four volumes**

**Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations**

**Vol. 2 Women and Disasters Literature Review**

**Vol. 3 The Landscape of My Soul — Women’s Accounts**

**Vol. 4 A Gut Feeling — The Workers’ Accounts**



## Narrative reinvention

The way you tell it  
we had an infallible plan  
your foresight  
arming us against catastrophe  
and your efforts alone  
prepared our home  
against calamity

The way you tell it  
your quick thinking  
saved the day  
you rescued us  
and we escaped  
ahead of the inferno  
while you remained defiant  
Unashamedly

you reinvent the narrative landscape  
cast yourself in the starring role  
paint me with passivity  
render me invisible

Your truth is  
the shrieking wind  
hurled flames through the air  
you fled, fought and survived  
flesh seared  
mind incinerated

You weave a fantastic tale  
by which you hope to be judged  
inside is just self-hatred  
and in seeking to repair  
your tattered psyche  
brush me with your loathing

I understand, even forgive  
but this is not the way I tell it

**Dr Kim Jeffs**

*(The title of this report is adapted from 'Narrative Reinvention' with sincere thanks to Dr. Kim Jeffs)*



## Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt thanks to the women who shared their experiences, hoping — as we do — to positively change the experiences of women in the aftermath of future disasters. They have survived a bushfire unprecedented in its ferocity in Australia's recorded history and each morning, face another day. Their honesty and courage is inspirational.

*'I died for a while. I was wandering, and the world I touched turned into sand. I could hear wind, but the sand did not fly. For ten years I lost my way. I almost forgot about you; there was so much work leading to other work and another life — like picking up coins in a dream.*

*(From, The Woman Warrior, Women's Health Goulburn North East, 2011, p. 70)*

Our sincere appreciation to the workers who took time out of their pressing workloads to inform our approach to this work. Their selflessness was apparent in each consultation. Working in the aftermath of disaster takes its toll. Without exception, the workers' own deep concern — and sometimes distress — was apparent. Their thoughtfulness and commitment to the communities within Mitchell and Murrindindi shires are evident in their comments throughout this Volume.

## Vision

Our vision for women and children in Australia is to live free from family violence after a disaster in their community because:

- Community members and service providers openly recognise and respond to the risk of increased family violence after a disaster
- Policies and protocols are in place in disaster planning and recovery to enable agencies to fulfil their role in preventing family violence after a disaster
- The appropriate range and number of services are in place to prevent family violence in communities affected by a disaster
- Families — and especially men — have the skills and awareness to recognise and access the appropriate help when there is a risk of family violence

## Commitment to caring for the environment

In consideration of the environment, this document is online for free download at [www.wealth.com.au/environmentaljustice](http://www.wealth.com.au/environmentaljustice). A series of 'Snapshots' have been printed to capture the key points and are available upon request to WHGNE 03 5722 3009.



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# **The way he tells it**

Relationships after Black Saturday

**Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations**



**WOMEN'S HEALTH**  
GOULBURN NORTH EAST  
*challenging inequity, embracing diversity*

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. PO Box 853, Wangaratta, Victoria, 3677.

Phone: 03 5722 3009 Fax: 03 5722 3020

[whealth@whealth.com.au](mailto:whealth@whealth.com.au)

[www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au)

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Written by Debra Parkinson, and based on interviews by Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara from 2009 to 2011.

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## Introduction

Australians have a 1 in 6 estimated lifetime exposure to natural disaster and Victoria is one of the three most fire-prone areas in the world. The Black Saturday fires resulted in the greatest loss of life from a bushfire since settlement with 173 deaths. A further 414 people were injured and 2029 houses were destroyed. The ferocity of the fires, the total devastation of whole communities, the individual tragedies were a new and traumatic experience for the people living and working there.

Large-scale disasters are managed in a gendered way in which assumptions are made about the role of men as protector and women as protected. In the most obvious example, men are at the frontline in fighting bushfires much more than women. Yet statistics show that until Black Saturday the gap between male and female deaths in Australian bushfires was closing, and in two fires, had actually reversed (Haynes et al., 2008). Our common aim, as research participants and researchers, is to throw some light on what happens to women during a disaster and in its aftermath in Australia. The personal is, indeed, political. Each woman's story of individual struggle is much more than that — their circumstances dictated to a large degree by the expectations society has of men and women.

As a result, in this research, we argue for a different gendered approach to disaster — one that is based on the reality of women's experiences. On Black Saturday, women's responsibility for children and other dependents placed them at increased risk. This risk goes beyond the actual disaster to its aftermath. Worldwide literature suggests increased violence against women is characteristic of post-disaster recovery. Yet there is a gap in the Australian literature of the sociological aspects of disaster recovery in Australia. While previous Australian research has looked at what happens in disaster-recovery phases, none focuses on the experience of women in regard to violence. In the tumult of disaster recovery, family violence<sup>1</sup> is often ignored, unrecognised and unrecorded.

The gendered nature of risk must be recognised and included in any disaster and emergency response. Part of this is the recognition of family violence and the awareness that accurate statistical recording will improve response to families experiencing this hidden disaster (Parkinson, Lancaster, & Stewart, 2011).

While we understand that men are suffering, rather than excuse this, we can ask why women who have been through the trauma of a disaster and are now going through the trauma of its aftermath and all that entails, should be expected to accept violence from their partner. This research presents the case for clear-eyed recognition of increased violence against women in the aftermath of disaster and a disaster response that protects women and offers options, while proactively recognising the increased needs of men, to prevent family violence. Where violence occurs after disaster, there must be no lesser effort in upholding women's rights to live a life free from fear of violence — including when police are involved and there may be legal consequences for perpetrators.

In this research, family violence was present for 16 women. For nine women, it was a new experience since Black Saturday and for six, the violence had escalated or had been an isolated incident many years earlier. One woman left her violent partner before the fires and he returned after, almost immediately resuming his violent behaviour. Of the 16 women who experienced violence since the fires, 15 women stated they were afraid of their partner.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, terminology will vary between 'Family Violence' and 'Domestic Violence' as research participants often referred to 'Domestic Violence' and indeed, 'DV'.

Australian emergency responses, as evidenced by the response to the Black Saturday bushfires, must attend to the real issues of gender and the particular risks to women during disasters and in their aftermath. Our progress on family violence over recent years must not be surrendered in the weeks, months and years following disasters.

## Background

This report documents the findings of qualitative research conducted over two years from late 2009 to 2011. It captures the experience and knowledge of women who survived Black Saturday. Definitions for terms used in this report are in Appendix 1.

Our intention is that this evidence will inform practitioners, policy makers and funders, leading to improved 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.

Its value for us as friends, family, colleagues and human beings, is that we have the opportunity to hear directly from women and workers about what happened, and how the Black Saturday bushfires affected them and the people around them. In this document, the 29 women and 47 workers reflect beyond the terror of the disaster itself, and beyond the heroism of individuals, to speak of how this disaster has irreversibly changed aspects of their lives and their sense of self.

Black Saturday has upended and scattered entire communities in our region. The wholesale disruption continues as we write this in 2011, three years after the event. And will continue for many people, for years to come.

*You aren't the same people and you never will be again. That person you were pre fires isn't there. (Libby)<sup>2</sup>*

## International and Australian research findings

The literature review in Volume 2 on women and disasters shows that in developing countries women are at greater risk of mortality in a disaster, and increased violence against women is characteristic of a post-disaster recovery. In Australia, although there appear to be no published studies investigating increased rates of violence against women in the wake of a disaster, some papers mentioned the link. In 1994, Councillor Beth Honeycombe from the Burdekin Shire Council in Queensland wrote a short article on the 'Special Needs of Women in Emergency Situations' for *The Macedon Digest* where she stated, 'An increase in domestic violence is repeatedly found in post-disaster situations' (Honeycombe, 1994, p. 31). In the same edition, Narelle Dobson's presentation to the *Women in Emergencies and Disasters Symposium* in March 1992 is reproduced. Dobson reflects on the period following the 1990 Charleville flood and her role in the recovery as a social worker. She noted that in the wake of the flood:

*Human relations were laid bare and the strengths and weaknesses in relationships came more sharply into focus. Thus, socially isolated women became more isolated, domestic violence increased, and the core of relationships with family, friends and spouses were exposed. (Dobson, 1994, p. 11)*

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<sup>2</sup> False names are used throughout this document.

In countries similar to Australia, relationship violence, child abuse and divorce have increased in the wake of disasters. In the US, a 2009 study (Anastario, Shehab, & Lawry, 2009) showed a four-fold increase in intimate partner violence following Hurricane Katrina. New Zealand police reported a 53 per cent increase in callouts to domestic violence incidents over the weekend of the Canterbury earthquake on 4.9.2010 (Houghton, 2010). Six months later, the five Domestic Violence services in Christchurch reported that inquiries increased to 47 in the 48 hours following the earthquake on 2.3.2011. This was estimated to be a 50 per cent increase (S. Phillips, 2011).

Despite work in recent decades to address this issue, it is apparent that this lack of recognition of violence against women in the private domain may be taken to a new level in a post-disaster context where stress levels are high, perpetrators may have been 'heroes' and where men are often unemployed and sometimes suicidal. Support services are over-burdened with primary and fire-related needs in the aftermath of a disaster and this serves to exacerbate a willingness to overlook violence against women.

Research on masculinity and disaster is outside the scope of this work, but is clearly deserving of attention. Please note, however, that the definition of disaster used in this research and in other research focussing on natural disasters specifically excludes disasters caused by war or terrorism.

### **Aims of the research and this report**

When women were asked why they wanted to participate in this research, overwhelmingly they stated they wanted to help others by sharing their experiences. They did not want the knowledge borne through suffering to be lost. Clearly, they shared the aims of WHGNE in undertaking this research, which were:

1. To document women's experiences in the aftermath of the Black Saturday fires, and
2. To contribute to a new knowledge-base and inform post-disaster recovery.

Outcomes sought included:

- Documented narratives from women in fire-affected communities about their experiences of bushfire and the recovery period.
- New knowledge about the effect of bushfire and the recovery period on women and their communities.
- Information dissemination to those in decision-making positions, thereby contributing to an improved government and non-government response.
- Broad distribution of findings through website information.
- Positive change through the research process due to the ripple effect of people talking about these issues and acting on them.

WHGNE sought also to acknowledge the expertise and insight of women and workers.

## Methodology

Feminist analysis of violence against women led us to engage in this work, and we took a feminist research approach. Feminist research is best understood by considering the values that inform it rather than the methods used (Millen, 1997). It endeavours to provide a location from which women's voices can be heard (Millen, 1997; Trinder, 2000). We do research to bring about positive change (Humphries, 1997). Chatzifotou (2000) suggests that in-depth interviews are one of the most powerful qualitative research methods used by feminist researchers to enable women to tell their stories. Our research approach is qualitative, based primarily on in-depth interviews.

This research was conducted over two years from late 2009 to 2011 and geographically confined to the shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi in Victoria's North-East. The area was selected as it was badly fire-affected in 2009 and is part of the region served by Women's Health Goulburn North East. The research sought to capture women's experience of Black Saturday and its aftermath with a focus on the key research question, drawn from the literature review:

- 1 Have women experienced an increase in violence against them following the Black Saturday bushfires?

A total of 76 people were consulted — 47 workers (38 women and nine men) and 29 women — through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups as described below. The sample of women was self-selected, and key workers were identified, contacted and invited to participate. Interview venues were chosen by the participants.

The gaps in available data on family violence after Black Saturday pointed to the need for this exploratory research. Despite difficulties in recruiting (described later), 29 women did come forward to participate in this research. This sample was drawn from a small population — made even smaller in the aftermath of Black Saturday — and factors were at play inhibiting women from participation, including risk to confidentiality and fear of inflicting hurt on loved family members and loved communities.

The women's direct first-person narratives revealed the pressure on women to put their own needs last in the context of chaos after Black Saturday. It is, perhaps, extraordinary that any women took this risk. Most women stated they decided to participate to improve the circumstances for women in future disasters. After checking the draft of this report, one woman said, 'When I walked away from the interview, I thought, 'Why did I do that?' Now, I know why I did it'.

The findings from this research identify themes and pose important questions about strategies to support women and men in the aftermath of disasters, and ways to protect women and children. Findings have been summarised in this Executive Summary and in a series of 'snapshots' with suggested actions for those involved in Disaster Planning, Response and Recovery (available at [www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice](http://www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice)).

## Research participants

### The workers

The first stage of the research comprised consultations with 47 workers involved in the fire-affected shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi through 16 individual interviews and nine focus groups. In some cases, the workers' responsibilities extended beyond this region. Interviews spanned from people in the most senior State-wide roles to those in management and policy roles, to team leaders and on-the-ground workers.

The Consultation Matrix below groups the workers into categories as a way of preserving confidentiality and indicates whether they were interviewed individually or were part of a focus group. The bracketed numbers in the 'Focus Group' column show how many people were involved in each focus group. Total consultations show 49 as two people were interviewed alone and also attended a focus group.

Areas of experience or responsibility included Yea, Broadford, Kilmore, Alexandra, Marysville, Yarra Glen, Kilmore, Wandong, Clonbinane, Kilmore East, Strathewen, St. Andrews, Dixon's Creek, Steels Creek, Taggerty, Buxton, Kinglake, Flowerdale, Yarra Ranges, Kinglake, Kinglake West, Pheasant Creek, Wallan, Humedale and Seymour. The areas covered sometimes extended beyond Mitchell and Murrindindi into the Nillumbik and Whittlesea local government area, and for senior managers, their overview reached all other fire-affected parts of Victoria, including from Horsham and Coleraine, to Yarram through to Bendigo and Beechworth.

Four workers were directly affected by the fires; another twelve lived in or near the bushfire areas and all workers were indirectly impacted by their work in the aftermath of Black Saturday. (See Table 8 in Vol. 4 for more detail.)

One worker had been involved in the recovery and reconstruction of the 2003 Canberra bushfires and another, now retired, held a very senior front-line position in the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983, as well as subsequent fires. Their reflections add perspective and historical depth.

Stage 1: Workers consultation matrix — 38 women and 9 men

	Focus Group	Individual	Total
Community development/health or social worker (CHS, Local Government, Church, etc.)	4 (3,3,3,2*)	4	15
Case management	2 (6, 2)		8
State government/ VBRRA/ Community recovery	1 (4)	8	12
Mental health practitioner	1 (2)	2	4
Canberra fires		1	1
Ash Wednesday fires		1	1
Community volunteers	1 (8)		8
	<b>33 people 9 focus groups</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>49 (47 individuals — 2 repeat ivs)</b>
Withdrawn		1	1
Not included	2 (2, 6) **	1***	9

\*Number present at each focus group \*\* Information not relevant \*\*\*Police Officer interview could not be included

## The women

A total of 29 interviews with women were analysed (30 interviews were conducted and one woman later withdrew). Women were aged from early 20s to 60s. In February 2009, 15 of the 29 women were living in Kinglake or Kinglake West. The other 14 came from Marysville and six other small towns in the Murrindindi and Mitchell shires. Their length of residence in the fire-affected region ranged from six to 51 years, with a median of 20 years and average of 22 years. Two of the women had separated from their partners before the fires and the other 27 were married or in defacto relationships. The women held managerial, administrative, professional and service occupations in the health, community, agriculture, retail, education and transport sectors and some worked in a voluntary capacity (see Consultation Matrix below.) There is little ethnic diversity within the two shires — 83% of women in the Mitchell shire and 81% of Murrindindi shire women were Australian born. Those born in other countries were mainly from the UK, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. The sample reflected this.

Twelve women actively fought the fire and 12 escaped, with all the danger that entailed. Two women spoke of doing both (three missing data). Eleven women lost their homes. For those who still had homes, many were damaged and unliveable for some period. Only six of the 29 women felt they would survive the Black Saturday bushfires. Thirteen women were alone for at least part of this experience, seven of them with dependent children. Another woman had small children and left early.

In this research, 16 women spoke about violence — 14 in their own relationship, one spoke about the violence in her close sister's relationship and one regarding her daughter's relationships. **Nine of 16 relationships affected by violence in this study had no violence before the fires, and seven of these were stable, non-violent relationships (See Table 3).** These women spoke of settled and happy relationships that were disrupted by the fires.

For six women, the violence had escalated sharply or had been an isolated incident many years earlier. For one woman, the violence had been severe and she had left the relationship before the fires. He returned after the fires and resumed his level of violence towards her. Of the 16 women who experienced violence since the fires, 15 women stated they were afraid of their partner.

Eight of the 16 women had separated from their partners since the Black Saturday bushfires at the time of interview, two had separated prior.

Table 1, at the end of this Volume, details features of the 16 relationships where family violence was present and Table 2 gives further details about the 29 women in the sample. Names, places of residence and age are removed to maintain confidentiality.

Stage 2: Women's consultation matrix — 29 women

Please see Tables 2 and 5 for more detail	
Age	From early 20s to 60s
Location	15 from Kinglake and Kinglake West; 14 from Marysville and six other small towns in the Mitchell and Murrindindi shires.
Years of residence	Six to 51 years. Median 20 years, Average 22 years.
Marital status	27 married or in defacto relationships and 2 separated as of 7.2.2009
Occupations	Managerial, administrative, professional and service occupations in the health, community, agriculture, retail, education and transport sectors, and voluntary work.



## **Recruitment and ethics procedures**

Participants were invited to be interviewed in-depth about their experience and subsequent reflections. (See Appendix 2 for Recruitment Flyer.) Recruitment notices were placed in community newspapers, newsletter and electronic publications, at the Kinglake, Flowerdale and Marysville hubs and temporary villages, and at key community centres in Seymour, Alexandra, Yea and Whittlesea. Facilitators of Women's groups were asked to display the flyer in their usual meeting places. The recruitment flyer invited women to contact the researcher to arrange an interview at a time and place of their choosing. Workers were contacted by telephone and invited to an interview. Some workers organised for colleagues to attend as well.

Ethics approval was granted from North East Health Human Research Ethics Committee and Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The women were offered direct access to professional counsellors if they wanted to debrief. All participating counsellors were fully apprised of this research and advised that they may be contacted by participants. Most women already had ongoing counselling or psychological support.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Two interviewers attended the interviews, as required by the initial ethics approval conditions, to allow for researcher debrief and care of the women. The interviews were semi-structured (See Interview Schedules in Appendix 3). Interviews with women were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. Workers' interviews were digitally recorded to assist with note taking. All transcripts were returned for women and workers to approve — except for two women, who were concerned that their husbands may find out about their involvement in this research, and asked not to be contacted for further approval. Where small groups of workers were interviewed, one person was nominated to receive the notes.

The data was analysed using Grounded Theory, which is a combination of theoretical sampling and thematic analysis developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Theoretical sampling is where participants are selected to be part of the sample on the basis of the need to fill out particular concepts or theoretical points. Thematic analysis is the identification of themes through a careful reading and rereading of the data. The methodology is inductive, building up concepts and theories from the data. NVivo Qualitative Software Analysis Package (Version 9) was used to assist in coding the data.

The validity of coding and interpretation is enhanced by the second researcher's careful reading, and by the process whereby participants firstly received a copy of their own transcript and were invited to correct any mistakes or remove information they wanted excluded. When this research report was in final draft form, it was sent to participants and again, they were invited to correct or exclude their own information.

Many chose to remove quotes, fearing reaction from others. This affirms the sensitivities still at work in these communities.

## **Difficulty in recruiting women**

A notable feature of this research was the difficulty of recruiting women to participate. Our previous research topics include family violence and, more recently, partner rape — both sensitive and taboo issues — and yet these did not present the same level of constraint and silence as did

this. One obvious explanation for the slow recruitment of women was the diminished population in fire-affected regions as many people moved away, either temporarily or permanently. The post Black Saturday populations of fire-affected communities will not be accurately known until the ABS 2011 Census is released, but anecdotally, populations are much reduced.

*I did hear the stats last week — only less than half have come back .(Libby)*

*There was originally a population [here] of approximately 1200 and now it's about 400.  
(Community development, health or social worker)*

*We've suddenly lost 72% of our housing. (Community development, health or social worker)*

Several health professionals suggested that the timing of this research was too soon. Indeed, the question of when to conduct this research had been a critical consideration. As the regional women's health service, we were apprised of recovery efforts through on-the-ground services and six months after Black Saturday, we began to formulate the research plan. Nine months after, we received ethics approval. The first stage of the research was to interview workers and ascertain from them the best time to interview women. The great majority of the interviews with workers were held between October 2009 and January 2011. Their advice was consistent — to wait until after the first anniversary and until the fire season was over. Our first interviews with women were in May 2010, some 15 months after Black Saturday through until March 2011, with one final interview in October 2011.

We are doubtful that the timing was too soon as data from two worker interviews implied that much would have been lost by waiting longer. Interviews in late 2009 with two key workers provided rich data about the increase in family violence. Yet, when we re-interviewed these same workers a year later, things had improved generally for the fire-affected areas. The problems their clients were presenting with were less directly attributed to the disaster and there was a sense that it had all blown over and perhaps it was not really that bad before.

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. In relationships where family violence was present, six of the women were still in the relationship at the time of the interviews. For women who remain with their partners, like the workers, we suspect that any future attempt to interview them would yield less information. Although our experience with 'A Powerful Journey' and 'Raped by a Partner' revealed the passage of time allowed women a clear analysis of the violence they lived with, where couples stayed together, data gathered some years into the future would lose the immediacy of the experience captured in this research.

In accepting that the timing was optimum, the more complex explanation for the silence on family violence in the aftermath of Black Saturday is the magnification of the taboo on this issue and magnification of all those reasons that we know women use to not report violence against them — their shame, exhaustion, self-blame, fear of not being believed, lack of options, protection of children, protection of the violent man. Our belief is that protection of the man is perhaps the main reason.

*... 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)*

*I don't want to betray [my sister's] trust either, and being part of this research isn't going to help her right now, somewhere along the line it might help someone else. (Yvette)*

*... I feel guilty saying these things about him and putting him down because he's my husband and my best friend. (Ruth)*

International disaster research suggests whatever is happening in a community before a disaster is magnified after. The Black Saturday bushfires exposed the landscape, and it equally exposed the men and women who went through it. The women we interviewed who experienced abuse from their partners nevertheless felt empathy for them. The workers we interviewed had compassion for men which 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.

*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)*

*Yeah, it was a day. But I know that for people who are traumatised from this, who have lost their friends or even seen horrific stuff, that's going to feel like yesterday to them for the next ten years ... I mean the pressure on the men to just ... (Lisa)*

The result is a feeling of disloyalty by women in speaking about the violence against them, and a lack of attention to family violence by agencies involved in disaster recovery and reconstruction. Hence, the slow recruitment.

## How to read this report

This report is organised into four volumes. Volume 1 provides the background, methodology, executive summary, recommendations and appendices. Volume 2 is the International literature review. The remaining two volumes reiterate points made in the executive summary, providing further evidence. Please refer to these volumes for substantiation of the summaries provided in Volume 1. For example, Volume 3 expands on the executive summary in relation to interviews with the 29 women who participated and Volume 4 expands on information provided by the 47 workers, and addresses the question of, 'Why women?', drawing on evidence from VicHealth to explain this focus.

The data from worker interviews was wide-ranging, covering issues related to the mechanics of the recovery and reconstruction phases and bureaucratic decision-making. However, as other research had this focus and as we are funded to consider issues affecting women, this research concentrated on women's experiences and on relationship issues and family violence in the aftermath of this disaster. Our purpose is to improve disaster response to women, particularly in relation to family violence.

A series of Tables throughout the report adds individual detail without revealing identities:

- Table 1: Characteristics of the 16 informants who described relationships where family violence was present after the fires.
- Table 2: Characteristics of all 29 women who participated in this research.
- Table 3: Characteristics of the 16 Relationships with family violence present
- Table 4: VicPol Family Violence statistics 2007-2011 — Murrindindi Shire and Victoria
- Table 5: Job loss, occupation, and lost home
- Table 7: Police response to family violence for six women
- Table 8: Workers' consultation matrix
- Table 9: Workers' characteristics and opinions on family violence

Table 1: Characteristics of the 16 relationships where Family Violence (FV) was present - 14 direct experiences and 2 indirect (shaded) regarding a sister and a daughter.

Approx. no. of years in relationship	FV before fires	FV present after fires	Frightened of partner	Still with partner	Stable, non-violent relationship before	Factors noted as affecting male	Man's role during fire	Thought death was imminent	Woman has compassion for man
6	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	New living circumstances	Present	Yes, both	Yes
10	Escalated	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Mental illness?	Coped well	Yes, both	Yes
3	No	Yes	Yes	No	No		Negligent	Yes, he	
10	No	Yes	Yes	No	Separated before	Predatory	Not in fires	Yes, she/ he - not in fires	
Missing data	(Escalated)	Yes	Yes	Yes, can't leave	No		Firefighter	Yes, he	Sister: Yes
20	Escalated	Yes	Yes	Yes, can't leave	No		Present	Yes she / he denies	
12	Escalated	Yes	Yes	No	No	Mental illness?	Mostly absent	Yes, both	Yes
10	No	Yes	Yes	Yes, can't leave	Yes		Negligent	Yes, both	Yes
20	Escalated	Yes	Yes	No	No		Present	Yes, both and sister	Yes
10	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Coped well	Yes, all	
(1)	(New r'ship)	(Yes)	(Yes)	(Yes)	N/A		No role	Unsure daughter / No he	
10	No	Yes	No (Not stated)	Yes	Yes	Prev. trauma	Present	No, but protracted threat	Yes
5	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Sep before	Predatory	Not in fires	Unsure /No - he	Yes
18	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes		Firefighter	Yes, he	Yes
25	Escalated	Yes	Yes	Yes	No		Negligent	Yes, both	
25	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Functional alcoholism	Present	Yes, all	Yes
Totals	1 Yes 9 No 6 escalated	All Yes	15 Yes 1 No?	8 Yes 8 No	7 Yes 6 No 2 Sep 1 N/A			Yes M 11 F 10 No M 5 F 4 Unsure F 2	10 Yes

Table 2: Characteristics of the 29 women in the sample (Names and places removed for confidentiality purposes)

	Years in shire at iv date	Fought or escaped fire	Lost home	Thought death was imminent	Alone or with dependents	FV present	Still with partner
1.	51	Fought	Yes	Yes both	No	Yes	No
2.	10	Fought	No	Yes both	No	Yes	No
3.	35	In hospital	No	No she, yes he	Not applicable	Yes	No
4.	40	Fought	No	No	No	No	Yes
5.	9	Fought		Yes both	No	No	Yes
6.	23	Fought	No	Yes she, No he	No	No	No, sharing house till sells
7.	6	Escaped	No	Yes, she	Yes, Overseas friend and 3 young children	Yes	No, separated before fires
8.	20	Missing data	Yes, rented	Missing data she, Yes, he	No	Yes (sister)	No
9.	20	Both	No	Yes, but he denies	Yes with 15 son when escaping	Yes	Yes, can't leave (Fear)
10.	10	Escaped	Yes	Yes, both	Yes 7 months pregnant and 2 year old child	Yes	No
11.	11	Escaped, saved trucks	Yes	Missing data	Yes, 4 young children	No, community violence	Yes
12.	20	Escaped	Yes	Yes, both	Yes, driving daughter's friend home, then at times with her own three children as partner walked ahead	Yes	Yes, fears for children if she leaves
13.	20	Fought, tried to escape	No	Yes, both and her sister	Yes, at times, alone in fire, and alone escaping with sister	Yes	No
14.	6	Fought	No	Yes, both	Yes, alone when driving to buy petrol for generator as flames were threatening	No	Yes
15.	8	Fought	No	Yes, all	No	Yes	Yes
16.	30	Escaped	No, lost home office	Unsure daughter (Yes mother)	Yes, alone for Saturday and part of Sunday, then picked up by 2 sons	Yes, daughter	Not Applicable
17.	50	Son escaped	Yes	No, not home	No	No	Yes
18.	30	Fought	No, lost business	Yes, daughter	No	No	Yes
19.	10	Fought to save animals	No	No but protracted threat	Yes, when getting supplies	Yes	Yes
20.	7	Escaped	Yes	Missing data	Yes, alone at home, waiting for partner to return	No	Yes
21.	35	Fought	No	Yes both	No	No	Yes
22.	7	Fought	No	Yes both	No	No	Yes
23.	25	Escaped	Yes, forced to move from rented house	Missing data	Yes, alone, raced ahead of fires to return to two small children in another town.	Yes	No, separated before fires
24.	25	Escaped	Yes	No she, Yes he	Evacuated early, alone with kids and aged parents	Yes	No
25.	13	Escaped	Yes	Yes, both	Yes, with baby and small child	No, cv	Yes
26.	Estim. 40	Both	No	Yes she, No he	No	No	Yes
27.	8	Fought	No	Yes both	Yes, alone at home in neck brace with teenage son for some hours as the fire approached	Yes	Yes
28.	35	Escaped	No	No she, yes he	No	No	No
29.	42	Escaped	Yes	Yes, all	No	Yes	Yes
Totals (Where relevant)		12 Fought the fire 12 Escaped 2 Both 2 missing data, 1 Other	Yes 11	19 Yes — Women 17 Yes - Men	15 alone for at least part — 8 of these with children.	16 Yes 11 No 2 community violence	17 Yes 9 No 2 Sep before 1 N/A

## Findings

### Lack of family violence data

The lack of family violence data is itself a key finding of this research. 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. In the urgency of disaster recovery, where needs are fundamental, attention to family violence became secondary. Yet concerns about increased family violence were expressed after Black Saturday.

Increases in family violence were observed and anecdotally reported by funded family violence agencies, recovery authorities and community leaders. Newspaper articles linked family violence directly to the bushfires, quoting the Victorian Bushfire Recovery and Reconstruction Authority Chairperson (Bachelard, 10.5.09), a Church leader (Saeed, 26.8.09) and the Clinical Psychologist Consultant to the Victorian Disaster Recovery Plan (Johnston & Mickelborough, 30.7.10).

In the first six months after Black Saturday, indications of increased family violence came through early verbal reports from funded agencies and through two network meetings of 13 funded women's and children's family violence counselling services in the northern metropolitan region (Lancaster, 2009; Women's Health In the North, 2009). In this same period, a local community health service reported to the Bushfire Agency Review that there had been 'Increasing violence resulting from frustration, anger, grief and bereavement leading to family conflict and impacting on family relationships'(Amanda Murphy CEO, July 14, 2009).

Despite its role in integration and co-ordination within the family violence sector in the region, Women's Health In the North (WHIN) was unsuccessful in attempts to quantify the increase.

*Gathering data on family violence and the bushfires proved difficult ... the task was complicated by the multifaceted recovery effort. Multiple regions, areas and catchments of the numerous services were involved in the recovery and reconstruction ... obtaining family violence data was overwhelmingly complex. Teasing out numbers of responses and even making 'guesstimates' about family violence and bushfire trauma was complex due to staff data recording practice and inadequate data. (Parkinson, et al., 2011)*

A diverse range of services was offered to bushfire-affected communities from case managers, counsellors and psychologists, to Churches, to alternative health practitioners. Over-arching this, The Victorian Bushfire Case Management System (VBCMS) was established to ensure the broad range of bushfire victims' needs could be met — including family violence. Case managers were to help navigate complex systems and refer to appropriate services to help get lives back on track.

It was a massive undertaking. The VBCMS began only days after Black Saturday, on 13.2.2009 and involved the coordination of 74 Federal, State and Local Government and non-government agencies. It was overseen by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and aimed to provide a case manager for up to two years to every fire-affected household. The DHS evaluation of the system reported that by June 2010, 5506 households had been allocated a case manager — 2,211 of these in Murrindindi and 379 in Mitchell Shires (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, pp. 28,30).

The VBCMS assessment framework included family violence, violence against children and family separation. In the two years since the Black Saturday bushfires, DHS case management statistics show that in the Hume region there were only nine cases of family violence recorded by case managers. The Hume region covers a fifth of the State and includes 12 Local Government Areas including Mitchell and Murrindindi and the fire-affected shire of Alpine.

The explanation suggested for this incredible figure of nine cases of family violence in two years of case management is that case managers would have been sensitive in how they chose to record the presenting issues and would have only recorded the main issues. The low figures are likely to reflect that taboo many women faced in revealing their partner was violent towards them, and there was, at least for some workers, a conscious decision not to record family violence as a way of being respectful to clients.

*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 ... I think the difference is getting through it and knowing what it is but actually respecting the client and recording it in their words.  
(Case management — 2 people)*

Many case managers were not qualified to work with family violence, and it appeared that family violence was not recorded at a broader systems level across existing and new services after Black Saturday (Parkinson, et al., 2011). The DHS evaluation report concedes, too, that case managers were not always qualified for the role they were expected to play and states that it may not be possible to achieve the recommended target of Bachelor degree qualifications in a health or human services or related field for all case managers in a massive disaster like Black Saturday (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 50). Inevitably, this would have contributed to the lack of data.

*The case managers didn't even ask about it [family violence]. All they wanted to know is what people needed. (Di)*

*Every case manager has probably different styles of recording and might choose to record it as a drug and alcohol issue, they might not necessarily record it as a family violence issue.  
(Case management — 2 people)*

Victoria Police statistics, too, are inconclusive. Table 4 shows VicPol statistics on the number of family violence incidents recorded, the number where charges were laid and where intervention orders or safety notices were involved. These statistics are publicly available at Local Government Area (LGA) level, yet we cannot tell whether family violence increased amongst fire-affected people after Black Saturday for a number of reasons:

- The fire-affected populations are only a fraction of the entire LGA population
- Community populations changed in the aftermath of the fires and appear to remain significantly reduced even three years on
- The statistics show only the cases where police recorded the call-out
- Rural LGA rates of family violence incidents per 100,000 are generally higher than metropolitan or Victorian rates at any time, not just after disasters.

If we take Murrindindi Shire as an example (as it contains Kinglake, Flowerdale and Marysville and many other fire-affected communities), examination of VicPol statistics over the past five years in Table 4 indicates varying rates of family violence incidents — highest in the year before Black Saturday (610.3 in 2007/8) and lowest in the most recent year's figures (370.2 in 2010/11). It is unclear if the drop in incidents is due to reduced populations, reduced call-outs or reduced recording.



A discernible pattern is that charges laid were higher than the State average in the three years to 2008/9 and then much lower in each of the two years after Black Saturday. The same trend is apparent for IVOs and Safety Notices. However, these broad, LGA-wide statistics must be considered in the light of the complexity discussed and as a result, are inconclusive.

Table 4: VicPol Family Violence statistics 2007 — 2011 Murrindindi Shire and Victoria

Rate per 100,000	FV Incidents	Where charges laid	Where IVO applied for or Safety Notice issued
Murrindindi 2006/7	473.3	162.5	183.7
Victoria 2006/7	539.1	138.6	126.2
Murrindindi 2007/8	610.3	203.4	196.4
Victoria 2007/8	572.8	141.2	127.6
Murrindindi 2008/9	499.8	187.4	166.6
Victoria 2008/9	611.1	155.8	147.8
Murrindindi 2009/10	485.6	119.5	97.1
Victoria 2009/10	641.1	168.3	165.7
Murrindindi 2010/11	370.2	111.1	133.3
Victoria 2010/11	732.1	209.8	185.3

Source: (Victoria Police, 2011)

All attempts by the researchers to quantify an increase from official sources were unsuccessful. The final attempt in 2011 resulted in advice from FAHCSIA that they were unable to provide any relevant data related to the incidence of family violence and the correlation to Crisis Payment in the fire-affected regions of Mitchell and Murrindindi, and further that they were unable to identify any alternative sources of data to assist with the information required (FaHCSIA, 23.11.2011).

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, at best, haphazard and unconvincing to policy makers and funding bodies.

## Family Violence

This qualitative research provides evidence that family violence increased after Black Saturday. This is consistent with international research showing violence against women increases in the aftermath of disasters.

*There are so many people who are being affected after the fires with domestic violence, and so many women who aren't able to seek help. (Kate)*

*One girl, I ran into her, I think it was between Christmas and New Year, and she had a big black eye ... just a girl I knew whose husband works with [mine] sometimes. (Tess)*

*I have women coming here who have been abused physically, and my friend — they've been married 20 years and he assaulted her and she had to get a restraining order on him. (Di)*

Most of the women interviewed spoke of increased violence within relationships they knew about, and 16 women spoke of their experience of violence from partners since the fires — 14 in their own relationship, one in regard to a close sister's relationship, and another concerning



her daughter’s relationship. All except one woman stated they were frightened of their partner. For nine women, this was a new and disturbing trend, and seven of these described previously stable relationships. For a further six women who had experienced some level of violence before the fires — sometimes many years earlier or as a once only occurrence — the violence sharply escalated in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. (Only one woman reported a similar level of violence before and after. At the time of the fires they were separated (See Table 3.)

Table 3: Characteristics of the 16 Relationships with FV present

FV present after fires	FV before fires	Woman frightened of partner?	Stable non-violent relationship before
16 Yes	1 Yes* 9 No 6 escalated	15 Yes 1 Missing data	7 Yes 6 No 2 Separated 1 Missing data
	16	16	16

\*Violence caused separation before fires, partner returned after fires when woman was vulnerable.

The opinion of workers was divided or uncertain, yet overall, only three of the 12 consultations clearly refuted an increase in family violence since the fires (See Table 8, Vol. 4). The knowledge of each worker depended on their professional or community role and, inescapably, on their willingness to hear about it. The three quotes below were from the most senior people in state-wide roles.

*And we’re certainly, I think, 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, from that sort of level, you know, people saying that that’s one of the major concerns ... whether or not people are being dealt with was part of their question. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

*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/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*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)*

Other managers of state-wide services agreed that family violence had increased —one adamantly and one hesitantly.

*It’s very bloody obvious. Especially for the first nine months ... I heard from my own case management staff and child protection staff that there has been an increase in notification, and women in those communities were staying there was increased violence. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*It was recognised that it was becoming an emerging theme ... The case managers were reporting that they had discussions with their clients and that the women were reporting—not all of them obviously, but a number. (Case management — 2 people)*

Workers from regional and community services, too, noticed an increase.

*The DV services in the area have definitely reported a spike in DV post-fires. That is definite. (Community development, health or social workers — 3 people)*

*We have Neighbourhood Watch and police attending community meetings ... the police always stressed increases in domestic violence. (Community Volunteers — 8 people)*

*The number of times the police are having to be called is on a regular basis — weekly, fortnightly. I think it's exacerbated. I've been hearing that from women. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*Even though people don't talk about domestic violence a lot, I think there's an awareness on a community level that it's occurring. (Community development, health or social worker)*

One worker told of six men in his small town who had become violent towards their partners and families. All six had all been in the front line of the fires and seemed unable to talk about their experiences.

The sensitivity of this research prevents the inclusion of each woman's account of the violence she experienced after the fires. However, Volume 3 provides short excerpts that give a sense of the nature of the violence without compromising the women's anonymity.

### **Explanations for increased family violence after disasters**

Vulnerability to family violence is increased after disaster by a range of factors. Both men and women suffer grief and loss, and may be traumatised by their experience. Homelessness and unemployment may result, co-existing with the demands of the recovery and reconstruction phase. Increased contact between the couple, sometimes in shared accommodation, increases tension, and loss of control threatens the male provider and protector role (B. Phillips, Jenkins, & Enarson, 2009).

In 2006, leading US gender and disaster research, Elaine Enarson, wrote of silent men, suicidal men, unemployed men, men feeling 'unmasked and unmanly', concluding that some turn to some combination of drugs, alcohol and aggression, endangering those around them. Another US researcher identified a form of hyper-masculinity resulting from stress and loss and leading to discord and violence in relationships.

*Men are likely to have a feeling of inadequacy because they are unable to live up to the expectations of their socially-constructed gender role ... The presence of these conditions unfortunately influence higher numbers of partnered, heterosexual men to act in violent and abusive ways toward the women in their lives. (Austin, 2008)*

A prevailing 'private domain' of family violence (Inter-agency standing committee, 2005) is compounded by empathy for the abuser and excuses of 'out of character' behaviour. This may result in under-recognition of violence against women and lack of validation by service providers that may be associated with gender inequality before the disaster and the limited role played by women in formal disaster responses (Rees, Pittaway, & Bartolomei, 2005, p. 1) .

*Moreover, the police and other service providers are usually busy responding to other calls or emergencies that are deemed more pressing, so "domestics" become a much lower priority. (Renzetti, 2002, p. 6)*

The literature review in Volume 2 explores further the explanations given for increased family violence after disasters.

## Impact of fires on men and women

Women and workers told of individuals and communities struggling to cope with the aftermath of the traumatic events of the day, and the ongoing burdens that accompanied recovery and reconstruction. They told of widespread use of alcohol and drugs, previous traumas exacerbated by Black Saturday, mental health issues and community violence. Everything changed for Black Saturday survivors, and turmoil in personal circumstances was reflected at the community level.

*I hardly recognise the place now. I look around and I don't know what ethos it is we hold on to. (Community Volunteers — 8 people)*

Professionals and community members alike reported feelings of anxiety, sleeplessness and nightmares that continued long after Black Saturday.

*The event was overwhelming for everyone and everyone was hyper sensitised. (Govt/ VBRRR/ Community Recovery)*

Suddenly cramped or shared accommodation was the new reality and financial issues emerged, exacerbated by loss of employment for many. Lack of routine added to the sense of being cut adrift. Attempts to find other paid work were thwarted by demands that were excessive for traumatised people with no concession for easing into a full time workload. The artificial social atmosphere that occurred when people were confined to small temporary living quarters or compelled to share housing further added to a climate where alcohol (and often drug) consumption, became, for some, the norm.

*When you have people living in other people's houses together ... you'd be together and having a few drinks and a few more drinks and a few more drinks. (Community development, health or social worker — 2 people)*

It appeared that alcohol and drug use increased post-fire as people struggled to cope with the wholesale destruction of property and life, together with ongoing frustrations. Workers described both men and women self-medicating with alcohol to escape the pain. The way alcohol presented as a problem changed as time progressed. In the week after the fire, more men than women remained or returned early to fire-affected areas. Without the tempering effect of women, some men were getting together and drinking to excess. Two women spoke of returning to their homes to find them turned into impromptu pubs, complete with drinking men.

*My house was turned into a pub, it was a mess, there were things everywhere... there were five guys ... all pissed as newts ... There was a lot of free booze. (Jenny)*

*[My friend] lived in this street with a lot of men who were really, really traumatised. Women were traumatised, but the men really started to drink. My friend was having people rock up at the door at all times of the day. They were drinking in the street. They were getting together as blokes. (Di)*

*I mean he has his good moments and he can take one mouthful of alcohol and that's it, he changes ... Probably the worst [times] are when he's been with other guys, yeah, it's like a drinking session. (Yvette)*

A history of drug abuse, too, appeared as problematic once again, even if overcome before the fires.

*Pre-fires everything was going really, really well and he was determined never to be on drugs again ... Everything was happy ... And then the fire hit. (Madeline)*

The fires woke up and exacerbated what had seemed to be resolved. Previous traumas and long-buried fears, believed to be overcome, emerged again.

*It's not just the issue of the fire, it's a hundred things. The fire has just triggered a hundred things. (Sonia)*

*I noticed he was volatile. He always had issues of possibly depression or ... even borderline personality disorder which we were discovering because all these things had been exacerbated. So there were times of emotional issues before, quite significant ones, but they were more manageable. Post-fire they became unbearable. (Madeline)*

Two women spoke of being very fearful that their partners would commit suicide, based on innuendo and suggestion, and statements of life not being worth living.

*He had said I might top myself, but never, 'This is how I would do it' ... and from threats, but he didn't have a true suicide plan, just suicidal thoughts. (Karen)*

Another two women called the police when their husbands actually 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. (Emma)*

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 and distress into anger. Many of the women 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 the capacity to regulate behaviour.

*It's in him — and what's happened since the fires is, there seems to be no control on his emotions. He's just completely reactionary, when once he was able to moderate or there was at least some kind of understanding to his rage and anger. There was some context. Now there's no context to his rage. It just seems to be completely random. (Madeline)*

Workers, too, observed some people respond to the stress they were under by becoming violent.

*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/ VBRRR/ Community Recovery)*

The women described multiple layers of stress they and their families lived with after Black Saturday, with immediate and urgent pressures demanding their attention. Workers, too, observed that concerns with family violence were set aside.

*I think [women's concerns with violence against them] took a second place. If you don't have anywhere to live and you have children and your children are displaced, that's what you'll go for first. (Govt/ VBRRR/ Community Recovery)*

## Impacts of family violence on women

As well as trauma from the fires, women faced a further impost of violence in its aftermath. Their words reveal the effect of living with violence:

*So I became like a cat on a hot tin roof ... I felt completely broken. (Madeline)*

*You lose yourself. (Angela)*

*I just learnt to shut up ... I'd just be quiet. (Jenny)*

*After all the intimidation happened, I just got more and more depressed and I couldn't get out of bed. (Annie)*

*I'm feeling quite overwhelmed, honestly, and I would quite like to crawl into bed and cry. (Karen)*

*Oh, it's horrendous ... it hasn't been an easy couple of years. (Sally)*

*It's just a lot to take, on top of a fire. (Beth)*

*Just with the fires, I think everything just caught up with me personally, the violence, leaving my husband, dealing with a young baby and his brother. I lost all confidence pretty much and I just fell apart. (Shelly)*

*it's like he died. It's like I'm a widow but the corpse is still here to beat me up. (Emma)*

## Relationships in crisis

Most of these interviews were held close to the second anniversary of Black Saturday. Of the 29 women, eight had separated from their partner since the fires and those still together were struggling. Some were working on reviving their relationship, and others were biding time while the children were still at home. Indeed, two women told how their children asked them to stay, despite the violence in the home.

The reasons given for relationship breakdown varied and were sometimes ostensibly unconnected to the bushfire. Yet women made the connection to the underlying trauma wrought by the fires and to the huge stresses people were carrying as a result of Black Saturday as reasons for relationship difficulties.

During the fires, 19 women felt close to death and believed 17 of their partners felt the same. Some women stated that this would have to have had a negative effect on their relationship.

*Even if you don't admit it to yourself intellectually, in a way you've kind of said goodbye to everything. And ... you say goodbye to one another ... [and that] is certainly going to be having an impact on how we feel about one another. (Carla)*

The women reflected on the extent of relationship breakdown in their communities.

*Marriages are just breaking up like you wouldn't believe. And the thing is even my friends who had very grounded relationships have struggled, like professional people. (Annie)*

*The more you talk to other friends, they say, 'Oh, so and so's husband, they had trouble too and he flipped out and took off'. So I know that there's quite a few others. (Rosie)*

*Most of the mountain is divorced now. Or if they're not separated they're nearly there. (Libby)*

When undertaking this research, some health professionals and community members asserted that if there was an increase in marriage breakdowns in the aftermath of the disaster, it was only in troubled relationships. However, this research shows that to be untrue. Even secure partnerships suffered under the weight of so many pressures post-bushfires.

*It's a huge, huge percentage of relationship break downs ... because it strips back all the perceptions and all the things that we put around us. Any relationships that were having trouble were hugely exacerbated but ... there are certainly relationships that I know directly, that were doing quite well but are hitting rocky ground because of the fact of being stripped back bare. People are questioning who they are, where they're going and their place in the world. (Madeline)*

## Denial

### Disaster magnifies women's reluctance to disclose or report

Family violence has always been a taboo subject. It is only in recent years that the work of women in the women's health, sexual assault and family violence field has resulted in mainstream social marketing campaigns and more open community discussion. At an individual level, discussion of a partner's violence remains fraught as women feel disloyal and sometimes, misguidedly, to blame. This is the man she loves, the man with whom she shared a home, a life and often, children.

If a woman in normal circumstances cannot report family violence, the chances of her reporting her husband after a disaster are reduced further — because he is suffering and because she is vulnerable. Workers noted a strong tendency for women to underplay their own suffering, even withdrawing from receiving family violence services accessed before the fires.

*Women who had been in domestic violence situations — clients of the DV service — were saying the violence is not important now, after the fires. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

There was unspoken yet enormous pressure not to speak about men's violence because of what they had been through and their continued distress. The women in this study described instances they felt had damaged their partners. One woman described what her husband had been through and finished with, 'So, these are all the horrors that he saw'. Some of the women had partners who were fire-fighters, at the front line of an unprecedented disaster. Their training would not have been adequate preparation for what they had to face, and the sight of so many injured and burned people. The stress of that day and the following weeks of high alert is unimaginable to those who were not there.

*They are the professional fire-fighters, it was their job to stop the unstoppable. They bear the grief and the loss and the guilt and they had all those people die, and we knew them all... they feel that they were the professionals, they feel like it was their job to stop it, they feel they failed, and they feel their friends died because of it and I could see him reliving those moments, where he could have done something differently and saved a life...(Emma)*

Table 1 shows that eleven women made statements that showed compassion for their partners despite the violence.



*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)*

*And he said ... he could see flames when he was trying to go to sleep. I think he actually suffered more. (Gaye)*

*I knew he was suffering ... God only knows what happens in that poor little head these days. (Madeline)*

*[H]e actually was a bit vulnerable and I felt sorry for him ... I view him as being unwell, rather than just being a callous bastard. (Sally)*

The women's compassion, combined with their own traumatic experience and the complexities of re-establishing life in the aftermath of disaster, inevitably added to their vulnerability and effectively silenced them from speaking out.

*... I believe that one of the things that is stopping her from leaving ... is the fear of his retaliation. Right now she is still struggling with the post-fire trauma, and her resilience ... is severely diminished. Maybe the pain in her life now is more manageable to bear than having to leave and face the additional distress. (Yvette)*

It is critical to understand that women were traumatised by Black Saturday, too. Men's trauma is not presented here as any kind of justification for their violence. If men use violence, they are violent men and this cannot be simply excused and ignored.

### **The community excuses post-disaster violence**

Traditionally, a man's home was his castle — remnants of these beliefs pervade our society and legal system (as detailed in previous research by WHGNE, 'Raped by a Partner' and 'A Powerful Journey'). The complicity of society in upholding a man's right to rule his household is strong in the everyday. A 2009 VicHealth survey found that a large proportion of Australians believed 'domestic violence can be excused if it results from temporary anger or results in genuine regret' (2009). Such violence may even be seen as legitimate and excused.

In the aftermath of a disaster, these community sentiments are stronger and the arguments for excusing family and community violence are persuasive. Without doubt, Black Saturday was an assault on a massive scale. Everyone in its way was changed by it. Critically, this research presents data to show that often when women do seek help, the heightened complicity of society prevents action to protect and support them.

The men's trauma was perhaps exacerbated by ongoing practical and financial pressures but tolerance of bad behaviour, through to violence, seemed to increase as men were said to be acting 'out of character'.

*The fire took all of our boundaries away, too, so ... everyone would accept bad behaviour. Even up to now. (Libby)*

Everyone hoped the adverse changes would be temporary and eventually resolved by time passing or progress in re-establishing family life and getting back to 'normal'. It may have seemed disloyal and ungrateful to talk about the violent behaviours some of these men were displaying. Fear of tipping vulnerable men over the edge may have softened responses. To hold them accountable — out of the question.

*It's really heartbreaking thinking about the suicides ... I know of three people in Kinglake, all men. (Community development, health or social worker)*

Other workers, too, told of the community excusing violence in the aftermath of Black Saturday in recognition of the trauma that all survivors lived with. This is one example:

*[One woman whose husband was a prominent community member], there was violence against her. She was supported ... but very discreetly ... I was astonished when I learned of this particular instance ... I thought how odd that I didn't know about this, even within my own team. People were being very, very discreet because her husband was very prominent and a bit of a hero in the town. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)*

Women, however, were dismayed at the way the community excused this behaviour.

*The comment came up regarding breakups and 'fights' where police were called. It was accepted that it was just because of the fires. I felt that this was not OK, to just accept it. (Yvette)*

*You don't want to upset [him] because it just gets big ... At what point do you go, 'I'm sorry but your behaviour is bad and I'm pointing it out to you', instead of going, 'Let's not say anything 'cos he'll get upset'. (Angela)*

### **No systematic focus on family violence in the aftermath**

Workers reiterated the women's accounts of relationships and community behaviours in the aftermath of Black Saturday. Yet, where there was a clear sense amongst the women (see Volume 3) that family violence had increased after the fires, this was not universally accepted by all the workers. Some workers rejected this, stating that family violence was occurring only in relationships where men had previously been violent, and that relationships that broke up were only those that had been troubled beforehand. The opposition to the possibility of increased violence against women after this disaster was curious. While Victoria Police were transparent that they did not support the participation of police members, several workers who did participate in the interviews echoed the sense that this research was unnecessary.

It became clear that this reluctance came from a desire to protect a vulnerable community.

*There was a sense of tragedy. The world was not a safe place anymore. My response was different to the work I'd done before, even in hospitals — in all sorts of hospital situations. It's very different when it's happening at your back door. (Mental Health Practitioners — 2 people)*

The response to this 2009 disaster was remarkable. Research and evaluation efforts in the years since have sought to assess its success in regard to different aspects of the recovery and reconstruction. Our focus is on improving response to women and children experiencing family violence — a phenomenon known to happen post-disasters, both in developed and developing countries (see Vols 2 and 3).

In the aftermath of Black Saturday, the demands on services were overwhelming. As detailed in Vol. 3, across the Victorian fire-affected regions, key structures to assist the recovery were established, notably the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, charged to coordinate all levels of government and work with community recovery committees; the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS) which provided services to 5,500



households; Community Service Hubs, including in Flowerdale, Marysville and Kinglake; the DHS Bushfire Housing Services Unit with services to 1,300 households — 500 of these were housed in temporary accommodation; and the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF), which allocated \$43 million to 219 community projects (Victorian Government, 2012, p. 11).

On the ground, a range of services were quickly established or expanded, and workers seconded from organisations Australia-wide. Temporary villages and community hubs were set up to house and inform survivors. Churches and the army augmented essential services in the early days and weeks. The response was immense in order to meet the equally immense needs of those affected.

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. Individual workers did what they could, but many had no training or experience in family violence.

*The VBCMS service received 1000 referrals a week for four weeks [and] the workforce recruitment drive was extraordinary. All cases were allocated within eight weeks. The only prioritisations were for families that experienced a death or severe injury. (Case management personal communication)*

Counselling seemed to be offered as the panacea for all. However, women and children living with a violent man need more. As one of the women said, 'It's alright to talk about it, but sometimes they've got to actually follow through'. When women were able to overcome the silencing by a complicit society and voiced their concerns — to friends, family or health professionals — at times this was useful, and, at other times, it added to the damage.

Despite the unspoken, yet enormous pressure not to be 'disloyal' and not to speak about men's violence for so many reasons — 'what they had been through', and 'how heroic they had been', and 'how they were acting out of character', and 'it was just the alcohol' and 'they were depressed or feeling suicidal' — some women had the courage to speak about their partner's violence and to ask for help. Even then, women were not heard.

Eight women spoke of seeking help with no positive outcome (See Vol. 3). With family, they 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 and were sometimes fearful of violence or confrontation themselves, leaving the woman unsupported. Sometimes, women just kept trying to get help from different people, different services. 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 pass 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.

Some women seeking help with family violence were clearly not well served by the health professionals they saw. Some felt reprimanded by the person they confided in and this effectively stopped them seeking support from other people. They feared they were just complaining and wastefully accessing services that others could be using. In the aftermath of Black Saturday, they felt that others were so much worse off. This misconception was, surprisingly, reinforced by one woman's counsellor.

*I said, 'You must get sick of people and their sob tales' and she 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 and James are comparatively easy.' (Beth)*

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

The women's accounts told of some case managers, counsellors and psychologists inadequately responding to signs and even direct requests for help. One spoke of several efforts including contacting specific family violence workers:

*They were really nice, they took all the details, and I told them stuff that I'd never told anyone, I really let it all out ... And so it came out in the conversation with [them that I was going to see a new bushfire case manager], and then it was like, 'Okay, you should tell this case manager about all this'... it was like passing the buck. That's what it felt like ... [and when I saw the case manager] I think it was a lot more than what she'd signed on for as a bushfire case manager. That was sort of the end of it. It felt a bit humiliating. (Tess)*

*[The social worker/facilitator] didn't do anything about my situation at that point, she was preoccupied with something in her life at the time ... She'd crossed professional boundaries and didn't offer me much support ... [With the counsellor] I deliberately told her I was frightened three times during that session ... And she said to me in front of [him], 'Are you frightened physically?' and I said 'No' because I wasn't about to say yes in front of him because god knows what would have happened if I had said that. And she never followed up ... We played phone tennis and then I gave up. (Karen)*

*[I] said how things were and he just linked me with a worker from there, I don't think she was a domestic violence worker or anything like that and I started seeing a counsellor and spoke to my GP and pulled everything in that I needed to get back on my feet. It took probably seven months to do so. So were they helpful to you? Not really. I felt like they would just speak to me at the start because they were obliged to and not because they wanted to help ... I had nothing. When I was trying to get a lawyer or a solicitor, anyone, I was after anyone pretty much, amongst those phone calls I rang a domestic violence worker ... She got in contact with me the day before my second court hearing, and she said they couldn't get anyone to make it, to be there supporting me. She was helpful [but] I had no help with that side of things. (Shelly)*

*I rang [his counsellor] and said, 'Listen, you need to know it's not all rosy here, he needs help, he's angry, he's scaring me, this is not healthy for a baby, not for a [child] to be around, it's not right.' And then as soon as she started talking to him in the next session he comes home and goes, 'That was my final session, she says I'm doing really well'. (Angela)*

A possible explanation for the denial of family violence by workers in the face of disaster recovery is two-fold. First that there is, indeed, immense pressure on individuals to show understanding and loyalty to suffering men, and secondly, that workers who were very much part of the fire-affected communities — either long-term residents or those arriving immediately after the disaster and who worked tirelessly to help restore lives — were less likely to recognise increased family violence. However, those with state-wide responsibilities and an overview of communities were in agreement — their sense was clear that family violence had increased. This underlines the reluctance of community members to speak out about people they know and care about. Their understanding of the depth of trauma experienced by survivors of Black Saturday may have led to reluctance to act in any way that would further add to daily burdens and pressures. For example, one community showed evidence of resistance to supporting women experiencing violence from their partners.

*When I first started to notice that women were experiencing [family violence issues] we set up a bushfire support group really early, and we had that running from the CFA shed. It seemed like quite a good idea at the time. There was a lot of negative comments that they received after the fires, which was really ridiculous. (Community development, health or social worker)*

This research argues for a systematic approach to disaster response, recovery and reconstruction that plans for an increase in family violence in the aftermath. Ideally, National Disaster Guidelines would include family violence as an issue that must be anticipated and responded to effectively. For example, the role of Parliamentary Secretary for Bushfire Reconstruction, the VBCMS and VBRRR would prioritise family violence along with other pressing and urgent needs, and allocate responsibility to one body.

### **Police and legal responses to post-disaster violence**

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, when all the reasons women are reluctant to report are magnified.

The actions of police regarding family violence in the aftermath of Black Saturday have been described by some community members as appropriate and sensitive to the circumstances of men who had been traumatised by the fires. Yet, this cautious approach means police data may be incomplete, given the accounts in this report that family violence incident reports were not always made by police, despite their attendance.

*... the first time I reported the domestic violence to the police, the police attended and it was 2am, they would have to have been called from their homes. They were badgering me, saying most women who go through something like this just turn around tomorrow and withdraw, and they didn't want to do anything. These were two male police officers. They were not very helpful. (Shelly)*

*My case manager said, 'When there's been a report of domestic violence they've got to do something about it' [but] they didn't do whatever they were meant to do. (Gaye)*

*[My sister] said a neighbour or someone must have called the police. When they arrived, the police were told that everything was fine [so nothing happened]. This was a case of severe and ongoing family violence. (Yvette)*

*I think it must have been just before Christmas I called the cops at one point. I called 000 and it took them two hours to get here. I mean I was scared, I wouldn't have called them otherwise ... And they told me they were going to ring in the next few days or something to see how I was. I never heard back from them at all. (Tess)*

This research suggests that police may have had a greater tendency to excuse the men's behaviour because they knew the man and the stresses faced by Black Saturday survivors.

*I said I definitely need [an Intervention Order] after today. [The police officer] said, 'Are you sure about that? It's going to really affect him'. (Shelly)*

*[The police] just weren't helpful. It was like, 'We don't really want to know and we've known [him] all his life... He's a good bloke. (Gaye)*

Some welcome this approach as sensitive and sensible, fearing the effect of a police report or criminal charges on the health and wellbeing of already scarred and suffering men. Further investigation into family violence after disaster is warranted and should include recommendations for preventative and punitive measures that are sensitive to post-disaster conditions. Our stated position is unequivocal — that women, too, were survivors of Black Saturday and it is not acceptable to expect them to suffer further assaults because their partner is not coping.

*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. (Madeline)*

Indeed, violent men often use situational factors to excuse their violence, and their experience of disaster may be perceived by themselves and others as reason enough for 'losing control' (Fothergill, 2008).

*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)*

It is clear and uncontroversial that accurate statistics should be kept so that disaster planning and response is based on evidence.

A second issue is the question of whether family violence was informally relegated to a low priority as demand on policing increased following the disaster. This research reports on six women who had police involvement — none felt the police response was adequate. (See Table 6 in Vol. 3.) Family Violence workers lamented the lack of action by police and the inference that women put aside their own safety for the good of the family.

*So much has been justified as a result of the fires. Eight months later, we ask women, 'Was he abusive before the fires? Has it been exacerbated?' So much has been fobbed off. So many women have gone to police and been told by police, 'Things will settle down again'. (Case Management — 6 people)*

*I should have put a complaint to the police for not going to court ... if they had done their job properly I would not be in this mess now ... They never told me [why]. But speaking to my [police officer] friend ... she said they were very busy, they were all dealing with the fires ... Apparently I'm not that important. (Shelly)*

In addition to ethics approval received from North East Health and Monash University, WHGNE applied for research approval from the Victoria Police Research Coordinating Committee (RCC) and the Victorian Police Human research Ethics Committee (VPHREC) in order to include Victoria Police in this research. The RCC declined to approve the application, stating there were 'a number of reasons for the decision, including that the participation of members was not supported by local and regional managers'. We were invited to submit a revised application addressing a number of issues including: 'The Committee suggests the recruitment draft flyer for women be altered to be neutral, to allow for a more representative sample of participants. Specifically removing or altering question three 'Have you experienced violence since the Black Saturday bushfires'. Resubmission would have meant omitting the two key features of the research which is that it was about women and about violence.

## The narrative of disasters — hers and his

### Gender Stereotypes

The way we construct gender roles with women primarily in the nurturing role and men primarily on the front line of fire fighting gives men and women different kinds of risk in a disaster. It is these circumstances that must be taken into account and planned for — without the assumption that men will be men and women will be protected. In the face of the Black Saturday bushfire, people just did what they could.

The women in this research told us of their survival and escape from Black Saturday, as documented in 'Beating the Flames' (Parkinson & Zara, 2011). Cultural conditioning seemed less robust in this life-threatening situation, and the way individuals reacted depended more on their personal strengths and qualities.

*When husbands and partners were present, some women found great solace, inspiration and practical support. Others found them an additional burden. The women reflected on their own responses with some stating that at times they were unable to function effectively. These accounts reveal that men and women reacted to life and death situations as individuals, rather than along gendered lines. (p. 1)*

As, one of the mental health practitioners said, 'We need to remember there is a gender issue but it's not universal'.

Society's gendered expectations place the burden of responsibility to protect on men. In a disaster, the stakes are raised, as man as 'protector' is no longer just a symbolic role. On Black Saturday, protecting families was life threatening and largely dependent on factors beyond the power of individuals. Naturally, not all men were able to do this.

*They ... felt an immense responsibility to protect — they're the men of the house — to protect their family. That's a massive responsibility ... The role that they took on that day, not willingly. (Community development, health or social worker — 2 people)*

*They ... feel like they should have been able to protect their family when they didn't. So it's all the normal behaviour but probably under the anvil, for want of a better description, of fires it gets exacerbated. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

*I think there's an element that he's let me down. He maintains if he'd been here the house would be here. (Community Volunteers — 8 people)*

*It became primal. For example, if a man could not save his own house. Lots of males have really struggled. It's that notion of men as provider and protector. 'I am supposed to provide for my family and I have to protect them and I haven't been able to do that. (Community Volunteers — 8 people)*

On that day, some men failed to live up to society's demands of their masculinity. Their shortcomings are less a reflection on these individual men than on a flawed social construction that expects men to have a particular set of characteristics simply because they are men. The reality is that men display a broad range of 'masculinities' and 'practices' (Pease & Pringle, 2001) in life and it will be no different in a disaster. Some will be brave, selfless, foolhardy or macho and some will be cautious, self-centred, incapable, immobile.

As will women.

We know that, especially with bushfire, women are often left with the responsibility of home and children as mostly men join efforts to fight the fire (Eriksen, Gill, & Head, 2010). Indeed, their vulnerability was highlighted in a report two months before Black Saturday (Haynes, et al., 2008). Women whose husbands or partners worked for council or emergency services were definitely on their own as these services struggled to cope.

*Some women felt quite betrayed with their husbands off helping other people. Not one person in the CFA in [this town] went home to their own house, they all lost their own homes. (Beth)*

*A lot of families are hurt that they weren't there to help ... The women had a big job that day. (Holly)*

One woman captured the consequence of believing men can protect women and children when she said, 'He was my fire plan'. As a result, she almost died. He was unable to leave the fire front and any plans of protecting her were prevented by the magnitude of the disaster itself. This confirms that bushfire presents vulnerabilities that are both gendered and embedded (Cox, 1998; Eriksen, et al., 2010; Fothergill, 1998; Proudley, 2008).

Some workers spoke in black and white terms, confirming that they had, indeed, observed women and men behaving in these culturally defined ways — most obviously that women nurture and men provide and protect.

*Men and women interact differently. Women talk about stuff, men tend to not. I mean if we want to bring in the stereotypes, men have tended to want to get back to life as normal and the women get together and talk about things. (Community development, health or social worker — 2 people)*

*The stereotypical woman is holding the emotional situation together and the stereotypical men are physically very active. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

One senior worker told of a woman who was alone to escape the fires with children and neighbours because her husband was on fire duty. The expectation of men to fulfil the culturally designed masculine role of protector is not just in men's heads. It is a real expectation, at least for some.

*She is very bitter because he wasn't there. He stayed at the CFA shed. She says, 'I want a man who'd protect me or die in the attempt'. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

The women told of their own and their partners' behaviours in the life-threatening circumstances of Black Saturday. Some were admirable and some were not. The myth that women will be cared for by men is most exposed in one account where a man saved himself first, then his two small children, leaving his wife and older children unprotected in a life-threatening situation. They escaped through fire on both sides of the road and falling embers.

*I'm looking at this man and going, 'You shoved us in the back [of the utility]?' ... He was inside ... he put himself before the kids and that's what got me ... I said to him recently when things blew up, I said, 'Mate, you could have stuck all four of those kids in the front... and you should have got on the back with me ... He used to often say that he would be good in an emergency ... it went to this look in his face like, 'You don't count as much as me'. (Sally)*



Disaster planning that assumes a set of characteristics of men and another of women is predicated on inaccuracy. In the cultural storytelling, men are cast as protector and hero, and women as 'damsels in distress' waiting to be rescued. Australian researchers argue that bushfire moulds and upholds gender roles as women are viewed as 'victims without required competencies and devoid of power' (Wraith, cited in Eriksen, et al., 2010, p. 338). Yet, when women's voices are heard and documented, it seems 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 drive out was fraught, with times of zero visibility — smoke so thick that women spoke of driving by memory. Or terrifying visibility — enormous fireballs catching up in the rear vision mirror. Blocked roads forced some of the women to take roads they knew to be dangerous at the best of times — winding, flanked by sheer drops or solid bush. And Black Saturday was the worst of times. Powerlines were down, trees on fire, cars forced to drive over burning logs, sometimes overheating and sometimes, too, low on petrol.

*It was like an atomic bomb had gone off here. The clouds were like orange mushroom formations and it was getting lower by the minute. (Annie)*

*I'm in a Commodore and it was overheating because I was driving over burning logs and burning both sides of the road and the alarm was going off saying, 'Engine hot, engine hot'. 'Oh, shit, I hope it doesn't burst into flames.' (Rosie)*

Some women showed clarity of thought in the most life-threatening situations. They planned ahead, anticipated problems and solutions and drew on knowledge packed away to get around seemingly insurmountable problems. Incredibly, anticipating their own deaths in the bushfire, two women thought to advise police. (See also Parkinson & Zara 2011)

Arguments against equal rights for women, access to equal pay or entry into the armed services draw on the myth that women will be looked after by men. This document argues against rigid gender roles in recognition of reality. We are not insisting that men risk their lives for women — men have an equal right to be human and flawed. Rather, we urge inclusion of women's experiences and recognition of the strong role women play in disasters.

### **Hyper-masculinity**

*'I am a man, and I can do' has been defeated in so many men. Things they couldn't do and they couldn't be and so much was lost. (Madeline)*

The complete dominance of the fires was unexpected and overwhelming to those who survived and some men sought to regain a sense of control of their environment through extreme behaviours. Echoing the disaster literature (Austin, 2008), women described a kind of hyper-masculinity displayed by their partners both during and in the aftermath of the fires. The atmosphere on the day of impending disaster seemed to excite some men, who took themselves into the danger rather than away from it. Women described their partners as wanting to do something and feeling frustrated. They appeared to take unnecessary risks.

*He was facing 40 foot flames, he was jumping into the flames, he was right there, he was in them. One or two times [the kids] had screamed out, 'Dad!' because he was so in the zone of fighting the fire, he was in the fire. (Madeline)*

*He rang me back and said, 'I've just bumped into the coppers and two guys from the fire brigade and I'm going to help them to clear the roads down the [name] Highway. I said, 'How dangerous is it?' He goes, 'Fucking dangerous as anything'. (Libby)*

This echoes findings from Handmer, et al in their review of fatalities on Black Saturday.

*There were often different attitudes and behaviour between males and females, with males almost always wanting to stay and females wanting to leave. This led to changes to plans at the last minute, or failure to commit to an effective course of action in time. (Handmer, et al, 2010, p. 8)*

In the weeks and months after, for some men, speeding and reckless driving was commonplace, while others sought out the adrenalin rush through motorbikes, martial arts or heavy metal music. Another version of hyper-masculinity came through a sudden freedom in spending money on expensive men's toys from a family budget already under extraordinary pressure. There was no negotiation with their partners, and when called to task, the men asserted their right to spend the money they had earned.

*He will turn around and say he's the only one working and he earns all the money, he can do what he wants. (Sally)*

*It's that same thing of [men] not talking, spending money when you don't have an income or otherwise, or on a limited income, buying things. (Erica)*

*It was like boys' own adventure. ... Well, he seemed to be in his element. (Jenny)*

Running on adrenalin to avoid the past and block out the future is not sustainable. There are emotional and psychological consequences of this hyper-masculinity as men overwork to try and reclaim their expected role as the 'protector'. The painful memories, tragic losses and unrelenting workload started to take their toll, not only on the men, but on their families too.

*There is a limit to how much the adrenalin can motivate you before you start to burn out physically. There's a part of me that suggests it's a way of avoiding the emotional stuff. Guys falling apart put in a lot of physical energy and then they run out of steam, the emotional stuff comes. They burst into tears for no reason and their partners get concerned because they are not sure what's happening. They [the women] saw their men as stoic and to see someone who has never broken down do this is confusing and distressing. (Community development, health or social worker)*

### **Stigma for men in seeking help**

Acknowledging that men are overwhelmingly reluctant to seek help for any personal problem, physical or mental, the women considered the inadequacies of the help their partners were offered — or perhaps worse, that they were not offered help at all. The very male cultures in the CFA and DSE undermined successful interventions. 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.

*There should have been help straight away, not ... when they are at the point that something bad is going to happen. It's a very tough manly man thing [in that organisation], and it was seen as a bit of a stigma ... Guys aren't necessarily going to open up to a group of guys. (Holly)*



It is generally understood that men are reluctant to seek help for physical or mental health issues. Because our society values masculinity that is strong and self sufficient, men tend to see help-seeking behaviour as a weakness.

*Amongst the men there was a feeling of stigma in asking for help. People might think they were mentally ill or weak for asking for help. (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)*

*It's really hard to engage the men (Community development, health or social worker)*

*Blokes won't do it. At all. At all. It's very, very hard to go and sit with a bloke where you can see he's really in trouble and say, 'Mate, what's wrong?' (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

This is especially so for traditional counselling settings or group work which involves sitting and talking.

*I saw advertised a month ago there was something about 'Are you angry all the time? Come and join a men's self help group'. They would have all just looked at it and gone, 'Oh, fuck off, I'm not interested in that'. (Community development, health or social worker — 2 people)*

### **Traditional gender roles**

While most people were struggling to cope, interview data suggested that the choices in re-establishing lives after Black Saturday were gendered. Women spoke of some choice for themselves and men in returning to work, but no choice in whether they, as women, cared for children. Men seemed to be free to choose if they would extend 'help' with the care of their own children. They chose how much of role to play in the home and in their children's lives. That freedom to choose was not granted to women.

*As the wife in the situation, or the mother, you do not have the luxury of saying, 'Oh fuck it, I'm sick of this, someone else do it — because the buck stops with you'. (Holly)*

*Women get together and cry and hold each other then go, 'Righto girl, back in the game. There you go, you had your little sulk, we love you, we understand, we've all been through it too, go make dinner'. (Emma)*

Women's return to work, especially considering the impact of the fires on the children, relied on stable and loving childcare arrangements, and this was the case regardless of the women's occupation. In two couples the women held better paid and more senior jobs than their partners and both still had to assume primary care of the children in the emotional and physical absence of their father. Both women, had no choice but to give up their very senior positions in the absence of supportive fathers and in the absence of supportive workplaces.

*I couldn't return to work because I had no childcare and the schools hadn't reopened, so I said to him 'If you work four days, let me go to work one day and that way I can keep some sort of income coming in so that I can keep paying the mortgage'. And anyway, he never did that, so I was unable to get back to work. (Annie)*

Work is a defining characteristic of manhood. The stereotype of the man as breadwinner, unsupported by reality, is still fixed in our imagination.

*Child Support Agency told me that he was not going to [pay] support, and I said to myself and I said to the support people, 'I'm all my kids have, the onus of responsibility of everything, to educate, to feed, to guide, to socialise, I have three lives that are completely dependent on me for every single need'. (Annie)*

In the aftermath of the fires, people searching for security sometimes looked to the past, reverting to traditional male and female roles. This was observed after the 2003 bushfires in Canberra and in California after the wildfires of 1991.

*Men went into instrumental tasks rebuilding, finding the new place and women went into the domestic and supra domestic roles around the children. (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)*

*... progress in carving out new gender behavior suffered a fifty-year setback. In the shock of loss both men and women retreated into traditional cultural realms and personas. (Hoffman, 1998, pp. 57-58)*

Pressure was on men to return to work and for women to look after children. Clearly, some women had both pressures and spoke about the unfairness in the assignment of responsibilities — an unfairness that emerged along with the massive workload that followed the disaster.

Perhaps the key difference in how people experienced the trauma and the aftermath of the fires lies in the fact that our society expects women to care for children — no matter what. This same expectation is not levelled at men. The option for women to equally take on paid work goes to the heart of the origins of family violence. VicHealth noted that ‘the most significant determinants of violence against women are the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women [and] an adherence to rigidly defined gender roles’, and further, that economic dependence increases barriers to disclosing family violence and seeking support (VicHealth, 2011).

## Conclusion

Despite the obvious sensitivities involved in researching the possibility of increased family violence after Black Saturday, and concerns about further traumatisation that may be caused by this research, one worker poignantly captured the essence of why family violence cannot be ignored after disasters.

*[With] one family in particular — we’ve been helping a lot with referrals for domestic violence — there have been a lot of tragic things happening in that 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. His wife also reported to [a community worker] that he had been suicidal for some time, and did, eventually commit suicide. (Community development, health or social worker)*

The details of this account have been removed to preserve confidentiality and avoid charges of being injudicious. The sensitivities are raw in these communities and many of the accounts we included in the draft have been removed after requests from research participants.

We do not intrude on sensitive, traumatised communities in order to blame men and bring further hurt. This research aims to draw attention to increased family violence in order to prevent or effectively respond to it.

## Recommendations

### **1.0 To improve DISASTER PREVENTION policy and practice by responding to the increased incidence of family violence during and after disasters.**

For DISASTER PREVENTION AGENCIES responsible for the elimination or reduction of the incidence or severity of emergencies and the mitigation of their effects (e.g. Ambulance Victoria, Aust. Attorney General's Dept., Red Cross — RediPlan, Building Commission, BOM, CMA, Coroners Court, CFA, DEECD, DH, DHS, DPI, DSE, DOT, Emergency Broadcasters, EnergySafe, EPA, Life Saving Victoria, MFB, Municipal Councils, OESC, OFSC, Parks Vic, St John's, Vic Roads, VicPol, SES, WorkSafe) and Police

- 1.1 Establish Disaster Guidelines at National, State and Local Government levels that:
  - 1.1.1 include attention to family violence as a priority in the aftermath of disasters with strategies to prevent and respond to it.
  - 1.1.2 Require accurate recording of family violence statistics by all personnel responding to disaster e.g. health and community services and police
  - 1.1.3 Ensure additional relationship and family counselling are available in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and on a long-term ongoing basis as required
  - 1.1.4 include women at all levels of disaster planning, response and recovery
  - 1.1.5 identify women and children as vulnerable groups after disaster
  - 1.1.6 recognise women or men escaping fires with young children as vulnerable groups
- 1.2 Federal and state governments to provide targeted funding to emergency management agencies involved in disasters to upgrade policies and practices and provide training in family violence recognition, response and reporting practices.
- 1.3 Establish and promote a National Preferred Provider Register of disaster trauma practitioners who have a sound understanding of family violence. Responsibility for establishment and maintenance of the register could be either state or federally administered.
- 1.4 Establish a Police Disaster Liaison Officer position that brings expertise in the dynamics of disaster and family violence to disaster planning and recovery meetings.
- 1.5 Include the likelihood of increased family violence and retraumatisation in 'Disaster and Mental Health First-Aid' courses and promote as a mandatory requirement for emergency service workers, volunteers and case managers.
- 1.6 Train women in fire preparedness including use of chainsaws and other machinery to address gendered vulnerability arising from out dated social roles that limit individual abilities and potential.
- 1.7 Research effective ways to engage men (e.g. in support strategies that offer alternatives to counselling, Men's Behaviour Change programs, etc.) to address gendered expectations that restrict men from seeking help.

- 1.8 Develop social marketing campaigns warning of the dangers of excessive alcohol intake following disaster.
- 1.9 Include a gendered focus in implementing Recommendation 65 from the Final Report of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission that: 'The Commonwealth establish a national centre for bushfire research in collaboration with other Australian jurisdictions to support pure, applied and long-term research in the physical, biological and social sciences relevant to bushfires and to promote continuing research and scholarship in related disciplines.' (Teague, McLeod, & Pascoe, 2010)

## **2.0 To improve DISASTER RESPONSE policy and practice by responding to the increased incidence of family violence during and after disasters.**

For DISASTER RESPONSE SERVICES responsible for combating of emergencies and the provision of rescue and immediate relief services (e.g. Response Coordination Agency: VicPol, DH, CFA/MFB, Defence Forces, DPI, DSE, EPA, Water Authorities, DOT, VicRoads, Red Cross, Ambulance Vic, Municipal Councils, VicRelief Foodbank, Salvation Army, BOM, WorkSafe, DPC)

- 2.1 Recognise that the way men and women act is often the result of social conditioning and these gendered roles can leave women at a disadvantage both during and after disasters, e.g. women and children home alone in disaster or at risk of violence after disaster, and men responding to disaster with hyper-masculinity, violence or alcohol abuse.
- 2.2 Challenge expectations that men will behave in a defined 'masculine' way — encourage expression of emotion by promoting a change of culture through training and changes in organisational practices
- 2.3 Prioritise the needs of all sole adults escaping disasters with small children.
- 2.4 Explore ways for emergency service workers — especially police and fire-fighters — to return to their families immediately after the initial trauma of the disaster and where possible, backfill with personnel from other regions.
- 2.5 Establish mandatory counselling for emergency service workers and their families in the immediate post-disaster period — particularly in male-dominated organisations.

For DISASTER RECOVERY SERVICES responsible for assisting people and communities affected by emergencies (Recovery Coordination Agency: DHS, Municipal Councils, DPI, Parks Vic, Centrelink, DIIRD, Rural finance Corporation, Rural Financial Counselling, Hospitals, Community Health, Mental Health, Victorian Council of Churches, Red Cross, Salvation Army, DEECD, DPC)

Check the list above, as well as:

- 3.1 Ensure relevant human services personnel have undertaken Common Risk Assessment Framework (or similar) training to identify and respond effectively to family violence.
- 3.2 Ensure domestic and family violence services are a visible and engaged part of disaster recovery.
- 3.3 Ensure Municipal Emergency Management Plans include Family Violence services in Community Recovery Committees to provide training and to be a visible presence in recovery operations.

- 3.4 Include women at all levels in disaster recovery bodies.
- 3.5 Address — not excuse — men’s violence and affirm women’s and children’s right to live free from violence in the aftermath of a disaster. Name ‘family violence’; avoid euphemisms such as ‘tension’ and ‘anger’ — particularly in reportage.
- 3.6 Monitor and support accurate recording of family violence after disasters
- 3.7 Include an agenda item on family violence at all recovery meetings to monitor its incidence and the efficacy of responses.
- 3.8 Increase funding to domestic and family violence services when demand increases after disaster. (NB: increase in demand is expected when constraints to women disclosing are addressed and health and community workers trained to identify and respond to family violence.)
- 3.9 Provide financial and systemic support for women’s groups post-disaster.
- 3.10 Include advertising on the dangers of excessive alcohol at community venues and hold some community alcohol-free events.
- 3.11 Provide relationship and family counselling using the National Preferred Provider Register to ensure family violence expertise in the immediate aftermath and on an ongoing basis for emergency service workers. Include family counsellors’ home visits.
- 3.12 Employ local men and women in paid reconstruction efforts, and offer a gradual and supported re-entry to the workforce, such as that provided by the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 — Terminology

'Disaster' includes natural disasters such as bushfires, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes and cyclones. War, terrorism, drought and climate change are excluded. Quarantelli (1994) described droughts, famines and some epidemics as 'diffused' and concluded that disaster is best understood as 'an occasion involving an immediate crisis or emergency' (1994, p. 9).

The 'fire-affected regions' for the purposes of this research are those located in the Shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi.

'Violence against women', 'Domestic Violence' and 'Family Violence' are defined differently by laws in each Australian state and territory. In 2011, in their *National Plan*, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) stated that 'Domestic violence' includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse:

*'While there is no single definition, the central element of domestic violence is an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear ... It can be both criminal and non-criminal.'* (Council of Australian Governments, 2011, p. 3)

In the Victorian context, 'Family violence' is defined in the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* ("Family Violence Protection Act ", 2008) as follows:

'(1) For the purposes of this Act, **family violence** is—

(a) behaviour by a person towards a family member of that person if that behaviour—

- (i) is physically or sexually abusive; or
- (ii) is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or is economically abusive; or
- (iii) is threatening; or
- (iv) is coercive; or
- (v) in any other way controls or dominates the family member and causes that family member to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of that family member or another person; or

(b) behaviour by a person that causes a child to hear or witness, or otherwise be exposed to the effects of, behaviour referred to in paragraph (a).

(2) Without limiting subsection (1), **family violence** includes the following behaviour—

- (a) assaulting or causing personal injury to a family member or threatening to do so;
- (b) sexually assaulting a family member or engaging in another form of sexually coercive behaviour or threatening to engage in such behaviour;
- (c) intentionally damaging a family member's property, or threatening to do so;
- (d) unlawfully depriving a family member of the family member's liberty, or threatening to do so;

(e) causing or threatening to cause the death of, or injury to, an animal, whether or not the animal belongs to the family member to whom the behaviour is directed so as to control, dominate or coerce the family member.

(3) To remove doubt, it is declared that behaviour may constitute family violence even if the behaviour would not constitute a criminal offence.’ (“Family Violence Protection Act “, 2008)

The Act contains other definitions, including:

#### **‘Meaning of emotional or psychological abuse**

For the purposes of this Act, **emotional or psychological abuse** means behaviour by a person towards another person that torments, intimidates, harasses or is offensive to the other person. Examples—

- repeated derogatory taunts, including racial taunts;
- threatening to disclose a person’s sexual orientation to the person’s friends or family against the person’s wishes;
- threatening to withhold a person’s medication;
- preventing a person from making or keeping connections with the person’s family, friends or culture, including cultural or spiritual ceremonies or practices, or preventing the person from expressing the person’s cultural identity;
- threatening to commit suicide or self-harm with the intention of tormenting or intimidating a family member, or threatening the death or injury of another person.’ (“Family Violence Protection Act “, 2008)

In their 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the United Nations stated:

*‘The term violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women ... whether occurring in public or private life.’ (UN, 1993)*

## Collecting women's stories of their experience of life after bushfire

Worldwide research suggests that women experience disasters differently to men. Because we have very little research about Australian women following events such as the Black Saturday Bushfires, your views and experiences are important.

- **What aspects of trying to recover from the bushfires would you like to raise?**
- **Have interventions and assistance been helpful or caused problems?**
- **Have you experienced violence since the Black Saturday bushfires?**
- **What are the obstacles to you rebuilding your life?**

Your information will assist in post-disaster planning and will improve services to women and communities in the future.

For more information or to make a time to share your story in a confidential and private setting, please call ...

We can arrange for an interview at a time and place that suits you.



## **Appendix 3 — Interview Schedules**

### **Interview schedule for women**

1. First, can you tell us why you decided to participate in this research?
2. Now, let's start by asking how you came to be living here.
3. Can you tell us a bit about what's happened to you in the fires and in the months since?
4. What aspect/s of what you've just told us would you like to talk about further?
5. What do you see as critical events during that time? What made those events critical to you?
6. What would have helped or made a difference to you at that time?

### **Interview schedule for workers**

1. What's your professional/and personal role in this community?
2. Can you tell us a bit about what's happened to this community during the fires and in the months since?
3. What aspect/s of what you've just told us would you like to talk about further?
4. What do you see as critical events during that time? What made those events critical to you/ to the community?
5. What would have helped or made a difference to you/ or to the community at that time?

The nature of this research is that it is to be led by the participant. Further questions would be exploratory or seeking clarification. Points to explore would focus on the research questions (below).

### **Research questions**

1. Have women experienced an increase in violence against them following the Black Saturday bushfires?
2. What are women's accounts of increased violence against them in the post-disaster period?
3. To what extent have women minimised or ignored the violence against them in the period of post-disaster?
4. Why did they do this?
5. How complicit is society in minimising or ignoring violence against women in the period of post-disaster?
6. What are the reasons for this?
7. What actions are needed to recognise and address violence against women in the period of post-disaster?

## Appendix 4 - Participant Information and Consent

### Women's Health Goulburn North East

#### Women's experience of bushfire and its aftermath

Principal Researcher: Ms. Debra Parkinson

Associate Researcher(s): Ms Claire Zara (*A second Associate Researcher was noted on initial Participant Information and Consent Form but did not begin work and the NEH Ethics Committee was advised of her absence from the project on March 12, 2010.*)

This Participant Information and Consent Forms are 5 pages long. Please make sure you have all the pages.

#### 1. Your Consent

You are invited to take part in this research project.

This Participant Information contains detailed information about the research project. Its purpose is to explain to you as openly and clearly as possible all the procedures involved in this project before you decide whether or not to take part in it.

Please read this Participant Information carefully. Feel free to ask questions about any information in the document.

Once you understand what the project is about and if you agree to take part in it, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form. By signing the Consent Form, you indicate that you understand the information and that you give your consent to participate in the research project.

You will be given a copy of the Participant Information and Consent Form to keep as a record.

#### 2. Purpose and Background

The bushfires that affected so many communities in Mitchell and Murrindindi Local Government Areas were unprecedented. The ferocity of the fires, the total devastation of whole communities, the individual tragedies were a new and traumatic experience for the people living and working there. While some previous Australian research has looked at what happens in disaster recovery phases, none is particular to these unique communities and circumstances.

Research will be conducted to capture aspects of the experience of women during the fires of Black Saturday in Lower Hume and during the disaster recovery period that Research will be conducted to capture aspects of the experience of women during the fires of Black Saturday in Lower Hume and during the disaster recovery period that continues.

This research will allow women the opportunity to focus on what was (and perhaps remains) important to them. It could be that women speak about personal survival and grief, or they could speak about the politics of the disaster response and recovery. Issues of gender bias or inequity, or physical or sexual violence may emerge.

In addition, women will be invited to have a five or ten-minute 'conversation to camera' on topics they are happy to share with the World Wide Web. These will be uploaded to a dedicated page linked to the WHGNE and Women's Health in the North websites. This is a way of giving the community access to aspects of the research as it evolves. This option is for women or workers who are interested in it, and is not an intrinsic part of the research.

### **3. Procedures**

Participation in this project will involve you:

#### **1. Being Interviewed**

All information remains anonymous as your name and location will not be attached to any of your responses. While it is not possible to guarantee absolute confidentiality as people who know you may recognise your story, the anonymity of your participation is strengthened by our process, in which you will be asked to approve the document produced from your interview, and it is your right at this stage to make corrections and deletions. Notes from interviews will be destroyed once they have been written up and checked. The content of our discussions will be treated confidentially. Coded data is stored in a locked filing cabinet at WHGNE for a maximum of seven years.

### **4. Possible Benefits**

WHGNE has conducted previous research with women that focussed on issues such as breast cancer, teenage pregnancy, disability, social isolation, violence and sexual violence in intimate relationships. In the course of each research study, it became apparent that participation was valuable to women.

Women wanted to contribute to the research to help on three levels — to raise public awareness; to help others; and to contribute to their own recovery. For some, the interview was an opportunity to open up to others, initially the researchers, and then to others close to them. It took courage to attend and it was an important appointment for women. For their own healing, it helped them articulate out loud what had happened, sometimes for the first time.

### **5. Possible Risks**

You may feel upset by talking about your experiences. If you take part in the research, you have the right to request and receive post-research debriefing. This can be negotiated at the time of interview or earlier, in the days following the interview, or following your reading of the interview notes. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and if you agree to participate, you may withdraw your consent at any time by speaking to me and saying you wish to stop the interview and/ or withdraw your information. At this time your Informed Consent Form will be returned to you.

### **6. Privacy, Confidentiality and Disclosure of Information**

Any information obtained in connection with this project will be de identified. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way to minimise the possibility that you will be identified. Information gathered through interviews will be coded to maintain anonymity.

## 7. Results of Project

At the completion of this project a research report of the findings will be posted out to you.

## 8. Further Information or Any Problems

If you require further information or if you have any problems concerning this project you can contact the principal researcher or the Executive Officer of Women's Health Goulburn North East. The researcher responsible for this project is:

**Ms. Debra Parkinson**

**Telephone: 0423 646 930 or 03 5722 3009**

## 9. Other Issues

If you have any complaints about any aspect of the project, the way it is being conducted or any questions about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact

Executive Officer  
Human Research and Ethics Committee  
C/- Ms. Margie O'Connor, Secretariat  
Green St.  
Wangaratta, Vic 3677  
Telephone: 03 57 220233

## 10. Participation is Voluntary

Participation in any research project is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage.

Before you make your decision, a member of the research team will be available to answer any questions you have about the research project. You can ask for any information you want. Sign the Consent Form only after you have had a chance to ask your questions and have received satisfactory answers.

## 11. Ethical Guidelines

This project will be carried out according to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (June 1999) produced by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia. This statement has been developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies.

The ethical aspects of this research project have been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Northeast Health Wangaratta.

*(This following paragraph was included on all Participant Information and Consent Forms given to **women**. Workers required a separate permission slip and are not included in the PhD studies.)*

**Please note:**

Women's Health Goulburn North East has given me permission to analyse up to 20 interview transcripts to contribute to my study for a PhD at Monash University, under the supervision of Professor Denise Cuthbert. Professor Cuthbert is Head of School and a member of the Sociology Program in the School of Political and Social Inquiry.

This means that I will be writing a thesis and, as well as the thesis, there may be other articles, reports or presentations drawn from the research findings. The Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) has approved this research (CF10/0448 — 2010000209) based on the original Ethics Application and Approval received from North East Health.

## CONSENT FORM

### Northeast Health Wangaratta

#### Full Project Title: Women's experience of bushfire and its aftermath

I have read, or have had read to me and I understand the Participant Information version 1 dated October 15th 2008. I freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Participant Information.

I will be given a copy of the Participant Information and Consent Form to keep

The researcher has agreed not to reveal my identity and personal details if information about this project is published or presented in any public form.

Participant's Name (printed): .....

Address:.....

.....

.....

Telephone:.....

Signature: ..... Date:.....

Name of Witness to Participant's Signature (printed):.....

Signature: ..... Date:.....

Declaration by researcher\*: I have given a verbal explanation of the research project, its procedures and risks and I believe that the participant has understood that explanation.

Researcher's Name (printed).....

Signature: ..... Date:.....

\*A senior member of the research team must provide the explanation and provision of information concerning the research project.

**Note:** All parties signing the Consent Form must date their own signature.

## References

Please see Vol. 4 for references for all volumes.







# The way he tells it

Relationships after Black Saturday

Vol. 2 Women and Disasters literature review



**WOMEN'S HEALTH**  
GOULBURN NORTH EAST  
*challenging inequity, embracing diversity*

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. PO Box 853, Wangaratta, Victoria, 3677.

Phone: 03 5722 3009 Fax: 03 5722 3020

[whealth@whealth.com.au](mailto:whealth@whealth.com.au)

[www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au)

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Written by Debra Parkinson

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## Introduction

The bushfires that affected so many communities in the Shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi were unprecedented. The ferocity of the fires, the total devastation of whole communities, the individual tragedies were a new and traumatic experience for the people living and working there. While there is a growing body of evidence into gender and disaster, there appears to be little on women and disaster in the Australian research, and no published research to date on the link between disaster and violence against women in Australia.

There is a body of research on masculinity and disaster which is outside the scope of this work, but is clearly deserving of attention. The definition of disaster used in this research and in other research focussing on natural disasters specifically excludes disasters caused by war or terrorism.

The emergency stage after disasters necessarily attends to primary needs of food, water and shelter, and the recovery and reconstruction stages may include attending to grief and loss, and individual psycho-social needs. The international disaster literature indicates that physical and sexual violence against women increases following disasters, yet it appears there is no published research to date on whether this happens in Australia.

In line with other disaster research, this literature review has excluded disasters relating to war and terrorism, instead focussing on natural disasters such as bushfires, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes and cyclones.

## How gender is implicated in disasters

Disasters magnify both the strengths and the weaknesses in society so the way gender is constructed influences how women are affected by disaster (Domeisen, 1998).

Disaster phenomena necessarily involve all the basic dimensions and processes of social life. It is after all an old saw in common sayings and philosophical musings that crises lay bare the essence of personal and social life. (Quarantelli, 1994, p. 4)

## Mortality

Disasters affect men and women in different ways, with greater impacts on women and children (Dasgupta, Siriner, & Partha, 2010). Across the globe, women are at greater risk in disasters than men (Alston, 2009; Domeisen, 1998; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007; B. Phillips, et al., 2009), with a higher disaster mortality rate for women than men in developing countries (Domeisen, 1998; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007). The risk exists during the disaster and in the recovery period that follows (Alston, 2009). Phillips, et al. (2009) wrote that the common factor in recent tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes has been that, overwhelmingly, most victims are women, children and other vulnerable groups.

Historically, too, the figures are stacked against women's and children's survival. For example, 'Considerable excess mortality occurred amongst adult females' in both the 1948 and 1966 Russian earthquakes. In one, the Ashkabad earthquake, of the 33,000 who died, only 18 per cent were men: 47 per cent were women and 35 per cent were children. In the second, in Tashkent, 20 per cent more women died than men (Beinin, 1981 cited in Rivers, 1982, p. 257).

Such differential mortality rates are most probably the result of gender determined roles with their separate expectations and exposures to risk (Molin Valdés, 2009; Rivers, 1982). One explanation offered was women's responsibility for children hampering their escape, but Rivers (1982) goes further to state that choices made during various disasters impact on who dies. Her example questions the veracity of the notion of 'women and children first':

- In 1879, when the Atlantic steamship sank between Liverpool and New York, all but one of the 295 women on board died, compared to 187 of the 636 men.
- Forty per cent of survivors of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 were men, including over half the crew, leaving 30 per cent of the women and children on board to go down with the ship.

The disaster literature reveals other examples:

*In [one] Indian earthquake, more women and children [than men] died, with women aged 25-29 most affected (Parasuraman 1995). In this disaster, men's work and schooling had taken them out of the village when the earthquake hit. In an earthquake in Guatemala, more women were injured than men (Glass et al. 1977), and in an earthquake in Cairo, Egypt, more females were killed or injured than males (Malilay et al. 1995). In the Bangladesh Cyclone of 1991, 42% more females died than males (Chowdhury et al. 1993). (Fothergill, 1998, p. 18)*

In the more recent Indian Ocean Tsunami, 80 per cent of the 300,000 deaths were women and children from 13 nations (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008).

Although known death rates after Hurricane Katrina were almost the same for males (50.6%) and females (49.3%) (Jonkman, Maaskant, Boyd, & Lloyd Levitan, 2009, p. 696), in every country where studies have focused on gender, it has been clear that women are affected differently by natural disaster than men (Alston, 2009; Domeisen, 1998; Fothergill, 1998; Neumayera & Plümerb, January, 2007; Phillips, Jenkins, & Enarson, 2009). Although the effect of disaster on women is easier to observe and document in under-developed countries, the differential effect is evident in the developed world too. For example, there is some evidence from the US to suggest the situation is reversed and that more men than women are killed in disasters caused by severe weather events (Fothergill, 1998). While Fothergill (1998) listed lightning, thunderstorms, flash floods and hurricanes, this is equally true for bushfires in Australia, where the Black Saturday bushfires killed 100 males and 73 females.<sup>3</sup> One explanation is that men take greater risks than women, and are more likely to be involved in outdoor activities (Neumayera & Plümerb, 2007).

This example illustrates that the impact of a disaster is affected by the way a society is structured. There are different impacts on individuals depending on gender as well as class, ethnicity, disability. Fothergill (1998) echoes this premise, writing that 'social processes ... are more visible in times of a disaster' (Fothergill, 1998, p. 12). Gender inequalities in personal freedom will be exacerbated in a disaster, and access to information and resources will be limited for many women, creating what Enarson and Morrow (1998) term 'gendered disaster vulnerability'.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://royalcommission.vic.gov.au/commission-reports/final-report/volume-1/chapters/the-people-who-died>

### **Discrimination: disasters echo society**

The concept of disaster as a magnifying glass for society (Domeisen, 1998) is useful in understanding the gendered effects of disaster. In societies with a history of human rights abuses against women, the discrimination is stark:

*There are no reliable statistics on the great Chinese famine of the early 1960s, but the account given by a surviving Chinese peasant woman is revealing: "Families tried to pool their rations and often the husband would rule that any female children should be allowed to die first..." (Becker 1996, cited in Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007, p. 8)*

Two other examples indicate palpable discrimination against women. In the Bangladesh cyclone of 1991, 'one desperate father, unable to hold on to both his son and daughter, let go of his daughter, acknowledging that he did so because his son had to carry on the family line (Haider et al., 1991 cited in Finlay, 1998; Fothergill, 1998, p. 18), and Rivers (1982, cited in B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008) reporting on a famine, provided a local man's quote: '[S]top all this rubbish, it is we men who shall have the food, let the children die, we will make new children after the war' (p. 28).

Vulnerability to disaster occurs also as a result of women's poverty. For example, as women are poorer than men across the globe, they are more likely to live in areas that are more susceptible to disaster and housing that is poorly constructed (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007; Scanlon, 1998). They are less likely to have the resources to escape if a disaster threatens (Henrici, Helmuth, & Braun, 2010).

While women in the developing world are at greater risk of death, women in the developed world have increased risk of economic insecurity; increased workload; increased conflict in the home, the community and the workplace and fewer supports for workforce participation (E Enarson, 2000; B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). Economic recovery post-disaster is predominantly directed to employers or projects involving male labour, while women in disaster-prone areas are often employed in low status jobs (Elaine Enarson, 2006).

*Low wage women employed at the lowest rungs of the tourist industry and as beauticians, childcare workers, home health aides, servers and temporary office workers will not be helped back on their feet by economic recovery plans geared to major employers in the formal sector. (Elaine Enarson, 2006, para. 6)*

Economic insecurity and patriarchal social structure both contribute to increased vulnerability for women in a time of disaster as women's financial situation is hindered further by caring responsibilities and inequitable access to financial aid (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008).

Women 'are treated differently to men at every step from the initial warning period when women and children are pressured to leave, but men are often allowed to stay behind; through the immediate post-impact period when men may leave their families to assist others ...; to the relief and recovery period when women, especially single parents, may be left out of the relief process' (Scanlon, 1998, p. 46). Other studies confirm that disasters affect women more acutely than men and that men are favoured by recovery efforts and funding allocation (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Molin Valdés, 2009). It may be summarised this way:

*First, women's economic insecurity increases, as their productive assets are destroyed, they often become sole earners, their household entitlements may decline, their small-businesses are hard-hit, they lose jobs and work time, and gender stereotypes limit their work opportunities. Second, women's workload increases dramatically. They often take*

*on more waged or other forms of income-generating work; engage in a number of new forms of “disaster work, including emergency response and political organizing; and have expanded responsibilities as caregivers. Third, women’s working conditions in the household and paid workplace deteriorate, for example through lack of child-care and increased work and family conflicts. Fourth, women recover more slowly than men from major economic losses, as they are less mobile than male workers, likely to return to paid work later, and often fail to receive equitable financial recovery assistance from the government and/or external donors. (E Enarson, 2000, p. viii)*

Dobson identified a ‘new social order’ operating after the Charleville flood in Queensland (1994, p. 11). One where demands on women were excessive. They were expected to work harder in all arenas — women’s and men’s work, paid and unpaid work (Dobson, 1994). Women who are outside the ‘protection’ or ‘control’ of a man in our patriarchal societies are even more vulnerable to financial insecurity as single mothers, widows, divorced women and lesbians ‘conspicuously lack access to male-controlled relief and recovery resources’ (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008, p. 51)

The gender differential operates even in apparently equal societies. Susanna Hoffman, an anthropologist who survived the 1991 Oakland firestorm in California where 25 people died and 6,000 were left homeless, five years later reflected on the social impact, particularly regarding gender.

*The Oakland Firestorm survivors to a large degree represented the pinnacle of modern sexual definition .... The women of the community were independent, men equitable, couples by and large egalitarian. People of both gender occupied the same segments of space, public and private arenas, hours of day and night. But for many, progress in carving out new gender behavior suffered a fifty-year setback. In the shock of loss both men and women retreated into traditional cultural realms and personas ...The return of old behaviors and the loss of new was so swift, so engulfing, and so unconscious, few understood what occurred. Many unions, long and short, broke apart. (Hoffman, 1998, pp. 57-58)*

She described the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, as they tried to reassemble homes, families and friendships. Her experience was that friendships dissolved. Extended families, perhaps once distant, came to the fore, bringing goods, photos, mementoes to replace those lost. But along with this, came a responsibility to manage these family relationships.

*Friends grew impatient, proved unsympathetic, disappeared... [and] the return of kinship became, as it had customarily been in our traditional society, women’s job to facilitate...and women experienced pressures in dealing with kin that men, who had removed themselves from the domestic scene, did not. (Hoffman, 1998, pp. 58-59)*

The gendered roles were accompanied by age-old gendered slurs, as fire-affected women sought to rebuild their lives. Negotiations with officials were impeded as women — lacking the import of men - were dismissed, and their concerns disregarded.

*The more insistent women were with insurance officials, the more we were promoted to the second level of the ‘difficult’ category... By deeming women ‘difficult’ or more, of course, one removes them from individuality and places them in a grouping where their complaints are rendered meaningless, and thus dismissible ... Over time not only insurance officials, but architects, contractors, and workers, stereotyped us in this old cultural fashion and devalued our voice. (Hoffman, 1998, p. 60)*



This dismissal of women by officials was echoed by the wider community reaction to the firestorm victims, and particularly those who were women.

*In rather rapid course, disaster victims were also grouped into an oppositional category by the outside community ... At first the outside community saw us with sympathy. Eventually, when recovery took longer than the day, week or month they envisioned, they came to view us as greedy whiners and undeserving receivers of pots of gold ... Of course, since ancient times, the brimstone of criticism in our culture has been more directed at women than men. More venerated men are rarely swiped at with petty assault, and with their more decorous business times, male survivors barely endured comment. Women survivors had little choice but to turn inward and seek solace among those who were devoid of envy, other survivors, and thus isolate themselves further. (Hoffman, 1998, p. 60)*

After disasters, governments and non-government organisations move to rehouse people and reconstruct communities. Their large-scale actions in the name of efficiency (or perhaps necessity) mean that individual men and women are less able to make decisions for themselves about their lives (Proudley, 2008). Social networks shrink, as friends and family have moved away, or through strained relationships resulting from a reliance on them for accommodation. Stress overwhelms family stability, and efforts to restabilise is slow and must be sensitive to the emotional and psychological vulnerability of family members (NYCAASA (New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault), Undated). Gender influences both reaction to the disaster and ongoing stresses and it influences coping styles (Dasgupta, et al., 2010).

The media, too, joined the ranks of officials and community in stereotyping women. After Hurricane Katrina, the media ignored any considered coverage of gender influencing how men and women experienced and were affected by the disaster, instead focussing on archetypal characteristics of womanhood and linking it to helplessness, while celebrating male heroes. As Enarson (2006) writes, 'needy women and strong men' were presented. The images ranged from the 'old, infirm, heavily pregnant or paralyzed' (Boisseau, Feltey, Flynn, Gelfand, & Triage, 2008, p. viii); to the vociferous with mothers' outbursts against the conditions their children were forced to live in; and then to blaming women for their inability to rescue those in their care from the disaster and its aftermath. Boisseau et al. (2008) noted that female medical staff 'who remained behind with patients were vilified for "murdering" the patients who did not survive' (Boisseau, et al., 2008, p. viii). For some women in New Orleans, their frustrations post-disaster led to activism and the establishment of various women's groups to improve responses and bring change (Tyler, 2007).

Clearly, the way gender is interpreted in a society determines disaster actions from risk management policy and practices through emergency management and to post-disaster recovery and reconstruction (E Enarson & Fordham, 2001; Elaine Enarson & Meyreles, 2004).

### **Women home alone: the isolation of women in the Australian bushfire context**

Gendered vulnerability in the Australian bushfire context is, perhaps, most recognisable when women are left alone or with dependents in the home (Eriksen, et al., 2010). Valent (1984) documented his personal observations in two communities over a seven week period immediately after Ash Wednesday in 1983, and wrote that people felt guilty and ashamed at not living up to roles expected of them. Many people, including women alone, thought they were going to die, and '...as fear set in among those at home, intense longing was felt for the absent protectors, which led to frantic telephone calls and more direct calls through tears and screams' (Valent, 1984, p. 293).

*In many cases women recounted they relied on the knowledge of their partners. If household members with more bushfire knowledge and experience are away at the time of the fire, women are left to face the incident not knowing what to do or how to operate equipment. (Gilbert (2004) cited in DeLaine, Probert, Pedler, Goodman, & Rowe, 2003)*

Often women were left with the sole responsibility for the family and property because socially determined roles mean that women are likely to be separated from a male in a disaster (Honeycombe, 1994; Raphael, Taylor, & McAndrew, 2008). A male partner is often fighting fires while a woman cares for dependents.

The tendency of women to evacuate with dependents may put them at greater risk according to a 2007 report which stated that most women perish while sheltering in the house or attempting to flee and that late evacuations still accounted for most deaths. The same report noted that the deaths of women from bushfires has increased over the past 30 years (Haynes, 2007, cited in DeLaine, et al., 2003).

In her consideration of female mortality in disasters worldwide, Fothergill (Fothergill, 1998) provides explanations from the literature for their higher mortality than men. Her question as to whether more women died because 'their husbands had the decision-making powers and they did not dare leave without their husband's permission' and that 'women were left responsible for property and [could have been] afraid of blame and punishment' could perhaps equally apply to the Australian bushfire context (Fothergill, 1998, p. 18).

## **Violence against women and disaster**

*There is a suggestion that the stress of disaster may lead to increased violence, making battered women greater targets than at other times. However ... it was difficult to acquire empirical data to demonstrate that this was the case, and impossible to document it. (Scanlon, 1998, p. 5)*

This was written in 1998 and a decade later, little had changed:

*...the research on woman battering in post-disaster communities is still almost non-existent. In the disaster research community, many question whether rates of woman battering increase in a disaster. Thus, although this question has been frequently asked, it remains largely unanswered. (Fothergill, 2008)*

Some researchers report that violence against women increases following disasters (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Elaine Enarson, 2000; Molin Valdés, 2009; Palinkas, Downs, Petterson, & Russell, 1993; Wilson, Phillips, & Neal, 1998) and that the evidence to support this is growing (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). While most apparent in developing countries, there appears to be increased violence against women post-disaster in industrial countries too.

A 1998 review of approximately 100 studies, situated in both developed and developing countries, addressed gender in disaster scholarship (Fothergill, 1998). The review found several studies that indicated an increase in domestic violence following disaster, along with an increase in divorce rates and child abuse (see also Dasgupta, et al., 2010). For example, after Hurricane Andrew, analysis of domestic violence helpline statistics showed a 50 per cent increase (Fothergill, 1998). There was an increase in demand for refuge accommodation, and court cases for injunctions increased by 98 per cent (Wilson, et al., 1998). In the first four months following the earthquake in Dale County, reports of domestic violence increased by 600 per cent (Wilson, et al., 1998).



A study of 77 Canadian and U.S. domestic violence programs a decade later echoed these findings, finding that violence against women increases in the period following disasters (E Enarson, 1999). Another ten years on, 46 cases of sexual assault were reported in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and over the following seven month period, sexual assault cases increased by 45 per cent. It was calculated that this represented a 95 per cent increase when factoring in the reduced population as people had left the devastated city (Austin, 2008) .

In addition to Anastario et al's (2009) findings that sexual violence increased amongst internally displaced people living in trailer parks following Hurricane Katrina, their research also found an increase in physical intimate partner violence (IPV):

*When we sub-classified physical IPV in our random sample, women showed a lifetime prevalence of 34.7% and a postdisaster rate of 7.7% in 2007, suggesting that IPV in this population is particularly high for a disaster-affected population in the United States. Such increases in our sample reflect alarmingly elevated rates of new violence, which did not settle back to baseline during the two years following displacement, escalating from a lifetime estimate of 3.1/100,000 per day to 9.4/100,000 per day in 2006 and up to 10.1/100,000 per day in 2007. (Anastario, et al., 2009, p. 22)*

In 2010, it was reported that domestic violence calls from Louisiana to the national hot line increased by 20 per cent in the first two months after the oil spill (US Gender and Disaster Resilience Alliance, 2010). In Haiti, gender based violence 'dramatically escalated' after the earthquake, with an estimated 230 rapes of women and girls in 15 of the camps in Port-au-Prince, and with *Doctors Without Borders* treating 68 rape survivors in one facility in the month of April (Bookey, 2010, pp. 7-8).

Most recently, New Zealand police reported a 53 per cent increase in callouts to domestic violence incidents over the weekend of the Canterbury earthquake on 4.9.2010 (Houghton, 2010).

Disaster research in Australia which takes a sociological perspective seems to focus on what happened to people in a literal sense; the stresses and challenges they faced; the effects in terms of finances, work, housing; the practical aspects of individual and community recovery; communications and media; and evaluation of system responses. One study following the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983 investigated the human reactions using a 'temporal' and 'biopsychosocial' frameworks (Valent, 1984). While it speaks of tensions and stressors and mentions that 'Many families, especially those in which relationships were previously strained, suffered badly, and even split up' (Valent, 1984, p. 295), it does not report on violence against women. Research into individual and community recovery from the 2003 Canberra bushfires reported on relationships with family, friends and community, and health and well-being issues, but it did not ask respondents about domestic violence or other forms of violence against women. While 22.4 per cent of the 482 respondents said the bushfire had a lasting effect for the worse on relationship with family, none spoke of domestic violence (Camilleri et al., 2007). The only reported comment that approximates this is:

*One person interviewed told of a major and rather frightening family fight about a week after the fire, which they saw as the result of the stress of the whole experience, but also said that after the fight, everyone settled back to being very close and supportive. (Camilleri, et al., 2007, p. 48)*

This kind of interpretation was predicted a decade earlier, when Bolin, et al. wrote that gender is largely absent from concepts of the family in disaster research and how, 'The only hints of postdisaster discord in families are framed as role strains, suggesting that such occurrences are out of the ordinary' (Bolin, Jackson, & Crist, 1998, pp. 32-33).

This research underscores Phillips et al's (2009) assertion that some violence, including domestic violence, is un-recognised and un-recorded in the context of disaster (B. Phillips, Jenkins, & Enarson, 2010).

### **The under-reporting of violence against women in disasters**

Any assessment of the levels of violence against women in the aftermath of disasters must begin with an understanding that violence from intimate partners and sexual violence is grossly under-reported at any time. Women's reluctance to report violence against them is a further factor compounding gender blindness in times of disaster.

*One of the characteristics of GBV [gender based violence], and in particular sexual violence, is under-reporting. Survivors/victims generally do not speak of the incident for many reasons, including self-blame, fear of reprisals, mistrust of authorities, and risk/fear of re-victimization. Acts of GBV evoke shaming and blaming, social stigma, and often rejection by the survivor/victim's family and community. Stigma and rejection can be especially severe when the survivor/ victim speaks about or reports the incident. Any available data, in any setting, about GBV reports from police, legal, health, or other sources will represent only a very small proportion of the actual number of incidents of GBV (Inter-agency standing committee, 2005, p. 4).*

Post-Hurricane Katrina, Anastario et al. (2009) made the interesting point that rates of sexual violence - based on reporting - decreased at the same time sexual violence incidents actually increased substantially (Anastario, et al., 2009, pp. 22-23). Their 2006 and 2007 pooled data showed that sexual violence increased by 27 times the pre-disaster rate in Mississippi before the disaster. They wrote:

*... the lifetime rate of reported SV [sexual violence] decreased in prevalence 8.5%. It is possible that common issues associated with violence reporting such as fear for personal safety, sensitivity to questioning, and protection of the perpetrator resulted in underreporting ...' (Anastario, et al., 2009, pp. 22-23)*

They theorise that women suffering violence from an intimate partner may seek care for the physical and mental results of the violence against them, but are unlikely to draw attention to the violence itself, thereby leading to under-reporting (Anastario, et al., 2009, p. 23).

A report from Women's eNews<sup>4</sup> on 23.9.2005 stated that despite evidence of an increase in the number of rapes following Hurricane Katrina, a lower than the usual low rate of sexual assault reporting was expected because of the 'unfathomable chaos of Hurricane Katrina', and because of computer difficulties in the police department. The evidence included witnesses who reported seeing rapes and being unable to intervene for their own safety and reports of support services turning women away because of a lack of resources. The Rev. Toby Nelson of First Presbyterian Church of Hayward in Castro Valley, California was reported as saying on 20.9.2005, 'There were so many rape victims, and we had to turn (most) of them away because they had life-damaging, but not life-threatening, wounds' (Cook Lauer, 2005, para. 17).

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<sup>4</sup> Women's eNews is a non-profit daily Internet-based news service that has operated from New York since 2000.

## Australian under reporting of violence against women

For most of the world's history it appears that 'domestic violence' has at best been ignored, and at worst upheld as a man's right to subjugate 'his' woman by whatever means were necessary. Current legislation introduced only in 2009 in Afghanistan, permits Shia men 'to deny their wives food and sustenance if they refuse to obey their husbands' sexual demands' (Boone, 2009). This individual example has its parallel at societal level in other countries, too, and throughout history. For example, in Victoria prior to 1985, it was not a criminal offence for a man to rape his wife.

In Australia, the legislation in the 21st century is ostensibly free from such gendered discrimination as it relates to violence against women. Yet, the letter of the law is not necessarily what is enacted in the judicial system, and, as stated in *Time for Action*, 'Attitudes and beliefs about gender are learned, and society often teaches deeply held sexist views'. (Flood, 1998, cited in The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, 2009).

Australian research in 2004 indicated that only 12 per cent of women report sexual violence to police, 19 per cent report physical violence, and 15 per cent report physical or sexual violence from a partner (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004, p. 102).

Of the few women who do report, even fewer make it to court or to a conviction. The lowest proportion of all principal offences proven guilty are sexual assault cases (63%), and sexual assault cases have the highest rate of case withdrawal (22%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, p. 11; see also Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2004). Lievore, in her 2005 study of prosecutorial decision making in sexual assault cases, also found a 'relatively large degree of case attrition' with 38 per cent of cases in the sample withdrawn, and only 44 per cent of cases that were prosecuted resulting in a conviction. This figure includes guilty pleas (Lievore, 2005, p. 5). Similarly, a 2007 estimate by the Australian Institute of Criminology suggested that less than 20 per cent of the sexual assaults where women do report to police are investigated and result in charges (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2007). The low level of sexual assault reporting in Australia may reflect community attitudes of women bearing the blame for such violence. Indeed, it seems that '[m]ost societies tend to blame the victim in cases of sexual violence' (Inter-agency standing committee, September, 2005, p. 4).

The under-reporting of physical violence against women, too, is apparent.

*Too often intimate partner violence is trivialised in our society as somehow being less serious than violence committed in other contexts; as a matter to be resolved in the privacy of the home [yet]... It is the leading preventable contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15–44, being responsible for more of the disease burden than many well-known risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking and obesity. (VicHealth, 2004, pp. 8, 10)*

Disaster theorists posit that whatever rate of violence against women pre-existed the disaster, it will be magnified after. Australian research showed a litany of attitudes that blamed women and excused men in violent situations. In 2009, only 53% of Australians viewed 'slapping or pushing a partner to cause harm or fear' as 'very serious' (VicHealth, 2009, p. 4) and 18 per cent 'believed that domestic violence can be excused if it results from a temporary loss of control'. Even more (22%) believed domestic violence was excusable 'if a perpetrator truly regrets what they have done' (VicHealth, 2009, p. 36).

Australians' attitudes to violence against women clearly included victim-blaming and complicity with the violent man at the time of the Black Saturday fires. In accordance with the generally accepted theory of disaster researchers, these victim-blaming, perpetrator-excusing attitudes would have increased in the aftermath of this disaster.

### **Explanations for increased violence against women**

The UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee ((2005, p. 1) noted that 'the most immediate and dangerous type of gender-based violence occurs in acute emergencies' and theorised that the increased risk emerges as personal resilience - afforded by protective structures, both individual and community - are compromised (Inter-agency standing committee, 2005).

Indeed, vulnerability in disasters is increased by a range of factors. There is psychological strain resulting from grief and loss for both women and men. A prevailing 'private domain' of domestic violence and sexual violence (Inter-agency standing committee, 2005) is compounded by empathy for the abuser and excuses of 'out of character' behaviour. This may result in under-recognition of violence against women and lack of validation by service providers.

*Natural disasters do not exist in isolation from the social and cultural constructs that marginalize women and place them at risk of violence. In fact, there is evidence that violence against women increases in the wake of colossal disasters and that the increased risk is associated with gender inequality and the limited representation of women in disaster responses. (Rees, et al., 2005, p. 1)*

Phillips et al. (2009) theorised that reasons for the apparent increase of domestic and sexual violence after disasters include threats to the male provider and protector role; loss of control; increased and possibly forced contact between the couple; and loss of options as support services for women are reduced. They wrote that, following Hurricane Katrina, some women evacuated with their violent partner to ensure the safety of their children while escaping the disaster (B. D. Phillips, Thomas, Fothergill, & Blinn-Pike, 2009, pp. 296-297). Enarson suggested that relationships are pressured; disruptions to services mean women cannot call for help or transport is reduced; and women who have violent partners are often isolated and disaster exacerbates this (Enarson, n.d., cited in Renzetti, 2002).

*Moreover, the police and other service providers are usually busy responding to other calls or emergencies that are deemed more pressing, so "domestics" become a much lower priority ... It may be possible, then, that the decline in the incidence of domestic violence reports following Sept. 11th are a combination of women simply not calling for help because they see their own "personal" problems as unimportant, and the police not responding as they had prior to Sept 11th. (Renzetti, 2002, p. 6)*

*In 2006, Enarson wrote of silent men, suicidal men, unemployed men, men feeling 'unmasked and unmanly', concluding that some will turn to some combination of drugs, alcohol and aggression, endangering those around them (Elaine Enarson, 2006, para. 4).*

It is apparent that disasters and their aftermath increase the vulnerability of people — some more than others. A 2009 literature review of the effects of relocation post-disaster on physical and mental health reported that three of the seven studies that considered gender found women to be at increased risk of adverse outcomes. Being relocated increases the burden due to 'psychological stressors, healthcare disruption, social network changes and living condition changes' (Uscher-Pines, 2009, p. 17).

In Australia, although there appear to be no published studies investigating increased rates of violence against women in the wake of a disaster, some papers mentioned the link. In 1994, Councillor Beth Honeycombe from the Burdekin Shire Council in Queensland wrote a short article on the 'Special Needs of Women in Emergency Situations' for *The Macedon Digest* where she stated, 'An increase in domestic violence is repeatedly found in post-disaster situations' (Honeycombe, 1994, p. 31)<sup>5</sup>. In the same edition, Narelle Dobson's presentation to the *Women in Emergencies and Disasters Symposium* in March 1992 is reproduced. Dobson reflects on the period following the 1990 Charleville flood and her role in the recovery as a social worker<sup>6</sup>. She noted that in the wake of the flood:

*Human relations were laid bare and the strengths and weaknesses in relationships came more sharply into focus. Thus, socially isolated women became more isolated, domestic violence increased, and the core of relationships with family, friends and spouses were exposed. (Dobson, 1994, p. 11)*

Threats to women's safety extend beyond the direct impact of the disaster to 'vulnerability to unchecked male violence and aggression' (Williams, 1994, p. 34). Where researchers have noted the link between disaster and increased violence against women (E Enarson, 1998; Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008; Fothergill, 1998; Jenkins & Phillips, 2008; Morrow, 1999; Palinkas, et al., 1993), they hypothesise that this increase is due to a number of factors including heightened stress, alcohol abuse, and lapses in constraints to behaviour offered by legal and societal expectations (Bradshaw, 2004, cited in Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008; Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007). After floods in Queensland, Dobson wrote, 'It was as if the balancing influences were removed and life became very raw and stark' (Dobson, 1994, p. 11). Homelessness and changed living circumstances would be another factor (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). Enarson and Phillips wrote that from Peru to Alaska, men cope through alcohol abuse and aggression (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008, p. 51). Austin (2008) observed that disasters temporarily remove the societal institutions that regulate masculinity.

*I argue that a form of hyper-masculinity emerges from the stress and loss, which can lead to increased levels of violence and discord in heterosexual relationships. Men are likely to have a feeling of inadequacy because they are unable to live up to the expectations of their socially-constructed gender role ... The presence of these conditions unfortunately influence higher numbers of partnered, heterosexual men to act in violent and abusive ways toward the women in their lives. (Austin, 31.7.2008)*

This accompanies a community attitude that excuses such violence. In a 2006 report on Australian attitudes to violence against women, a large proportion of the community believed that 'domestic violence can be excused if it results from temporary anger or results in genuine regret' (Taylor & Mouzos, 2006) Such violence may even be seen as legitimate, and excused because this is 'the way men behave' (Atkinson, 2002, p. 4). Violent men often use situational factors to excuse their violence, and their experience of disaster may be perceived by themselves and others as reason enough for 'losing control' (Fothergill, 2008). Indeed, it seems this violent behaviour is excused by embedded cultural and economic factors too:

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<sup>5</sup> Although Honeycombe has been cited by Fothergill (2008, p. 133), Honeycombe's article is not based on original research, but draws on two Queensland based research projects which appear to be unpublished. They are: Parmenter, V (1992) *The Special Needs of Women in Disaster Situations* and Butterworth, Eric, et al. (1989) *The Effects of Cyclone Aivu on the Burdekin Shire: Interim report*. Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland.

<sup>6</sup> Also quoted by Fothergill (1998, p. 20).



*In every country where violence against women is high, cultural and economic factors play a critical role in promoting and condoning violence as a legitimate way to resolve conflict. (AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness, 2008)*

Women who have suffered violence from their partner before a disaster may experience increased violence in the aftermath and other women may experience it as a new event or pattern following a disaster. In disaster situations, domestic violence may well be buried even further beneath public consciousness, as attention is focussed elsewhere. The women and children subjected to this abuse 'suffer doubly when large-scale catastrophes strike - even as large numbers of volunteers turn out to respond, donors overwhelm local communities, and people open their hearts to those in need' (Jenkins & Phillips, 2008, p. 49).

The way communities respond, and whether disaster recovery is set up to recognise and address violence against women, seem to depend on how well it was done before the disaster (Fothergill, 2008). If violence against women was recognised as a problem before the disaster, it was more likely to be part of the recovery strategy. At worker level, too, how individuals perceived violence against women before predicted their recognition and response to it in the aftermath (Wilson, et al., 1998). It may also be influenced by specific programs established to counter the increase of violence after a disaster. Following Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua, a 1999 multimedia campaign was promoted with the slogan, 'Violence against women: a disaster that men can avoid'. It was aimed at men living in areas most affected by the disaster and used billboards, radio and television along with a series of workshops to convey the message that men could 'unlearn machismo' (Welsh, 2001).

Interestingly, disasters can offer women new options in leaving a violent partner. Women were afforded these opportunities though new confidence in their own ability brought about by the way they coped with the disaster (Fothergill, 2008) or new roles in recovery efforts within the community; or by using grants or insurance payouts to leave (Fothergill, 1998; Jenkins & Phillips, 2008).

*Disasters can provide, both financially and psychologically, an opportunity to leave an abusive relationship. (Fothergill, 2008, p. 151)*

Indeed, disasters can be a force for social change for the better (Dasgupta, et al., 2010; Quarantelli, 1994).

*.. we would do better by using the semi-Darwinian model of evolutionary change. It would force us to consider the more positive effects of disasters (all but impossible to consider in a social problem context that focuses on the negative). We would necessarily need to think about and look at both the functional and dysfunctional aspects if we see disasters as part of the evolution of social systems. (Quarantelli, 1994, p. 13)*

## **Women in disaster management**

There is a perception amongst emergency managers that women are less competent than men after a disaster (Scanlon, 1996). Scanlon identifies three persistent disaster myths: that people panic, that victims are likely to be confused and unable to care for themselves, and that looting follows. He suggests that emergency personnel generally attribute greater panic and confusion to women than men and that this is unfounded. He points to early academic writings to show that this idea was promulgated by 'the first scholar in the field of Sociology of Disaster, Samuel Henry Prince' who wrote about the 1917 Halifax explosion which killed 2,000 and injured 9,000 people.

*'His most-quoted source was an unpublished manuscript by his friend, Dwight Johnstone. Johnstone provides examples of women staying on the job despite the risk, and women taking part in the post-impact response. He also provides examples of men and women fleeing when there were rumours of a second explosion. Prince quotes Johnstone extensively but omits all the positive references to women and the negative references to men.'* (Scanlon, 1996, p. 4)

Scanlon writes that it is essential for women to become involved in local level politics to effect change. Such roles inevitably mean some level of decision-making power in disaster response which, hopefully, would not assume the same kind of gendered assumptions that have characterised much post-disaster response.

Recognition of gendered vulnerability can improve disaster planning and response and reduce their adverse economic and social effects (B. Phillips, et al., 2009; Williams, 1994), particularly when each step in recovery addresses the inherent power structures at play in the community (E Enarson & Fordham, 2001).

*Indeed, we have seen women lead some of the nation's most effective recovery organizations, but have even more frequently seen their contributions thwarted.* (Krajeski & Peterson, 2008, p. 207)

It seems that women are essential to volunteer and professional organisations but are not in positions of power (B. D. Phillips & Morrow, 2008). There is evidence of ongoing inequity (Garcia, 2005) and situations where men predominantly take charge of disaster management 'systematically excluding women, their needs, competences and experiences from contributing to these efforts' (Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007, p. 12).

In Australia:

*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)

The public/private dichotomy of men's and women's work was echoed after the Charleville floods in Queensland, where 'the most public aspects of the clean-up were a male affair' and the emergency services - including police and the military - were mostly men (Dobson, 1994, p. 12). Women's recovery work was far less visible and usually contained within households (Dobson, 1994). The concept of keeping the family unit together is not recognised, nor is the responsibility for its emotional, spiritual and physical well-being (Honeycombe, 1994). The heroes were public and they were male, and this portrayal has been challenged as misleading (Fuller, 1994). As Dobson stated:

*I believe that there were many heroines among the women who held their families together, who carved out a home from the mire, and continued to contribute through their community and professional work.* (Dobson, 1994, p. 13)

In addressing the male domination of disaster planning, Fuller identified the need to increase the number of women involved at all levels, and further, that some form of affirmative action be taken to achieve this. In her 1993 paper on outcomes from the Symposium on Women and Disasters in Queensland, Fuller reported:



*It was considered that the traditional route of promotion of operational through to management was neither necessary nor always appropriate. Women with necessary skills should be able to be employed at senior levels without specific operational experience. (Fuller, 1994, p. 26)*

## **Research gap in disaster and gender**

*The implicit grounding of disaster theory in men's lives affords a partial view which must be challenged through a woman-focused gender analysis. (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008, p. 41)*

Internationally, the literature has only emerged since the late 1990s. In 1994, Quarantelli (1994) included gender as one of a number of disaster phenomena that warrant researchers' attention, and the early forays into disaster and gender scholarship were forged in 1998 by key researcher, Elaine Enarson (Elaine Enarson & Morrow, 1998) and her colleagues (Bolin, et al., 1998; Domeisen, 1998; Fothergill, 1998). Yet, ten years on, Fordham (2008) wrote that this body of research was still small and mostly located within 'Third World' studies.

Internationally, Neumayera and Plümperb (2007, p. 4) claimed that their research report was 'the first systematic, quantitative analysis of gender differences in natural disaster mortality'. They described it as addressing 'one important, yet hitherto relatively neglected aspect' of disaster scholarship (Neumayera & Plümperb, 2007, p. 2). Likewise, Anastario, et al. writing in 2009 about Hurricane Katrina, claimed 'the first evidence-based study to show an increase in rates of GBV [gender based violence] in a population of women displaced by a disaster' (Anastario, et al., 2009, p. 22).

Gender and disaster researchers lament both the scarcity of research on gendered patterns of decision-making, and the absence of women's voices from the discourse (Elaine Enarson & Phillips, 2008).

*Feminists have argued that women's meanings and experiences have been epistemologically excluded in mainstream literature and a search of disaster literature confirms this claim ... Disasters have, in the main, been represented as gender-neutral and women have been portrayed rarely and negatively. (Finlay, 1998, pp. 143, 149)*

Yet, disaster researchers point to the learnings that can be gained by hearing from women and their significance to disaster response.

*We show that by listening to the voices of victims in post-disaster contexts, new insights can be gleaned as to how to make all women safer during disasters. (Jenkins & Phillips, 2008, p. 49)*

In Australia too, there is very little research into gender and disaster and the specific vulnerability of women in this country (DeLaine, et al., 2003; Williams, 1994) despite the fact that Australians have a one in six estimated lifetime exposure to natural disaster (Caruana, 2009). Several Australian researchers have called for more research into disaster that considers social and gendered aspects. One specifically emphasised the need for qualitative research and wrote about the potentially significant role that women could play in disaster preparedness and response if more was known about how everyone in the community is affected by disaster (Williams, 1994). Another (Proudley, 2008) pointed to the lack of research into the role of women in bushfires, the impact of disaster on families, and how decisions are made in emergency situations.

In 1992, Australian researchers were encouraged to look at post-disaster stress in the context of both the individual and the family (Gordon, 1992, p. 15). Few had responded to this call by 2009,

when Caruana (2009) wrote that despite a vast literature on the psychosocial effect of disasters on individuals, little was known about the effect on families. Even more broadly, some advocated engaging whole communities in reflecting on their disaster experience, due to its therapeutic value as well as adding to the research base (Camilleri, et al., 2007).

Despite these calls since the 1990s, there appears to be very little existing literature in Australia that considers the gendered aspects of disaster. While two studies involved interviews with women about social and health aspects of their disaster experiences (Finlay, 1998; Wallace, 1983), the question of whether violence against women increases in the wake of a disaster in Australia appears not to have been addressed in any published research to date.

Yet, clearly, implications of gender infiltrate every aspect of disaster experience. Gender focussed research is a pre-requisite to moving beyond the one-world view that has too often characterised disaster research.

Along with a gender focus, internationally, disaster researchers are urged to look beyond the negative aspects of disaster, which often dominate the discourse, to consider their positive effects, suggesting they contribute to the way society evolves (Quarantelli, 1994). Picking up on this, Dasgupta wrote, 'It is important to understand that women are not only victims of chance, but also agents of change' (Dasgupta, et al., 2010, p. 5).

## **Conclusion**

Internationally, women are at greater risk of mortality in a disaster, and increased violence against women is characteristic of a post-disaster recovery. While there is a growing body of evidence into gender and disaster, there appears to be little gendered Australian research, and no published research to date on the link between disaster and violence against women in Australia.

Violence against women, particularly within the private domain, has been a taboo subject, despite work in recent decades to address this issue. It seems that this lack of recognition may be taken to a new level in a post-disaster context where stress levels are high, perpetrators may have been 'heroes' in the fires, and where men are often unemployed and sometimes suicidal. The resources of support services are over-burdened with primary and fire-related needs in the aftermath of a disaster and this serves to exacerbate a willingness to overlook violence against women.

Data from the research on 'Women's experience in the aftermath of the Black Saturday Bushfires' will be analysed with a view to drawing on these theories.

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# The way he tells it

Relationships after Black Saturday

Vol. 3 The Landscape of my soul — Women's Accounts





**WOMEN'S HEALTH**  
GOULBURN NORTH EAST  
*challenging inequity, embracing diversity*

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. PO Box 853, Wangaratta, Victoria, 3677.

Phone: 03 5722 3009 Fax: 03 5722 3020

[whealth@whealth.com.au](mailto:whealth@whealth.com.au)

[www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au)

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Written by Debra Parkinson, and based on interviews by Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara from 2009 to 2011.

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## Introduction

You never get the forest you just live amongst the trees. (Beth)

Each of the 29 women who participated in this research is living amongst the trees. Each faces the challenge of every new day, seen through the prism of 9th February 2009. Together, their unique experiences, so richly described, begin to expose the forest.

Our common aim, as research participants and researchers, is to throw some light on what happens to women during a disaster and in its aftermath in Australia. The personal is, indeed, political. Each woman's story of individual struggle is much more than that — their circumstances dictated to a large degree by the expectations society has of men and women.

This report differs from most, perhaps, in its immersion in relationships. We begin with recollections of the 7th February, 2009 - the day that began a never-ending journey for those involved. The women's words give a sense of the labyrinth of relationships underlying events and emotions. Our focus then moves explicitly to the effect of the day and its aftermath on those relationships.

The research of WHGNE seeks primarily to hear the voices of women and the style of this report foregrounds the women's words. They speak forthrightly and eloquently, calling for little interpretation.

Our interviews were held in the months around the second anniversary of Black Saturday. The grief of bushfire survivors was palpable two years on, and it was grief for a bigger loss — when everything changed instantly and permanently. One woman said, 'They'll have an event, and they'll remember those who are dead, but they won't profile the bigger loss'. A recovering landscape with sprouting trees and new houses won't eradicate a changed sense of self — personally and professionally.

'The Landscape of My Soul' is a line from Dr Kim Jeff that eloquently captures what women describe in this report. It will always be a changed landscape for survivors of Black Saturday.

## Experiences of Black Saturday

### The scene

*It went pitch black, everywhere you looked there were flames, and I said, 'This is what hell would be like'. (Gaye)*

*It just went dark, really dark and the noise, it sounded like a jumbo was landing on you. (Rosie)*

*If you've ever been to a war zone you'd understand what it was like. Not just the mental and chaotic energy of everybody, but you're driving along and there's powerlines down everywhere, trees everywhere, people, so many cars just banged into trees, another car banged into that car, a car up a ditch—most of them still had bodies in them—people were having accidents in places where you'd think, 'How did they have an accident?'. They're five feet from a house and six cars all banged into each other all burnt, and bodies, and you think, 'There's a house there'. And then you know why, because you couldn't find your house which was two feet away ... and that was the scene all the way into Kinglake. And then you get into Kinglake and it was crazy town, just crazy ... The chaos in town of course was like what you'd see in people fleeing wars, not just sitting quietly in refugee camps, but running away from the war with bombs going off behind them. It had that kind of feeling about it. (Michelle)*

*It was chaotic. I saw a guy run a cop over because he was trying to get through, and they wouldn't let him through. The cop was all right. You know, he reversed up and then just floored it. The cop stood up again. We left not long after. It was just madness. (Tess)*

One woman spoke of carrying her camera tucked into her bra strap so she could take photographs every few minutes. She felt the need to document her extraordinary experience because she didn't think anyone would believe her. She was not alone. Many spoke of disbelief at the enormity of the fire and tragically bizarre sights — flames like skyscrapers, familiar neighbourhoods destroyed in minutes, bonfires everywhere, neighbours' houses literally exploding, blueberry orchards alight, birds dropping from the sky. And tragic sounds.

*I reckon it was going to 38,000 feet—this huge cloud, literally you're a small person and the cloud's just going like this over you and you can see flames up into it, and then gradually of course you start to hear explosions and you hear that sound of the train ... we can hear our neighbours screaming. It's just terrible. (Michelle)*

*You didn't know what was going on with your neighbours ... you could hear them yelling, you knew while they were yelling they were alive, but this massive old gum tree not far from the bloody house exploded, and I'm thinking how the hell are they going to bloody save themselves in there? (Gaye)*

Women who left in convoys spoke of enduring regret at not being able to stop for people walking at the side of the road fighting smoke and falling embers. The bumper to bumper traffic had to forge on as one with the firestorm close behind. One car stopping would endanger all behind. Such logic, however, barely dents the anguish of driving past adults and children, unable to help.

*You've got to flee. And we see people — their car has broken down on the side of the road and you just feel, 'Oh, should we stop? No-one is stopping and we have to keep going in the traffic and what's going to happen to them?' You could see from the side there was fires and smoke and flame and it was dark. (Jenny)*

The drive out was fraught with times of zero visibility — smoke so thick that women spoke of driving by memory. Or terrifying visibility — enormous fireballs catching up in the rear vision mirror. Blocked roads forced some of the women to take roads they knew to be dangerous at the best of times — winding, flanked by sheer drops or solid bush. And Black Saturday was the worst of times. Powerlines were down, trees on fire, cars forced to drive over burning logs, sometimes overheating and sometimes, too, low on petrol.

*It was like an atomic bomb had gone off here. The clouds were like orange mushroom formations and it was getting lower by the minute. (Annie)*

*I'm in a Commodore and it was overheating because I was driving over burning logs and burning both sides of the road and the alarm was going off saying, 'Engine hot, engine hot'. 'Oh, shit, I hope it doesn't burst into flames.' (Rosie)*

The immense loss of wildlife meant the next day was silent, and absence of traffic intensified the isolation. Venturing out, survivors faced another dimension of trauma as they viewed evidence of the death and destruction wrought by the fire.

*On the Sunday morning we drove up into Kinglake to see. It was like a set of where a nuclear war happened, you couldn't believe what you were seeing. (Rosie)*

*It was terrible. There were horses stuck on fences, there were animals over the road, there were people in the cars, there were houses upon houses upon houses that we knew, friends. We recognised cars from friends who had crashed and didn't know whether they were alive or dead. (Annie)*

*What he saw made him throw up. (Jenny)*

## Normality

Equally disconcerting was the abrupt thrust back into normality. One woman called it 'mind-blowing'. Another, 'alien'. One woman's son described it as going through a doorway into a different world, like Alice in Wonderland. Normality confronted survivors once they stepped out of the car into the main streets of unaffected towns, or into shopping centres. The normality was stifling and bewildering, causing them to want to flee yet again.

*It just seemed we'd gone from this hell and chaos to suddenly having this order, perfect climate controlled, everything. It was weird. (Jenny)*

*The family [my son] was with tried to distract him and they took him to Bunnings just to do something, and he said he felt like screaming at people, 'Don't you know what's happening? Why are you behaving so normally?'* (Kate)

Some carried with them the evidence of their traumatic survival.

*He got to Greensborough blackened, blood over his shirt, with my two dogs with nothing to hold onto them, and went [to go into the] shopping centre and the security guards told him to go away. (Erica)*

## Surreal Images

*All of a sudden I saw a rabbit go from a burning pile of something in our yard—our wood heap—and it was on fire, the poor bloody little rabbit was on fire, squealing, and as it shot off and went into the paddock the rabbit caught the paddock on fire. The fire was going anyway in the paddock, but the rabbit just ignited it where this mare and foal was. (Andrea)*

*We got to Yea and it was like entering the twilight zone. People had already set up on the nature strips, there were horses, animals, cows, dogs, sheep, goats, cars were a kilometre down the road queued up for fuel, the Red Cross was set up—how they knew I've got no idea—it was just like walking into the twilight zone. (Annie)*

*We were watching the firies lifting up the power lines so buses and ambulances and things could go under and it was strange, there was one little kid on the first bus who waved at us so we waved back, and then everybody in every seat on the bus, and the next, waved at us. They were all waving, it was just incredible. (Kate)*

## Deciding to stay or go

Australia has had a bushfire preparation policy of 'stay and defend or leave early' for decades (Haynes, et al., 2008). It was well researched, based on evidence. Black Saturday changed our understanding of bushfires. Its rage was impenetrable. Those who had a firm fire plan and were exceptionally well prepared to stay and defend, and with decades of experience of living in fire prone areas, reflected on their confidence, which was never meant for a fire with the ferocity of the Black Saturday bushfire.

*I was quite confident, almost cocky. We were prepared, but I never thought... (Michelle)*

One participant experienced Ash Wednesday as a child, and was urged to leave early by her mother. Others wanted their children out early. For those who did not evacuate early, decisions to stay or go on Black Saturday were made in the context of little or no formal information. They were made by intuition, or through fear,

*I started to feel panicky ... so I ran up and got my stuff in the car and tried to get the dog, and then I just left. There was nothing to say what was happening but there was something that was just wrong. (Sonia)*

*A lot of that is my instinct that I have warnings about certain things and I have for years ... I feel the vibrations, that's how I connect with everything, it's all vibrational. Yes, and tone. (Andrea)*

For many who left, the impetus often came when the power went off — and the phones with it. And for some, the incentive was more direct — they could see flames.

*All of a sudden that wind change had happened and black smoke just came rolling down our hill ... and at that point it was full on 'go', you know, the adrenalin kicked in. He screamed at me and he said, because the car was packed, the dog was in there, he said, 'You get the fuck out of here'. I said 'Not without you'. (Jenny)*

Or for people who understood something about the fire fighting system, the trigger was almost like code.

*Nobody knew [the extent of the bushfires but] when he'd said to me that Edward had to leave the tower, that's when I knew, 'Shit, we've got to go'. (Holly)*

A common reason to stay was fear of inadvertently driving into the fire.

*I drove up to the corner to see what was going on and the fireball was coming this way and exploding. (Di)*

*I said, 'I'm just going to get the kids and get out of here'. He said, 'Where are you going to go?' Good point. We didn't know which way to go. ... We heard there were fires [in all directions] so really there was nowhere left to drive. (Madeline)*

*'We'll stay and defend the house'. That had always been our plan [but] I had this flee instinct, and said, 'Maybe I'll take the kids and we'll go', and we both looked at each other and thought, 'No, it's too late'. (Ruth)*

## Wrong information or no information

The women lamented the absence of official warnings about the approaching bushfires. Most turned to the radio or the internet, in particular, ABC radio and the CFA website, only to find no current or accurate information. Even when the information was correct, it was posted or broadcast too late to be of use. Power outages forced reliance on batteries or car radios and ipods.

*We had been listening to the internet and radio and, truth is, everything we heard was the wrong information. (Celia)*

*The CFA didn't seem to know anything about it. (Sally)*

*There is nothing on the CFA website except that there is a spot fire down at [one road], so I thought, 'What is [he] going on about? Maybe he is just overreacting'. (Karen)*

*As we know when it was going over our heads the radio said it was still in Kilmore. (Sally)*

*The media didn't know what was going on. We were getting calls from our friends saying Marysville was gone. We knew before the ABC even said it was under threat. (Vicki)*

*We got home, checked the internet, and it didn't seem too big, bad or monstrous, and we thought it was a fair way away. And during the afternoon we could see the smoke and we were wondering how close it was, but the updates weren't there. (Kate)*

*I jumped in my car and I still could not acknowledge what was happening because the website said it was in Wallan and I was stupid, relying on that and relying on the radio. Surely if there was anything in our area, surely there'd be something on the radio. Surely they'd come around with the siren ringing like they did in 2006. (Andrea)*

*The first idea that we got that we might be under threat was my son's then girlfriend ... rang screaming over the phone, 'Get out, get out, it's coming, it's coming, we've got to get out' and we're going, 'What are you talking about, we haven't heard anything to back this up' and the power was still on so we checked the CFA website and there was nothing on that, nothing to be concerned, but within only 10 minutes we started to realise that the smoke was coming this way and it was starting to get darker and then the power went off and I thought, 'Oh, this can't be good'. (Rosie)*

*[My husband] was on the couch watching videos and I said, 'Oh shit. [A friend] has just lost his property.' I googled it and mapped it ... I kept getting on and seeing what was happening. All of a sudden, it said, '[One road], small but safe, [another road]— small safe'. I thought, 'This is really weird. How can you have a small safe fire in this type of weather?' (Libby)*

*You're listening to the radio going, 'Oh, it's at Wallan, it's at here, it's at there', and then all of a sudden they were saying, 'The fire's at Whittlesea, the fire's at Strathewen' and you think, 'Shit!' ... And then you're hearing reports of more people being killed and the news is becoming more chaotic. (Michelle)*

It seemed that even police, fire-fighters and other emergency service workers were not informed, and were not in place to assist people trying to escape the fire.

*People were just then starting to realise — including our police and our CFA — the trucks had been sent off the mountain, so they weren't even informed of any impending danger until it was on the doorstep. (Rosie)*

*There were other tourists standing in the middle of the road when I was leaving, looking at the smoke coming, just standing there, and there were no cars driving around, no police, no SES, there was no one. It was dead, it was like a ghost town. (Shelly)*

In some cases, warnings did get through, via DSE or fire brigade workers phoning or calling into properties. Others were able to access expert information through social connections workers. One woman's neighbour was a fire ranger who showed them a map and suggested they had about two hours and should go. Another had a sister in the CFA command centre. Sometimes, friends and neighbours living far away heard, before the locals, of the approach of the fire and its ferocity. One had access to a scanner and phoned to warn her daughter. Another's neighbour had a 'mate from the CFA who radioed through the CB'.

*All our news was coming from people that we knew in the community, people ringing [our workplace], friends of friends ringing in. (Shelly)*

Ultimately, subsequent decisions were made on the run, taking any option, as roads were blocked or cars stalled.

*So the kids saw the fire coming down the hill in Yarra Glen, and with no direction from the police—they just said, 'Turn around and head back'—we turned around and headed back. I stopped at the intersection heading back to Kinglake and a few people pulled over as well and said, 'Where do we go, what do we do?' So I rang some friends in Healesville and they said, 'You can't get through, the road's blocked'. I couldn't get through to my husband and so I went back towards Kinglake and didn't make it into Kinglake. (Erica)*



## Relief camps

When women made it to relief camps, sometimes with children, sometimes with partners and sometimes alone, they found another version of chaos. Relief workers were coping with people needing food, water, bedding and shelter, as well as medical supplies and access to toilets. The Red Cross centre was initially established to feed the fire-fighters and had, suddenly, a more urgent and unanticipated influx. The CFA, too, found their task had expanded. The scenes were of unreality and distress. People were in shock, often separated from family, seeking safety, and news of loved ones.

*We went down to the CFA building where they were just out on their feet, they had no idea where the fire was, what had happened, what day of the week it was. (Carla)*

Outside these more public settings, people did what they could to help, and survivors of the fires found the normal rules no longer applied.

*I got stuck in Yea, so I stayed in the caravan park with these complete strangers, who ... fed us that night. The next morning I went to the supermarket, I said I'd go and get some food and I left my eldest with them. I mean I don't even know them from a bar of soap but I just left him and took the young one with me. (Erica)*

## Finding out what happened

Women spoke of listening to the radio and turning to newspapers to understand what had happened.

*[My friend's] pager constantly went off, 'Mother, two kids, trapped in home.' All these addresses — we knew where all these people lived. 'Elderly lady, looking after grand kids trapped in home.' 'This person trapped, can't get out. Needs assistance.' But there's no one up there to help. The last pager came through at 5.30 that morning. (Libby)*

*We didn't know what had happened. Everybody else sees it on TV ... You don't know when you're in it, you just live through it. (Jenny)*

Having physically endured Black Saturday, the days and weeks that followed were characterised by seeking out friends, family and neighbours - telling and hearing of tragic deaths and of survival.

*People just 'metted and greeted' and told stories, and we grieved because by now we heard about people that had died. We were trying to put families together and connect people. (Annie)*

*Afterwards there was no power, you couldn't get around easily, you were in daze and in complete shock finding out every hour of the day about other people who had died, who couldn't be found. (Yvette)*

*People died. And every day was a new revelation of people who had died. (Di)*

*Just trying to find friends and what had happened to people. That still goes on. I heard only six or seven months ago [about an acquaintance] I wondered about him and thought he'll be fine, as you do [but he] and his partner died ... 15 months on you still hear of people. The one thing I will never forget is ... an old guy [who] was frantic showing a picture around of his friend that he couldn't contact and he, like, rushed up to me and was going, 'Have you seen this lady?' and was saying her name and I'm like, 'I'm really sorry but I haven't' ... I'm just always wondering whether he found her or not. (Sally)*

Indeed, hearing the stories was both a burden and a celebration.

*My experience is that everybody just wanted to greet you, nobody could take on any more stories, they'd had enough of their own. You know, 'G'day but don't tell me really'. (Beth)*

### **Relying on mobile phone technology**

Mobile phones provided an essential, though unreliable, communication method when landlines were not available or the power was down. Many women sent and received texts and calls warning of threats, passing on advice, and checking on each others' safety. The capricious nature of mobile phones in mountainous areas was frustrating as the signal came in and out. Battery levels, too, depleted and lack of power meant it was difficult to charge them. For some, the incoming texts and missed calls were another source of stress.

*You can't get onto 000 or anyone, and we lost our towers so we lost our phone. Over the next few hours we could get texts through but that was about it. (Sally)*

*I could get range on the mobile but then there was no power and I had 246 missed calls and messages from people. In a way you could say it was wonderful that people would care but it was an absolute problem and even when I texted to say I'm ok, they would text back and say, 'Where are you?' and they couldn't get that it was limited. I charged it at the generator at the [store] but the system was overloaded. (Sonia)*

*The mobile networks were jamming so we were not getting much reception. Every now and again when we did the frantic messages and phone calls were crazy. (Rosie)*

After the terror had passed, women spoke of texting or phoning friends and family and at times, having to drive to get reception or to recharge batteries in order to do so.

*On the Saturday the fire came through, and on the Sunday I went through my mobile phone text messaging every single person I knew who lived up here ... to see if they were okay. (Annie)*

*One of my main concerns was to try and contact our son ... we had to drive until we got the signal on the mobile because that was the only communication. (Kate)*

## Unexpected masculine behaviours

Some women spoke of being shocked by their partner's response in the life threatening Black Saturday fires. Some were frustrated by their partner's inaction during the fires and annoyed by the need to take action themselves. Perhaps this annoyance springs from the reality that it is generally women who do the double shift of paid work and unpaid home and caring work in the subconscious belief that in such dangerous circumstances, they will be looked after by the man in their lives.

*I don't know what the hell he was doing, but he wasn't bloody doing anything. So I'm up there with the dogs and he came back and he hadn't got any water, he hadn't done anything ... In the end, I got sick of it and said, 'Well I'll go', so that's what I did ... He should have gone out there, but I don't think he had the guts to be honest with you. (Gaye)*

One woman had a brace following a major operation and was not meant to lift, yet was left to prepare for the fire with her son. She described her husband leaving their property to drive off the mountain even though the fire threat was high and she and her son were left alone to fight the fire.

*My husband ... decided to go [off the mountain to his workplace] probably around two o'clock in the afternoon. He and my youngest son went to go down but they were turned back at a roadblock, so my husband found another way down. My son was there saying, 'We've got to go home, there's a fire coming. We've got to be with Mum and help' ... I don't know why, but he just did a whole lot of unnecessary stuff and [then] couldn't get back up any way he tried ... Apparently he got my son to drive him across as far as Yarra Glen and back with the fire on both sides of the car and things like this ... they were avoiding roadblocks, going around back ways to go down ... Apparently the car was coughing and spluttering because it couldn't get enough air ... He came in the driveway tooting the horn ... and I'm, 'No' because ... if he didn't leave in the first place... (Kate)*

Some of the women told how their husbands denied that there was any danger, and drove away from the family homes despite pleas for them to stay. The women faced accusations that they were over-reacting in asking for men to stay home, or prepare fire fighting clothes and equipment, and one drove alone to get petrol for the fire pump.

*We were together, my sister was there, I called him all day and asked him to come home and he's like, 'Don't be silly' ... He made it home I think 10 minutes before they actually shut the road. (Sally)*

*He said, 'You're being stupid' and I said, 'Okay, could you just get [the pump] out?' I'm not an alarmist person, I drive on empty cos I kind of like the thrill of will I make it or won't I, I'm not a very cautious person [but] I had everything ready and he was a bit, 'Oh you're being this, you're being that' ... I said, 'Go to the front gate, have your wallet ready, leave it open, I haven't got time to jump out' because of the dogs, you know ... 'You leave the gate open for me, I'm going to the garage', and he was standing at the front gate with it shut, just standing, and he was like he had no input from anything, it was like he was frozen or something. And I swore at him, and I think I said, 'Is there something fucking wrong with you?' which was really cruel I know but I had to snap him out of it. (Andrea)*

Another woman recounted that her partner took her young son (his step son) with him in his car — without her knowledge or permission - as he drove back up the mountain and into the fires.

*Poor Tom (not real name) still can't go in a car that hasn't got a lot of petrol in it cos he freaked out on the day. He thought [they] was going to run out of fuel ... And at the same*

*time, that's what gets me, it's not the fact that they literally nearly died three or four times just by getting caught up in stuff and making split second decisions, it's the fact that he didn't even have to go there and didn't have to do it that makes me cross ... They tried to save a few people and couldn't, and they pulled over and tried to get a guy out of his car but they couldn't, it exploded and caught on fire, and it was all a bit traumatic. (Angela)*

The most astounding incident was where a man saved himself first, then his two small children, leaving his wife and step-children unprotected in a life threatening situation, escaping with fire on both sides of the road and falling embers.

*I'm looking at this man and going, 'You shoved us in the back [of the utility]?' ... He was inside ... he put himself before the kids and that's what got me ... I said to him recently when things blew up, I said, 'Mate, you could have stuck all four of those kids in the front... and you should have got on the back with me ... He used to often say that he would be good in an emergency ... it went to this look in his face like, 'You don't count as much as me'. (Sally)*

### **Meeting expectations of masculinity**

Some women described the protective measures taken by their partners, from guiding and monitoring women in the house while frantically putting out fires outside to shielding them from seeing bodies or witnessing other distressing scenes. Sometimes it was weeks or months before the men even told their partners about the anguish of what they had seen. Sometimes circumstances or their role as fire-fighters meant men were prevented from being with their families.

*[He has] a lot of guilt that he wasn't there helping me that day. He's taken it pretty hard that they couldn't do anything that day. He couldn't do anything because of the enormity of the fire. (Holly)*

One woman was amazed at her husband's ability to think fast and plan with uncanny awareness of what would be needed. He prepared the property so they could leave, packed the chainsaw and locked up in case of looters. In contrast, she spoke about her own panic, her ability to think clouded by urgency. The next day he organised with other men to go back and check on the property and neighbours.

*I'm wandering up and down the house, it's only a very small house, thinking, 'What to take, what to take, what do I take?' So he came in every now and again and gave me directions, 'Pack an esky, put the bottles of water in the fridge, take what's important to you'. (Jenny)*

Another woman told how her husband worked 'madly' to save the property, interrupting his staggering efforts in moving cattle and putting out spot fires in choking, blinding smoke, to come back to house to reassure and advise her and the others sheltering there. A third woman compared the striking difference in her reaction to her husband's. She said he had obsessively prepared the south-east of their property, where she had been convinced the fire would approach from the south-west. After clearing and moving, he came inside. The fire did come from the south-east and 'jumped the house', as he had anticipated.

*He went out to just fight the fire, like there were trees near the house, to put them out, and I was just frozen. I sat in my chair like a dog in a car watching him, just expecting him to drop dead from the smoke or be burnt and I was just frozen, I couldn't do anything other than just go from room to room and watch him. (Michelle)*

Another couple saved their house and family through working as a team, with the woman working on the inside of the house, and her husband facing the flames, embers and smoke on the outside. After fighting for 'such a long time', at one stage, he came into the house saying he could not do it anymore. She said she forced him back, citing their small grandchild on the couch inside. The selflessness of his actions is remarkable.

## Women alone

Table 2 shows that 13 women were left alone to care for children and bring them to safety. Even when men were physically present, sometimes women were alone with this responsibility.

*When the car stalled, he just collapsed. He got out of the car and sort of went into the fetal position ... I just looked at him and I said, 'We've got four kids, we don't have time for this, get up'... I had one kid not breathing properly and his sister was trying to take care of him and she had broken her collar bone and I don't know whether she reinjured it by carrying him. My husband ... was just in too much shock or whatever...then he just went total into like he was in control and knows better and went in the lead and actually didn't see anything else happening around him... He didn't see that Jamie (not real name) wasn't breathing. He didn't compute at all, but he had to be in the lead and about fifty paces ahead of everyone. (Sally)*

Often, women drove out of the fire alone.

*I'm driving about 30km an hour because you can't see, I've got the pup, four gallons of water and a woollen blanket and [my husband] had said, 'Now if you get in a wall of flames on the road drive through the bush'! (Beth)*

Even when not forced into fight or flight, women alone were vigilant and frightened of what was to come, acutely aware of their responsibility to protect their children's young lives. One woman told of a friend who hitched the caravan to the car and put the children to sleep in the caravan then sat up all night watching. Another had her water tanker filled and attached to her 4WD facing out from the carport, with the keys in the ignition from the start of February.

Women whose husbands or partners worked for council or emergency services were definitely on their own as these services struggled to cope.

*Some women felt quite betrayed with their husbands off helping other people. Not one person in the CFA in [one town] went home to their own house, they all lost their own homes. (Beth)*

*A lot of families are hurt that they weren't there to help, even though it's a big responsibility for us. The women had a big job that day ... [My partner] and I have never spoken about if this happened, what would I do? It was never an issue. We never had a fire plan. You thought he'd be here. My fire plan was him ... I thought I would have his help. (Holly)*

## **Strong, capable women in the disaster**

The women showed clarity of thought in the most life-threatening situations. They planned ahead, anticipated problems and solutions and drew on knowledge packed away to get around seemingly insurmountable problems.

*The only thing I could think of was that in 2006 the fires came through the Glenburn area and there were bare paddocks where it had burnt out, plus they put in the pipeline so I knew there had to be a flat spot, maybe even a tunnel ditch, which we could shelter in, so we drove there. (Annie)*

*I checked on that plume of smoke every 10 minutes, I took photos of it and all our photos we used in the Royal Commission; my husband gave evidence there ... If the power goes out you don't have power for your pump so you need your generator pump, your petrol driven pump. So I said to my husband 'I don't think it's full enough, what if a fire does come from embers or something, I should go up to the garage and top it up a bit more before they shut. (Andrea)*

*He got to the fire station and rang me ... 'Lib, there's hundreds of people here' and I could hear [a friend] screaming, 'We're going to die, we're going to die.' [My husband's] saying, 'Lib, we're dead, we're dead. We're gone.' I said, 'No you're not. [There's a] generator. They've got a bore out the back, Go and find it. There's tanks out the back.. Go there and find it. Tell me when you've found it.' (Libby)*

Incredibly, anticipating their own deaths in the bushfire, two women thought to advise police.

*I thought 'I don't know who knows we're here and I thought someone needs to know'. So I tried to ring 000 and I couldn't get through and so I rang a police number ... anyway I said to her what my name was and where I lived and I said, 'Look I just need you to note down somewhere that there are six adults and two children at this address' ... I wasn't saying to her send someone to come and get us I was saying I just wanted her to note that we were there and how many were there because it wasn't just us. (Rosie)*

*When finally she got through to someone on triple 0, my daughter who was now in [organising] mode had said on the phone to them ... 'All right, no, no, that's alright, I know you can't get to us.' There was something she said that let me know that they couldn't do anything - 'they' meaning Emergency Services. She said, 'We just need to let you know to look for six people', and I thought, 'She thinks we're going to die'. (Andrea)*



## After the fires — loss and demands

For most, the day after Black Saturday was surreal. The immediate and primary reaction to the bushfire was shock from its intensity and the reality of all that had happened. Then awareness grew of the depth of loss and the extent of damage to the landscape. For some, the 'high alert' stage continued for days and up to six weeks.

*It was 8 weeks after the fires that I got woken up at in the morning by my local fire brigade because my creek was burning again. Tree stumps burn underground for months. The people [in one area] which didn't quite burn were on high alert for the next six weeks to save those couple of hundred homes down there ... Everyone was under constant threat. There were houses burnt down a week later. Because people had gone out and all of a sudden the house was gone. It was constantly burning.*  
(Libby)

### Loss

From hours into the Black Saturday bushfire, people began to hear of friends and neighbours and children who died. The first reports seemed unbelievable. But the reports kept coming. On a daily basis, the women spoke of learning who had survived, who was missing and who had died in the fires. And the suicides that followed. Funerals were held, bringing more sadness, and more guilt when women couldn't go, couldn't face it. All of the women in this research lost friends, relatives, neighbours or clients. One spoke of the sad death of a loved childcarer and the effect on her children.

No women who lost immediate family elected to participate in this research.

Women spoke of hierarchies of loss. There was a sense that people's experiences and losses were being ranked. And some felt that differentiation had resonance, one woman asking how she could feel good knowing people had died or lost family members.

*All I saw was my place burn and that's nothing, that's nothing. But to know when I'm sitting there watching my place burn, that my friends were dying is another thing.* (Sally)

Survivor guilt is well recognised. Guilt if you had a house, if you still had an income, if all your children survived, guilt if you weren't there on the day or if you stayed away in the recovery period. The complexity was described by one woman of encompassing layers upon layers of feelings and emotions.

One woman spoke of a long period of being on fire alert, of seeing everything through a veil of exhaustion. Although the fire stopped 500 metres before their house, the property was strewn with dead birds and fallen trees and dead vegetation. Their source of income was gone, yet, in the ranking, they were okay. No loss of life, no loss of house.

*Some of the things that have been said to me subsequently, 'It's alright for you. You weren't burnt out'. I mean, the resentment of some of the people that other people weren't burnt out. It has divided people because when some of the income started coming in there were financial value judgements being placed on, 'How much did you suffer?'* (Carla)



Even losing family was ranked:

*He was here but he never understood what it was like for me or some of the people dealing with it, and a lot of his group thought [unless] you lived there and you lost your house and family [...then] you should not be affected by it. But people are. (Shelly)*

The reaction to a burnt-out home varied, with one woman dismissing it out of hand.

*I know I've lost the house, I know what it feels like to not be able to go home, but I tell you what, how quick you can fill a house full of crap and feel like home again. I do get that its irreplaceable some houses and they're beautiful. I just think, 'Oh my god, suck it up, suck it up. It's a house, some people have lost people, that doesn't even compare'. (Sally)*

Some women found losing their home a source of great sadness — a loss of memories, family history, even identity. The bricks and mortar were bound up with values and relationships. They remembered why they settled there and the plans and dreams that led them there. They had built the homes themselves or with partners, they spoke of solar panels and ideals, and gardens lovingly created and tended. For some, the family home had absolutely vanished.

*When we got to our property we had space suits on and it was 34 degrees — it was very hot. There was nothing left, nothing left at all. There were no tears, even prior to that. It was just nice to be there and the kids would search for something but there was just nothing. Nothing for us to salvage. (Vicki)*

*It wasn't the Taj Mahal but it kept the cold and the rain out for 25 years ... Whatever else went wrong in your life you could come home and look around and think, 'I built this'. (Gaye)*

For these women the destruction of their home meant loss of the lifestyle they valued. The fires — at least temporarily — took away their purpose and future dreams. Some spoke of why they decided to live in Kinglake or Marysville or Flowerdale or any of the small towns in the region. Country life allowed freedoms like walking dogs without leads, pushing prams without cars speeding by, family recreation opportunities — caravans, boats, pools, horses. Some had history, some had plans, at varying stages of fruition, all stalled or stopped by the fires.

*I can still picture everything as it was, and I know growing up I spent heaps of time there, just roller-blading around and doing what kids do, playing footy and things like that. I just picture everything as it was. (Shelly)*

### **Changed landscape**

Only five of the women had moved away from their town at the time of the interview, although some were unsure if they would stay. A great sorrow for most of the women was the loss of the landscape they loved. Whether the forested mountainous landscape or their own small gardens, the landscape had changed. Women spoke of resenting the vistas or houses or lights that they did not see before the fires burnt their treed landscape. The once familiar landscape was now foreign and an unwelcome reminder.

*The trees. The trees just don't go away. They just don't go away. I don't know how long till we can't see the black trees and I know that reminder, that constant reminder, has moved people off the mountain. (Sally)*

*Even now trees are dying and splitting, we expected a lot more to come back after spring but they just haven't. (Nicki)*

*There are parts of the landscape now that are changed forever and I can't bear to look at those. There are places I don't like to go because people died there .... I can't believe it all happened ... In my lifetime I may not see it looking as beautiful as it did before and that is quite depressing. (Yvette)*

The commute from home to work was a daily reminder of all that had happened. One woman likened it to a graveyard.

*You would be in Yea looking at semi-green cos we got a bit of rain, and then you'd drive through all the burnt bush, and then you get into the burbs, and it was like you went through three headspaces by the time you got to work. And you knew on the way back you had to go through that bloody head space again. (Gaye)*

The 'headspace' was all that happened from February 9th. Even when people physically survived, the mental and emotional toll changed them.

*Yes, you change enormously, it's hard to describe. (Michelle)*

*My life's really different now, and what I did before and what my passions were before, I'm finding them again and they're coming with me on this journey. (Andrea)*

## **Demands**

Even an event such as Black Saturday does not alleviate the demands on people to keep up with their responsibilities. They are expected to keep on going despite urgent demands in every direction. Finance was a major concern. Eleven of the women interviewed talked about the burden of rent or mortgage payments to them and their families. For many, their income had been affected by the fires — whether employed or self-employed. In the short term, the focus was on re-establishing where they would live, or replacing cars or waiting for roads to be reopened. Finances were stretched as people tried to organise accommodation, sometimes paying the mortgage on damaged houses while renting another place. A dual demand was income production while trying to work on their homes or restore fences or shedding to properties, or help neighbours get on their feet.

*He stayed up here the whole time. I knew he was really, really traumatised and I said to him, 'Don't you worry about work. I'll earn the money, you need time to really process all this and maybe get some good counselling and get yourself through, so I'll find the money for the house. You have time off and do what you have to do to get yourself through this without adding more stress.' (Libby)*

Insurance claims were not necessarily easy, with some having to settle in court, and payouts not always covering the costs of rebuilding or repairing. Bureaucratic requirements for grants, insurance and council permits, too, were onerous and time-consuming.

Women with children had to re-arrange their children's schooling as schools had burnt down and bus routes no longer feasible. For some women in our study, lack of childcare prevented their return to work, especially as children were in a particularly vulnerable state after experiencing the disaster or its effects.

Income was affected in the longer term through workplaces burning down. Farms, businesses, hotels, offices, health premises and industries were all affected. Those who had been employed casually found it harder to pick up work after extended periods away. Both lack of interest in work, and overwork emerged as symptoms of distress.

We heard that 19 of the women thought they would die in the fires (see Table 2). Mental health issues slowly emerged, preventing a stable return to work for many and affecting relationships.

Table 5: Job loss, Occupation, and Lost home

Lost job after fires	Occupation	Lost home
No	Health professional	Yes
Self employed - OK	Natural therapist	No
Not reported	Hospitality worker	No
Not applicable	Unpaid community work	No
No	Paid community worker	Missing data
Placed her (own) business on market	Self employed	No
Yes	Para-professional	No
Not reported	Professional	Yes, rented
No	Family business	No
Stress leave then lesser position	Senior health professional	Yes
No	Transport industry	Yes
No	Studying and part time work in allied health	Yes
Not applicable	Family business and now new job	No
No	Disability worker	No
Not applicable	No paid work	No
Studio burnt, had to hire office	Not reported	No, lost home office
Workplace burnt, some delay in resuming	Administration	Yes
No	Health professional	No, lost business
No, retired and now farmer	Retired, farmer	No
Yes	Childcare	Yes
No	Therapist	No
Yes, lost farm income	Farmer	No
Yes, employer's place of business burnt	Therapist	Yes, forced to move from rented house
Unable to continue study	No paid work	Yes
Yes, used leave until forced to resign — unable to resume high level job	Senior health administrator	Yes
No	Shop supervisor	No
Not applicable	Unpaid community worker	No
No	Health professional	No
Needed to resign to emotionally support children	Para-professional	Yes
5 Yes 1 Left study 1 Left to care for children 12 No 4 N/A 6 not reported		Lost home 11 Lost own business /office 2 No 15 Missing data 1

## Longer term manifestations of grief, loss and stress

The experience of Black Saturday was so extreme that 19 of the women thought they were going to die. The human reaction to such intense threat is the focus of much psychological study. In describing their own reactions and that of their partners, the women spoke of abuse of alcohol and drugs and suicidal thoughts. Both partners tried to deal with the unimaginable burden of what they remembered. They tried to regain their sense of self in whatever ways they could. Men, too, turned to alcohol and drugs and a kind of hyper-masculinity emerged, alongside mood swings, suicide ideation and, above all, denial of any problem.

Where people had a history of trauma, Black Saturday brought it all back.

Some women had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or depression and most spoke of feelings of anxiety, panic, hopelessness, lost interest or inability to function at some stage. They conveyed a sense of inevitability about 'falling in a heap' and knew they had to live through these bad times.

*You can't happy yourself up, you've just got to go through all the crap ... Nothing's going to be good for a while. (Gaye)*

*I was low. Very low. Nearly every woman I spoke to said the same thing. (Karen)*

*After a week I went, 'Oh, I should go back to work' and I just sort of started like nothing had happened and I went back to work ... But then things just unravelled. (Michelle)*

At times, some questioned their own sanity:

*I felt at one stage it was a psychotic thing where I asked this of the counsellor, 'Sometimes I think I did die and I think we all did die and is this is a whole different reality where we don't know we died?' So that is a psychosis, I know that. I don't feel that way anymore. (Andrea)*

*I had terrible nightmares, and we woke up one night and I said, 'I don't know if I'm dead or alive' and for months couldn't really assess whether I had died and whether this is death, or whether I was alive or it was a dream. (Annie)*

One woman spoke of barely sleeping, instead having a movie playing over and over in her head of the whole experience. Another's husband slept only two hours a night for months. Understandably, ability to concentrate was very low and even remembering small tasks was challenging. There was no capacity for complexity. This affected partners and children too.

*Last year was a wasted year for her, school wise, she couldn't concentrate ... the teacher wrote she didn't complete the year but it was understandable after what happened. (Vicki)*

*He could not take any other thing other than what he had to concentrate on. If it was something as simple as washing his hands, all other input was too much. (Andrea)*

## Alcohol and drugs

A convergence of factors led to 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 – unemployment and homelessness – perhaps led to this reliance. It is unsurprising given the general societal acceptance of alcohol in Australia, particularly in times of stress. Its acceptance

is clear as alcohol was generally included in community dinners, and initial recovery meetings were held in the local pub in one town each morning – with alcohol service

The way alcohol presented as a problem changed as time progressed. In the week after the fire, more men than women remained or returned early to fire-affected areas. Without the tempering effect of women, some men were getting together and drinking to excess. Two women spoke of returning to their homes to find them turned into impromptu pubs, complete with drinking men.

*My house was turned into a pub, it was a mess, there were things everywhere, not just ash stuff but cans of food stuff and things that were just being handed out ... there were five guys ... all pissed as newts ... There was a lot of free booze. (Jenny)*

*[My friend] lived in this street with a lot of men who were really, really traumatised. Women were traumatised, but the men really started to drink. My friend was having people rock up at the door at all times of the day. They were drinking in the street. They were getting together as blokes. (Di)*

After this initial time, when women and children had returned, both men and women were self-medicating with alcohol and drugs. One woman said excessive drinking was widespread in households in the first six months amongst groups of men, and for some women.

*The alcohol probably is therapeutic in some ways as long as they don't become alcoholic ... I do know a couple of times after drinking, a few of the blokes would cry. There are a lot of women drinking too, including me. I got to a stage where sometimes I was having to drink to go to sleep (Di)*

*They turned to alcohol – the ladies turned to alcohol. (Janet)*

Other women spoke of their husbands' problematic drinking.

*Every time he drinks before lunchtime I'd say, 'It's not even lunchtime'. Sometimes at 10.00 in the morning. Did he used to do that before? Oh, hell no, hell no ... he admitted to me he's a closet alcoholic. (Jenny)*

*And he just started drinking a lot more, a lot more. I thought he drank a lot before [the fires], I think it doubled ... it just went out of control, and I think it peaked around December or January, just every single day and night. (Yvette)*

*So he was drinking, throwing himself into work, but being completely ineffectual ... then they eventually pushed him out and it was all very acrimonious and in the meantime he was angry and irritable, drinking. (Karen)*

*Everybody could see that he changed, they could see he changed at work and that he was not coping, that he was drinking and that he shut down. (Emma)*

### **Link between alcohol and violence**

For some men, alcohol changed their personality, endangering those close to them.

*So you've seen a personality change in a way? Yeah, and it's purely alcohol that's brought that on. (Jenny)*

*I mean he has his good moments and he can take one mouthful of alcohol and that's it, he changes ... Probably the worst [times] are when he's been with other guys, yeah, it's like a drinking session or something, I don't know. (Yvette)*

*He did go through a stage, but it didn't last too long, fortunately, because he got angrier when he was drinking, he's much more volatile. (Sally)*

## **Drug-taking**

Legal drug taking was spoken of as almost universal and women joked about putting anti-depressants in the water. Some people combined alcohol with medication, and possibly with drugs. Taking drugs, whether legal or illegal, did not appear to have the same link with increased aggression that alcohol did. The kinds of problems from this were easier for women to handle. For example, one woman explained that her husband's prescription drugs reduced his ability to function, thereby adding to her workload in handling all the required bureaucratic processes after the fires.

*And [my partner] was on opiates and unable to vocalise post fires, so I did that, and that would be normal for me to do most of that. He did nothing. (Karen)*

One woman spoke of her husband smoking dope every day from about 11am, although such regularity was not common across the community.

*[He had] a lot of grief, and not the sort of personality that could deal very easily with it. He self-medicated, I think, with marijuana and alcohol. (Emma)*

*Our place was a refuge. And so everyone who'd lost their homes would come, and pretty much most afternoons and evenings I'd be cooking ... I just remember cooking, cooking, nurture, nurture, and you know wine and cigarettes and dope and everything just became the evening afternoon pattern for quite a long time. But for him it became very much earlier in the morning and a lot more reliant and a lot more a coping mechanism. (Madeline)*

*It's becoming really difficult in some areas in the community because so many people you know have deteriorated and have turned to substance abuse and even now that's upsetting, it's heart breaking. (Libby)*

Whereas alcohol seemed to contribute to men's aggression, marijuana tended to calm things, taking a medicinal role.

*I'd notice because his smoke time had gone up so high by a certain time of the day he would be calm and he'd be relaxed so from dinner time to bed time we could sit down and have our dinner together and talk normally and it was all good, all relaxed. (Madeline)*

*After the sleeping tablets weren't working he started smoking dope every night to go to sleep, which he still does now. Because that's the only thing he can find that puts him to sleep properly and he doesn't wake up with an after effect. (Libby)*

Sadly, one woman's daughter turned to drugs almost immediately after the bushfires and this exacerbated her vulnerability.

*I saw a lot of drugs and [my daughter] was given money from bushfire relief and she ended up with nothing and ended up selling drugs and it became a murky story because everyone*



*honed in on her. They all knew, and the person who was supplying all the drugs knew she had the money. She spent \$8000 on drugs. (Sonia)*

### **Hypermasculinity**

Women described a kind of hyper-masculinity displayed by their partners both during and in the aftermath of the fires. The atmosphere on the day of impending disaster seemed to excite some men, who took themselves and sometimes children, into the danger rather than away from it. Women described their partners as wanting to do something and feeling frustrated. They seemed to take unnecessary risks.

*He was in his own space ... It wasn't like an emotional state, it was like he needed to do stuff, he felt like he needed to help and be a fire-spotter and do this super hero kind of stuff ... He goes, 'Can't stay long, it's a big day out there, something big's happening' and, 'Don't worry about it now, rah rah rah'. All like, 'We won't tell the lady what's going on cos she'll just worry'. (Angela)*

*He was facing 40 foot flames, he was jumping into the flames, he was right there, he was in them. One or two times [the kids] had screamed out, 'Dad' because he was so in the zone of fighting the fire, he was in the fire. (Madeline)*

*He rang me back and said, 'I've just bumped into the coppers and two guys from the fire brigade and I'm going to help them to clear the roads down the [name] Highway. I said, 'How dangerous is it?' He goes, 'Fucking dangerous as anything'... The cops went with them for about a kilometre and said, 'This is too dangerous – we're going back' and they turned around and went back into town. He was with two young guys ... they had no water, no nothing [and] they just kept cutting trees and trying to drag them off the road. (Libby)*

In the weeks and months after, men speeding and driving cars recklessly seemed commonplace. Some men sought out the adrenalin rush through motorbikes. One took up martial arts and became obsessed with heavy metal music. The women observed these behaviours with concern for their children as well as the safety of the man.

*[He's] very immersed, he's training cage fighters in MMA [Mixed Martial Arts]. So I didn't feel very comfortable with that. He was also getting into heavy metal music with imagery of death and that's fine because I listen to a bit of that, I listen to very dark music but he was exposing it to the children. (Karen)*

*It was like boys' own adventure. ... Well he seemed to be in his element. He's in charge, he's got guys there and they're having, like I say, a boys' own adventure, putting out fires, having a few drinks, they've got the generators going. One exploded and burnt his arm. He needed medical attention. (Jenny)*

*You'd drive down the mountain, even now, and everyone's an idiot up here now. They speed down the mountain, push you along. You see cars three feet away, I have to pull over. (Di)*

*I remember thinking to myself, 'My God, if the boys weren't in here I don't think he would care if he'd write us off [but] because his sons were there he probably won't'. But it was like being with a sixteen year old hoon really, in the car just being really reckless, and I've heard that from a few ladies that their husbands have gone through this really reckless driving stage, where they are speeding and just really reckless. (Sally)*



This same man appeared to have a sense of indestructibility. He said nothing could happen to his children when he was with them, despite displaying irresponsible behaviour, including keeping his two young children out until the early hours of the morning.

*I said, 'It's not like you're invincible' and his first reaction, he said 'I am'. (Sally)*

Another version of hyper-masculinity came through a sudden freedom in spending money on expensive men's toys from a family budget under extraordinary pressure. There was no negotiation with their partners, and when called to task, the men asserted their right to spend the money they earn.

*He did the 'I never had these things before so I want them now'. So he went on this buying-motorbike campaign, bought the dirt bike, bought the road bike ... The motor bikes are now for sale, and yes he wants ... a boat ... There are women doing that as well but I think the boys buy big ticket items like a motor bike, where the women buy an expensive handbag, but at the end of the day the women are still making sure the kids are fed and clothed.. (Erica)*

*Since the fires he has bought a Harley, a trail bike which we owe nine grand for, I don't know how we're supposed to do that. He wanted a pool table, he wanted a \$15,000 trail bike, and I said we can't do that. (Leanne)*

*He came home with a cycle for \$3,000 ... and two days later showed up with a plasma screen ... and \$600 has gone out to Snowgum ... and I'll say, 'Mate you can't be spending money like that' but he will turn around and say he's the only one working and he earns all the money he can do what he wants. (Sally)*

## **Psychological wellbeing**

As social researchers and writers of this report, we have no qualifications or practice knowledge in mental illness. This section reports the words of women, some of whom live with mental health issues and some who work as health professionals. Women would use terms their counsellors or psychologists had explained, for example, 'de-bonding', 'narcissism', 'paranoia'. These terms, and terms like 'depression' and 'anxiety' were used in a colloquial, conversational sense rather than as diagnoses and we repeat them here in the same way.

What is inescapably true, is that Black Saturday was traumatic to those who lived through the fires. For some - perhaps many — survivors, it will 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 10 years. People don't get that. They think that they're going to get over it and its going to be ok. But it's not. You learn to live with it, you don't get over it. (Sally)*

Women related how they changed after the fires, becoming more and more introverted, from society and from their partners.

*I became deeply, deeply introverted in the period after the fire. More and more and more avoided things, avoided talking about the fire, basically it just didn't happen. And that made me sick eventually, but that was my response and it probably suited [my partner] too ... Anything emotional he will just shut it out. It's too overwhelming to him, can't deal with it so it just doesn't exist ... It makes it impossible to relate to another human ... We just became more and more and more this isolated little couple, and our property's isolated so*

*that helps it. (Michelle)*

*I feel like I've got chains wrapped around me at the moment. I've got all this stuff in my head but I don't know how to process it or put it into action ... I used to be quite a social bee, but I prefer to be by myself a bit now. It's just nice and quiet. I just want to be alone. (Holly)*

One woman described the concept of de-bonding, explained to her by her psychologist.

*A de-bonding experience, that's how it was explained to me, is where you face your death and you reconcile to your death, and in the process of doing that de-bond ... from close emotional ties, like your wife and children. It's a way of becoming OK with imminent death. (Emma)*

Nineteen women felt close to death and 17 believed their partners thought death was imminent. Some women stated that this would have to have had a negative effect on their relationship.

*Even if you don't admit it to yourself intellectually, in a way you've kind of said goodbye to everything. And it's just occurred to me that actually one of those things is that you say goodbye to one another ... [and that] is certainly going to be having an impact on how we feel about one another. (Carla)*

Two women spoke of being very fearful that their partners would commit suicide, based on innuendo and suggestion, and statements of life not being worth living.

*He had said I might top myself but never, 'This is how I would do it ... and from threats, but he didn't have a true suicide plan, just suicidal thoughts. (Karen)*

Another two women called the police when their husbands actually attempted suicide. One woman knew of three suicide attempts amongst her husband's crew and suggested it was commonplace.

*That's what I'm hearing, 'I walk in and I see that my husband is going to kill himself, and I snatched the gun away'. This is what I'm hearing from friends ... 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. (Emma)*

In fact, when conducting an interview with a worker, she was interrupted by news of a friend who had committed suicide. She said there had been three suicides in their community just in recent weeks.

One woman felt her husband became less patient and quicker to judge because he had to face his mortality, and suggested his thinking became distorted.

*It's because they're against him, because he's done something and they've found out about it and they're getting back at him. Or I'm doing some relief work, so I'm doing the relief work so I don't have to be near him. It's really paranoid. (Kate)*

Another spoke of her husband's behaviour after the fires as very different from before. His moods ranged from being in total control to complete withdrawal. In rebuilding their house, builders would contact her, saying he was having a bad day. His loss of memory, for example, of conversations, led to feelings of paranoia. He accused his step-child of trying to poison him and his wife of having an affair. He wanted to involve police with what he thought were suspicious telephone calls. He became obsessive, running at all times of the day, then cycling day and night, then fanatically going to the gym.

*It's like living with three different people, you know, you just can't tell on any given day, is he going to be angry today? Is he going to be solemn today? Where he normally has been a fairly balanced person. (Sally)*

The mood swings affected another man in a similar way.

*He'll just come in and start talking to me... like a seven or eight year old child. Like you can be engaged in an activity and the kid will come in and go 'Mum! babble babble babble'... and then the next day they come home and they're in the shit because they've had a crap day and you go, 'Hello' and they go, 'Humph!' and like a 14 year old they go to their room and that's it. So I have those two people that I live with. It's like living with a child. (Michelle)*

## **Previous trauma**

*The aggression in that family reached the point where my husband's brother at 12 or 13 years of age took his father by the throat and was going to stab him over a game .... This is the fear I have because of the anger my husband has in him. He had a very traumatic childhood. (Leanne)*

*What he does is he externalises so he doesn't look in and see what it is that makes him depressed in terms of his own self esteem, he just looks for a quick fix that is external to himself. (Karen)*

Some women spoke of their own or their partner's experience of trauma before Black Saturday, suggesting it was implicated in ongoing struggles in recovering from the fires. They spoke of layer upon layer of assault to one's being. If people appeared to be functioning well and seemed to have overcome previous trauma, the fires disturbed any semblance of recovery. The women referred to their partners' histories of traumatic upbringings or tragic incidents in childhood, or childhood sexual assault. Some had felt helpless as a child, some with abusive alcoholic fathers. One had wartime trauma as an adult in the military.

The women, too, had suffered in the past. Beth spoke movingly of the death of her baby (See Box 1), and Bec of her mother's murder. Trauma from previous bushfire experiences was a further stress.

*When I was 14 our house burnt down so it's triggered a lot of stuff from then, the smell's triggered a lot of stuff. And then my Mum. So I know what that feels like, to be totally shattered. [The fire has] triggered me where I couldn't even think. (Sally)*

## **B**ox 1:

*For one woman, her memories of the way she coped with a previous tragedy helped her deal with the threat of Black Saturday.*

*First I want to tell you that when I was 22 I went to pick up my second son and he was dead already from cot death and I started to panic and I already had one boy who was 17 months old and I started running around picking things off the mantelpiece and wailing and then I heard a voice say to me, 'You're only making things worse, what's the point of that? He's going to be six feet under for the rest of your life Beth, why are you carrying on like a banshee?' So I said to his father, 'You clean him up' and I said to the ambos, 'That's a ridiculously large stretcher he can be carried', and I had a good look at him and felt him and he was still warm and so when [we were told], 'You're going to have a wall of flames headed your way', I felt like I did when I found [my baby] dead, but I thought, 'What's the point?' So I went and called the animals and when I told Bull he was late as usual, I felt calm. (Beth)*

The interviews presented a strong picture of counselling either not sought or not successful and a resurfacing of previous, unresolved trauma. Past trauma lay under the surface, ready to be revived and exacerbated by the bushfires.

*Various experiences from the past that had been traumatic and that we'd dealt with before all sort of came in together, and suddenly you're finding yourself immersed in this background of traumas from the past, not necessarily shared ones either ... It's almost as though you revisit previous emotions where you felt out of your depth, that's probably what it is, all of those circumstances where you feel helpless. (Carla)*

*He's had a history, got a bit better but never really dealt with anything and it all just got worse after the fires and after repeated losses. (Karen)*

For some, the new trauma has led to introversion, withdrawal, isolation, and denial of any problem, and for others, to increased aggression or symptoms of mental ill health.

*I think that for both [my sister] and her partner ... there is now a post traumatic stress issue on top of whatever there might have been before the fires. I feel that because he is harbouring so much that it all becomes too much and his [violent] responses are now more dramatic. (Yvette)*

Emma describes the effect of the fires on her husband:

*He was a reasonably fragile character before, but he was a whole egg. Whatever happened to him through the fires smashed him. Whereas a stronger shell might have held, he was smashed and his moral compass was decimated. (Emma)*

## Relationships

It appears that both family violence and relationship breakdowns have increased in fire-affected regions following the Black Saturday bushfires.

*Marriages are just breaking up like you wouldn't believe. And the thing is even my friends who had very grounded relationships have struggled, like professional people. (Annie)*

*Most of the mountain is divorced now. Or if they're not separated they're nearly there ... We could easily start a dating agency up here. It would be huge! Yeah, or a singles night or taking a singles bus trip off the mountain once a month with everyone that's separated. You'd need about 20 buses. (Libby)*

Counter arguments to this, again only anecdotal, are that the only relationships breaking up were in trouble before the fires. There is little evidence from this research that this is the case.

**D**o you think of the fires as the turning point where he changed so much that this relationship is lost ?

*This is where I need more time to just sit and think. It was really interesting, on Monday morning, the anniversary morning, as soon as I woke up that morning I burst into tears. I went, 'Fuck You Fire. You've just fucked everyone over big time'. Because you look at the road that you and everyone that has travelled over the last two years and you think, 'That fucking fire, you fucked everyone over big time.' Yeah I would put it down to that because pre fires everything was going really really well and he was determined never to be on drugs again and he was doing fantastic. And he was doing really really well. Everything was happy. Everything was going really really well. And then the fire hit.*

### Secure relationships affected by violence

When undertaking this research, both health and community sector professionals and community members asserted that if there was an increase in marriage breakdowns in the aftermath of the disaster, it was only in relationships that had previously involved violence. However this research shows that to be untrue. Even secure partnerships suffered under the weight of so many pressures post-bushfires.

One of the participants, well placed through her profession to see the extent of individual struggles and relationship difficulties, reflected on why this might be happening:

*It's a huge, huge percentage of relationship break downs. I can't give you an exact percentage but I can certainly say that it seems to be that there are more people that I know that have had difficulties and breakdowns than people who are cruising and doing really well, and even the ones who are still together are shaky - because it strips back all the perceptions and all the things that we put around us. Any relationships that were having trouble were hugely exacerbated but ... there are certainly relationships that I know directly, that were doing quite well but are hitting rocky ground because of the fact of being stripped back bare. People are questioning who they are, where they're going and their place in the world. (Madeline)*

*If you look into marriages and post traumatic stress, it doesn't have a really high survival rate. It really doesn't ... I know a lot of relationships have folded. (Sally)*

Although some relationships were strengthened by their experiences of the disaster, others were in crisis - and many were broken, even when couples stayed together. As well as the long list of pressures on adults after the fires, children were disturbed and anxious, and decisions about where to live post-fires divided couples and sometimes set children in opposition to parents. When interviews were held close to the second anniversary of Black Saturday, nine of the 29 women had separated from their partner and those still together were struggling. Some were working on reviving their relationship, and others were biding time while the children were still at home.

### **Reasons for relationship difficulties**

The reasons given for relationship breakdown seemed to vary and were sometimes ostensibly unconnected to the bushfire. Yet women made the connection to the underlying trauma wrought by the fires and to the huge stresses people were carrying as a result of Black Saturday as reasons for relationship difficulties.

### **Emotional absence**

*It's the biggest thing I've ever been through, the biggest challenge to our marriage we've ever been through. I knew we were fighting about everything, and we never used to fight. Everything was just so hard ... I was angry because he wouldn't address the problems and I couldn't live with them. (Andrea)*

Women spoke of wanting 'him' to be there and he wasn't. As individuals, people were not travelling well, not coping with the trauma or the daily pressures. It seemed that, barely able to keep their heads above water, they could not emotionally support their partner. The urgency for action during the fires and in the recovery period meant practical matters took precedence over emotional needs.

*I think it's been over nearly two and a half months since we've been together. There's nothing. I feel like there's a wall between us ... We're not close anymore like we used to be, that might be me as well, but we're just always tired and busy with the house. (Holly)*

Women spoke of not talking together as a couple about their reactions and feelings, of being tense and uptight with each other and of conversations getting 'quite rough' because neither one was balanced. One woman spoke of being tearful and overwhelmed and being told by her husband, 'No, don't cry, you have to be strong'. She stated that he could not tolerate her feelings of devastation. Another woman suggested her partner would not let her talk about the fires because it reminded him of his own experience which he did not want to face. For many couples, neither partner had the resources to help the other.

*People are going to say more stuff than they normally would because they're tired, exhausted, traumatised. (Sally)*

*Our fuses are very short. A lot of what we say is unedited ... You've got all the responsibilities, and you can't handle anybody else's needs. You know, if [she] would start whinging to me about something, 'I can't deal with your problems, if you're feeling unwell with your injury or whatever, I can't handle that'. I've just managed to tread water myself. (Carla)*



*The first ... weeks after were really hard. Everything just fell apart. It seemed like we couldn't really talk to each other about it. It was like my feelings were burdening him because he had his own feelings. (Ruth)*

*I remember feeling so sad and depressed all the time but [my husband] wasn't really tolerant of that. Even now if I say something that he thinks is negative, he doesn't like that. (Ruth)*

*I could feel him going down the tube and I could just feel us becoming more and more isolated within ourselves, but not even a pair of isolated people, two isolated people, and I just thought I could get on with things. (Michelle)*

For many women, it was a conscious decision to put aside any attention to emotion simply to survive day to day, a decision encouraged by their partners. A strong theme was the reluctance of men to acknowledge any kind of problem.

*He covers things up, him and his family, it's all deny. If anything's too hard or painful, it didn't happen – deny, deny. (Andrea)*

*He was sort of in denial and he would say, 'Just get over it, just get on with it, don't talk about it' ... So it got to the point where I would just clam up ... I was tired all the time, I would come home from work and there would be tension and then he would just announce, 'I'm going to bed' and he would go and then I would feel more relaxed ... So I felt like we were growing apart. (Rosie)*

*Any time someone came over and was talking about their story, which people need to do to vent it and put it in its place, he'd walk out of the room. So I couldn't tell him anything. (Angela)*

*It was hard to even talk about it because everyone wanted to know and after the first couple of times you just—I mean every time someone asked him, they'd go, 'Wow, how did you go through that?' and he'd just go, 'Oh, it wasn't too bad'. That was it. He never ever spoke about it ... and then I'd think, 'You were just about dead'. We really thought he'd be dead when we got back here. (Tess)*

*[He would be] just silent, or just go, 'There's nothing to talk about, I don't have any feelings about this'... I think he's in a complete world of denial ... 'Nothing wrong, I'm fine, I've dealt with it' was his view. (Michelle)*

*He'd just sit there and it was sort of like, 'Now it's my time watching TV' so I wasn't supposed to talk, and then he'd go to sleep in the chair most nights. And I just thought, 'Well stuff it, I might as well go and sleep down in the bloody shed with the dogs cos this isn't really a relationship any more'. (Gaye)*

One woman who has lived with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for 20 years helped explain why men were often reluctant to discuss their traumatic experiences or even to listen to their partner.

*I was scared, I suppose, to talk about trauma. It's something that people don't want to feel, and I always felt there was something wrong with me. I've only just realised that I'm normal for what I've been through in my life. So I didn't want to talk about it because it made me feel – and he made me feel – like there was always something wrong with me. (Sally)*



Ultimately, however, this lack of attention damaged relationships.

*[You think you will] deal with the emotional side later. Well the later didn't happen for a long time and we were actually, at one point, beginning to get a bit panicky, saying, 'Well these chemical pathways, are they permanent chemical pathways? Because we're tired of being fucked up, let's just get back some normality'. (Carla)*

**W**ell my husband said that the fire just didn't affect him.  
I don't think that's true.

*Why not?*

*Because we're getting divorced. I don't see how any human being could have that experience and be unaffected, emotionally unaffected, by it. He just said, 'I was fine, I just got on with it', and I said, 'Alright, you thought that might be your experience of fighting the fire on the day, but what's happened to the town, and the way it was living here?' Any human being is going to be affected by that and I think that he's just completely shut down. (Michelle)*

### **Blame and accusation**

Those who faced the fires together inevitably reflected on that and drew conclusions. One woman looked back with pride, seeing their work as a team. Her partner looked back with anger, feeling abandoned. Yet the anger did not come easily. It festered under the surface while she struggled to understand what it was she was feeling. For many survivors of Black Saturday, feelings that emerged in the time immediately after were un-named and unaddressed. For women, anger is not an acceptable emotion, so angry women sometimes repressed this emotion.

*Our view of our experiences was quite different. I thought how well we'd functioned together, and she came away with feeling that we had separated ... It took weeks and weeks and weeks to get to actually understanding it, but she was angry. (Carla)*

Amongst the great toll of the fire, there was a mass loss of confidence – physical, emotional, and psychological. What had been certain was no longer so. People were on short fuses and stress meant the care normally taken to not offend was absent. Accusations went both ways as partners blamed each other for action or inaction, courage or cowardice, competence or ineptitude.

One example of this 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' is given by Beth, who spoke of being unfavourably compared to other women who physically helped with fighting flames, while her contributions in the home and on the property were not recognised. She said she was considered 'worthless with the fires' by her partner. She recounted her conversation at a counselling session:

*'Counsellors, this is my favourite photo' and the whole spot is blank. I said, 'Where's [my husband] taking a photo of me going into town to do the shopping? Going into town to look after the animals? That's the photo that nobody took. I got no thanks'. (Beth)*

In contrast, where women were visibly and energetically working at the community level, criticisms were levelled at their lack of attention within the home and the relationship.

*There's a bit of resentment with him thinking I should have been more helpful to him. I knew that he was there and I had to do my job which is what I know how to do best. I save people's lives ... (Di)*

*But it was all my fault. If I wasn't such a bitch he wouldn't need to take drugs. And he wouldn't need to do bad things to support his drug habit if I was more supportive ... [It was all] 'I'm not getting a chance. You did this. You destroyed my life'. (Libby)*

It seemed the demands to be everything to everyone after the fires were felt by men, too. Women spoke of feeling neglected as their partners attended to community needs, resulting in greater fragility in the relationship.

*He'd say that he was doing everything for everyone and he would go off and it would almost be a relief to me that he left. (Ruth)*

### **Holding the baby**

*I sat there in my driveway with all the burnt out stuff around me when the Child Support Agency told me that he was not going to support, and I said to myself and I said to the support people, 'I'm all my kids have, the onus of responsibility of everything, to educate, to feed, to guide, to socialise, I have three lives that are completely dependent on me for every single need' (Annie)*

Disaster is referred to in the literature as holding a magnifying glass over all that is good and bad in a society. An article after the California earthquakes described how a very advanced, sophisticated and apparently gender equal society quickly reverted to sexism (Hoffman, 1998). Men grasped the opportunity for a public presence and women were relegated to the private sphere.

The interviews with women after Black Saturday revealed the same tendency, and the new demands brought on by the disaster revealed unfairness in relationship responsibilities.

*I was thinking about my relationship not so long ago, and there are women who have men as the primary bread winner [and although] he's not very available to do all the domestic things at least he brings the money in... Or there are the women whose man isn't earning so much money but is very available around the home and for the kids. And I thought, 'Well I sort of get the worst of both worlds, he earns not much money, and I do all the primary bread winning, and he's not here and I do everything'. (Karen)*

Men seemed to be free to choose if they would extend 'help' with the care of their own children. Men returned to work or not, and chose to look after children or not. They chose how much of role to play in the home and in their children's lives.

*Suddenly we lived in the city, and he could get a taxi and could go out at night and do all those bachelor things. I remember I was 36 weeks pregnant, and [my partner] said he was going out for something, and I said, 'Please don't drink, we might have to go to the hospital' ... He didn't come home until one or two o'clock, and when he did he was drunk'. (Karen)*

*So he was at work, and then on the weekends, 'Don't bother me, take the kids away, I want to work on the pool, I want to do this, I'll go for a bike ride'... Yes, it was all on me to buy everything, find a place to live, do all of those activities. So [the baby] and I, he went everywhere with me. (Erica)*

*And particularly when I was in such a state where my whole support network had gone, the crèche, the school, my friends. I had nothing. I needed him to be here to help support me and help me raise the kids while everything was happening, but he didn't. (Annie)*

That freedom to choose is not granted to women.

*As the wife in the situation, or the mother, you do not have the luxury of saying, 'Oh fuck it, I'm sick of this, someone else do it – because the buck stops with you'. (Holly)*

*Women get together and cry and hold each other then go, 'Righto girl, back in the game. There you go, you had your little sulk, we love you, we understand, we've all been through it too, go make dinner'. (Emma)*

Women's return to work, especially considering the impact of the fires on the children, relied on stable and loving childcare arrangements, and this was the case regardless of the occupation of the women. In two couples the women held better paid and more senior jobs than their partners and both still had to assume primary care of the children in the emotional and physical, absence of their father. One woman was a senior health professional and another was a senior administrator before the fires and both had no choice but to give up their jobs in the absence of supportive fathers and in the absence of supportive workplaces.

*And the kids had issues and I carried all of that, and so that put big issues on our relationship in terms of I felt I couldn't fall over. I wanted to fall over but if I fell over there was no one else around to pick that up, and I've said that to him ... he wasn't doing anything domestic-related or supporting the kids or otherwise. (Erica)*

*There were problems before, but they kind of receded a little bit and things had been going a little better since he had changed his job, although I was putting up with a lot of dodging of responsibility. Such as, 'It doesn't matter if I don't earn any money because you do', 'Doesn't matter if I go out because Karen will do it all'. (Karen)*

*I said, 'As parents of these kids we need to be able to do things and we need to be able to shelter the kids from it, so I need you to help me. You look after the kids this time and I'll look after the kids the majority of the time'. And I couldn't return to work because I had no childcare and the schools hadn't reopened, so I said to him, 'If you work four days, let me go to work one day and that way I can keep some sort of income coming in so that I can keep paying the mortgage'. And anyway he never did that, so I was unable to get back to work. (Annie)*

Perhaps the key difference in how people experienced the trauma and the aftermath of the fires lies in the fact that our society expects women to care for children — no matter what. This same expectation is not levelled at men.

## Men and work

Work is a defining characteristic of manhood. The stereotype of the man as breadwinner, as flawed a concept as it is, is still fixed in our imagination. The bushfires left a path of destruction and a workload that overwhelmed most affected by it. There was no shortage of unpaid 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 did not seem to be options for a gradual return to work that would support physical and mental recovery and growth of confidence through paid work on a part-time basis.

*He had 20 years of tradie stuff in his shed – \$150,000 worth of tools and equipment. Everything was in the shed. All that went. He was angry and frustrated about that because he couldn't go to work even if he wanted to... He wasn't thinking properly, he couldn't get his head around, he couldn't make decisions, couldn't pay his phone bill, couldn't do anything ... [He] did go and apply for a position [and was told he would] have to work six days a week. Seven in the morning until six at night' ... That was the start of the deterioration of mental health of the men up here. They were more or less sat back and told, 'You're too traumatised. You can't do. You're incompetent. You can't do anything'. (Libby)*

*He lost everything in his garage – all his manhood he lost ... Men, they are the protectors and providers of family and head of the family. They lost it that day. The fires took control. (Leanne)*

One woman spoke of her husband's self-employment, saying he let the business go, avoiding business trips and losing clients. It was as if he had an aversion to anything that might be a problem. This normally organised man, had a room full of scattered piles of papers and refused to open bills. Another man who had a strong work ethic before the fires lost interest and seemed unaware of his absence from the workplace. The women felt their partners' inaction was symptomatic of depression.

*He'll still say that he missed very little work, but there were three or four months where you kind of go, 'Are you going today?' And it might be 2pm in the afternoon and he'd go in for an hour. (Sally)*

*I'd say he lost his mojo. He was a very driven person beforehand. He's lost that drive. He was always first out of bed in the morning and he had to be gone to get to work. Well, that's all changed, he doesn't have that drive anymore. (Janet)*

Three spoke of their partners' sudden disinterest in hygiene, one man not showering all week.

*It's just got the feeling of the way a little boy would live if he'd been sent to live on his own, like he'd leave all his plates everywhere and his cups, and you know the way little kids live, they live like dogs. (Michelle)*

*He was not getting dressed, he was flopping around in slippers. He used to dress so very clean, well shaven, very business-like, took a lot of pride in things. He'd slop around, wouldn't shower, wouldn't shave. (Andrea)*

*It started to bother me was he was having a couple of showers a week in the beginning but by the time I left he hadn't even had a shower all week. (Gaye)*

More commonly though, men were overworking. Overwork was a necessity for some – in terms of income and re-establishing homes and communities. It was also used as a way to restore normality to life by burying the fear and horror associated with the fires.

*I know trauma, I've known trauma for 20 years ... [Back then] I just didn't stop. I got to the point where I'd make a million things a day happen because I didn't want to stop and think and I could see him doing that. I could see that was why he went to work. (Sally)*

*Paul was working—that's right, working, working, working—he worked 18 days straight round there, he had gastro but he still went to work ... Six o'clock in the morning, he'd get home about seven or eight o'clock. (Gaye)*

*At first it wasn't really good, he just wanted to keep working and didn't want to stop ... They just work, work, work. (Holly)*

*[He] did the instrumental grief thing, 'I must be doing, I must be doing. Sitting around with kids is not where I want to be. If I'm not at work, I want to be up cutting trees' type of thing. (Erica)*

*His boss had told him that he could take as long as he needed off, but the day the roads opened he was back at work. ... At that stage we were still being told to prepare for evacuation because the fire could turn around and come back. (Kate)*

*His only symptom is he works ... he went to work in that second week, I don't even know if we had power on. We couldn't sleep because you had to keep getting up to check things weren't on fire. (Sally)*

## **Affairs**

While the sense of not coping at all did not allow for sensitivity to others' needs, a lack of routine added to the strain. Some looked outside the relationship for emotional support or for diversion from reality through flirtations and affairs — both real and on the internet. It was simpler to seek emotional support and sympathy from new people, particularly people who did not have the weight of their own struggles with an experience of Black Saturday.

*He was incredibly distant and unresponsive the whole time. He began to communicate with a woman on line during this time, and proceeded to have an affair with her. (Emma)*

*The woman my son had the affair with went through the fire too. Her husband is devastated. (Di)*

*By that night I was convinced there was an affair happening and I was totally devastated ... He said later on, 'We weren't getting along and she's just so easy to talk to'. (Rosie)*

One woman told of her husband's interest in his virtual life on the computer. Conversations were about the life events of people neither of them had ever met. Real life interactions were neglected to attend to the internet. It emerged that his interest developed during the period she was struggling with post traumatic stress disorder as a direct result of the fires.

*[When I was] overwhelmed with post-traumatic stress, I lost interest in my horses, lost interest in everything and also couldn't focus, couldn't function. That would have been very disturbing to [him], I'm sure, but he was incapable or was becoming perhaps distracted by his little [Internet] friends. He just let me go off, basically. (Michelle)*

## Closer to divorce

Chasms seemed to be widening between couples. People wondered about the point of staying together, and sometimes rationalised staying together for the sake of the children. They needed to provide a stable environment for children after the tumult of their experience of Black Saturday.

*They jury is still out on that. I guess I have my concerns, I mean you ask me that two months ago and I would have been talking to a lawyer, and I am finding out some legal things as I go ... If I did choose to go that way it will bring another host of issues, so I'll just try to, you know ... and like I said I'm probably not ready to deal with the whole host of things and neither are the kids. (Sally)*

*I know I would not have put up with the last two years of abuse if it wasn't for the kids and thinking predominately that their dad being there for them was more important than not. I know my psychologist would say, 'Everyone knows that the kids are happier if the parents are happy'. I know, but I don't know. The kids are big kids — 14 and 15 — they're at the age where they're making big decisions about their manhood. (Madeline)*

Two women had requests from their children to stay.

*I hadn't said anything, but it was one of those days when I thought I can't do this anymore that's it. OK, I'm shooting baskets with [my son] and he says to me, 'I can understand why you would want to' and he didn't finish his sentence, 'but please don't leave we've been through enough'. (Sally)*

*Well they say, 'We know that it's hard for you, we can see that, and we don't want it to continue but at the moment we're not set up enough to move out so when we move out you can move out, Mum'. (Kate)*

*I'm very worried that, because I've subjugated my own needs for that of my children and my partner that then I might not suffer some delayed other PTSD. I have a few little twigs of things that happened over summer when I saw smoke or smelt smoke. Or depression, and I think I'm skating along by the skin of my teeth from anti depressants to be honest. (Karen)*

The holiday that families could access through the Bushfire fund allowed for reflection, and some spoke of this as a critical time for deciding about the future. Three women described the forthcoming holiday almost as a light at the end of the tunnel but when it actually happened, their partners' behaviour confirmed ongoing problems.

*[I thought] it would be great to be having a holiday but the first few days would be so stressful. [He] would be so picky. (Ruth)*

*I thought we could just chill out as a family, and he was like a caged tiger. And he so didn't want to be there, and he found if he had to actually deal with his children for 24 hours a day. He couldn't deal with that, he just got angry. (Karen)*

*It was supposed to be the biggest holiday we ever had, and pretty much the moment we landed ... he just started flipping, doing strange things. We went for a big bushwalk. He kept getting really cranky with [our son] ... He was raging, hassling him, pushing him, yelling at him. The whole walk was just — this is just the first hours we spent [on our holiday]. (Madeline)*



Another spoke of her friend:

*A close friend whose husband ... fought the fires, saved the house but lost everything – half way on a holiday, he said, ‘I want to leave you’, with the kids in the back seat ... This came out of the blue, she couldn’t believe it. She said it was a holiday from hell. (Sonia)*

**I** *t probably would have gone on forever the ways it was. (Sally)*

*And at another stage:*

*I think that finished us, but we were going to break up one day or another. I think the fires made us so tired and angry at each other. We couldn’t think straight and just got really angry and that finished it. So, yes and no. I don’t think it would’ve been quite as bad as it was if we weren’t so traumatised. (Sally)*

*But when his reaction to the fires was to turn to violence, this simplified her decision to leave.*

*When it got so aggressive it was easy to say, ‘You cannot come home anymore. This has to end’. (Sally)*

## Relationship violence

### Extent of the problem

*I know one of our biggest problems at the moment is domestic violence I’m aware of specific families that I always keep an eye on. (Libby)*

In this research, 16 women contacted WHGNE in regard to their experience of violence from their partners since the fires. For nine women, this was a new and disturbing trend. For a further six women who had experienced some level of violence before the fires — sometimes many years earlier or as a once only occurrence — it sharply escalated in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. Only one reported a similar level of violence before and after, and at the time of the fires, they were separated. These 16 women referred to the stability of their relationship prior to the fires, seven reporting a stable, non-violent relationship. (Table 3 from Vol. 1 is repeated below.)

From Vol 1: Table 3 Characteristics of the 16 Relationships with FV present

FV present after fires	FV before fires	Woman frightened of partner?	Stable non-violent relationship before
<b>16 Yes</b>	1 Yes* <b>9 No</b> <b>6 escalated</b>	15 Yes 1 Missing data	<b>7 Yes</b> 6 No 2 Separated 1 Missing data
	16	16	16

\*Violence caused separation before fires, partner returned after fires when woman was vulnerable.



## Description of family violence

The sensitivity of this research prevents the inclusion of each woman's account of the violence she experienced after the fires. However, the following quotes give a sense of it, without compromising their anonymity. Each quote is from a different woman.

*I could see he was so angry, so angry ... 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 ... and then he physically pushed me, my head opened the front door, and then he pushed me onto the ground and it was just like—you know— doesn't sound bad, [it was] shocking. I don't know if they were cracked or they were bruised but I would say they were bruised cos bruising is more painful, four ribs and the sternum, and I was on Voltaren and Panadol Osteo for two months. I couldn't turn over in bed without—and I'm not a sook—I can't explain what it was like trying to get out of bed. The movement! Oh, man! Anyway what happened then, I think he locked me out of something ... And I tell you I mean it, if he'd been drunk I'd be dead. You just knew he was paying out on you, on everything.*

*I knew, I just knew in my bones that he was going to react. And being alone with him I was fearful ... because when he would rage it would just go on for so long and his voice is so loud and he's nearly six foot four and he would tower over me and yell down at me, 'ARGGHH' like a lion. Like he is. Were you afraid of him? Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely ... He actually pulled the hand brake on [when I was driving] on that road when we broke up.*

*You couldn't appease him ... he'd scream. The goal posts just kept changing ... He was a very intimidating person because he thought he was highly intelligent and he would just use words and twist words around so that 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.*

*Well that night he started punching his fist into the car when we got home, and then he was so drunk that night he could barely stand, so I think he threw his bottles at me a few times down there. He tried to hit me but he was so drunk I just dodged him ... I feel like it's just – I'm on borrowed time.*

*Apparently [my son], who is seven, says to this man who he has never met, 'My Dad is really mean to my Mum'. The poor man is going, 'What?' They both told me, [my older son] said, 'I don't know if [he] should have said something today' and I said, 'What did you say?'. And [he] goes, 'I just told him that [Dad] is mean to my Mum every day. Every day he is just so mean'.*

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

*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 anyone 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. They'd get upset and they'd say, 'I'm scared of Daddy when he gets like that'.*

*He stood up, put his hand on my neck, can't remember which side, and he blocked my airways ... [He did that ]until I desperately lunged for air. He wouldn't have killed me. So I landed on my knee on the slate breaking my knee cap in two.*

*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.*

*After I had the death threat [from him], because then I was living in this house that I didn't know, and I had things happening to the house, people knocking on the door. I was too scared to open the door. I didn't know if someone was going to be there about to blow me away. It sounds like you were quite frightened of him at times. I was. I thought he was going to lose it.*

*Initially, [my son] didn't want to leave me alone – ever – because he thought he had taken on the role of protector when nobody else was there. He was very angry at his father—this is the son who stayed with me ... If I could get over my fear I'd leave [my husband].*

*I've never seen the aggression in him. That anger was absolutely not my husband ... You could hear the frustration and anxiety in his voice ... And his eyes and his face, the anger in his face, he's exhausted and pale but the anger in his face is what scared me ... I've spoken to counsellors and the CAT team and people I trust said, 'You can't do it anymore, he's so aggressive to you, we don't know what he'll do'. I was in a situation that if I left him, I was afraid of what he would do, and if I stayed with him I was afraid of what he would do.*

*We were carrying a sleeper because we were trying to make my son's sand pit, and he was verbally abusive and I got very angry and I just dropped the sleeper and it bounced and hit him and I was like, 'Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry' because I didn't mean to hurt him. And he turned around and his fist stopped very close to me and I think since then I've been very anxious about what he could do. I think our relationship was difficult because he was abusive and very controlling.*

*I begin to see a cycle happening, where he is fine, reasonable, remorseful, he is wanting back into the relationship, and then flies into a rage of colossal scale over something that would seem reasonable, or at least excusable...Every time he gets into a rage he is more abusive and more hurtful and more likely to threaten violence ... [When he came to get his things from the house] he is sending me these text messages...'I just pissed all over the bed'... I'm really scared, even with his brother I'm really scared.*

The women spoke of the effect on them. Again, each quote is from a different woman.

*You lose yourself.*

*I just can't believe it, I am just so sad that it's come to this, so ... it's like he died. It's like I'm a widow but the corpse is still here to beat me up.*

*I ended up getting out of the car ... and not wanting to come back.*

*I mean I'm getting on with it I suppose – I'm feeling quite overwhelmed, honestly, and I would quite like to crawl into bed and cry.*

*Oh, it's horrendous ... it hasn't been an easy couple of years.*

*It's just a lot to take, on top of a fire.*

*Just with the fires, I think everything just caught up with me personally, the violence, leaving my husband, dealing with a young baby and his brother. I lost all confidence pretty much and I just fell apart.*

*I tell you I'm pretty tough but I was really, really scared living there for the next two days. I had a crowbar near one door, I had a hammer near the other door, and I had the doors locked ...and I'm not joking, I'm not easily scared.*

*He just raged at me and yelled at me and banged the table. And I was just shaking like a leaf, as soon as he starts yelling. I used to cope but now I can't ... I became like a cat on a hot tin roof ... I felt completely broken.*

Fourteen women referred to anecdotal evidence and spoke of increased family violence being common knowledge in the communities.

*There are so many people who are being affected after the fires with domestic violence, and so many women who aren't able to seek help. (Kate)*

*One girl, I ran into her I think it was between Christmas and New Year, and she had a big black eye ... just a girl I knew whose husband works with [mine] sometimes. (Tess)*

### **Why women won't speak out — and why we won't listen**

Family violence has always been a taboo subject. It is only in recent years that the work of women in the women's health, sexual assault and family violence field has resulted in mainstream social marketing campaigns and more open community discussion. At an individual level, discussion of a partner's violence remains fraught as women feel disloyal and sometimes, misguidedly, to blame. This is the man she loves, the man with whom she shared a home, a life and often, children. Traditionally, a man's home was his castle - and remnants of these beliefs pervade our society and legal system (as detailed in previous research by WHGNE, 'Raped by a Partner' and 'A Powerful Journey').

The complicity of society in upholding a man's right to rule his kingdom is strong in the everyday. In the aftermath of a disaster, it is stronger.

If a woman in normal circumstances cannot report family violence, the chances of her reporting her husband after a disaster are reduced further — because he is suffering. And, critically for this study, if she does seek help, the complicity of society prevents any action to protect and support her — because he is not himself as a result of the trauma.

*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. I know how real people are, I've learnt that lesson. People just think, 'Nah, they won't do that' but people do do that ... I hid his keys a couple of times because he was pissed or just angry. (Sally)*

Indeed, another ten women made statements that showed compassion for their partners despite the violence.

*And he said like initially after the fire when we were staying with the neighbours he could see flames when he was trying to go to sleep. I think he actually suffered more. (Gaye)*

*I knew he was suffering ... God only knows what happens in that poor little head these days. (Madeline)*

*[H]e actually was a bit vulnerable and I felt sorry for him, and I thought, 'Is this the real person? ... I view him as being unwell, rather than just being a callous bastard like somehow there is a difference there.' (Sally)*

*Weeks and months after that, I struggled to get [my husband] good mental health... He had a history of depression, alcohol abuse and I was highly concerned for his risk of post-traumatic stress disorder ... I didn't want him to just see anyone ... I wanted him to see somebody who was good, so eventually I found him a professor in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ... here's me spending hours and hours and hours trying to find a psychologist ... (Karen)*

*I'm encouraging him this whole time to see a counsellor, 'Please go and see a counsellor... please go and get some medication...and please cut down on the drinking...' Encouraging him doing what I can, trying to bring his friends from about the place into the home. (Emma)*

*He's never said but there's been so many other different people treating him for it that there's no doubt that that's what he has, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Plus for him he had a traumatic upbringing and it triggered. So he had lots of triggers, lots of triggers. (Jenny)*

*They were up to their eyeballs in stress and horrendous stuff. It would have been very difficult for them, even as trained people, to have to deal with the fire, the injured and burned people and the death. He's been exposed to that ... I feel that because he is harbouring so much that it all becomes too much and his responses are now more dramatic. (Yvette)*

*I think the fires turned him back into a soldier and that's why he barked at me. All his soldier stuff, which he told me about when I first met him and he used to cry about ... it all just surfaced and he's never had counselling. (Beth)*

*He was not coping and things like that – he was having his own mental problems, and I was quite compassionate towards him and encouraged him to come back as well, silly enough. (Shelly)*

*We are soul mates. We made our marriage vows, for better worse, richer poorer, sickness and health. He's helped more through my problems and I'm there for him now cos he's admitted he's fire-affected. He's very confused, overwhelmed and I don't know which way he's going to turn. (Leanne)*

### **Anger rather than tears**

According to Western definitions of masculine behaviour, anger is more acceptable than tears. Black Saturday was an assault on a massive scale. Everyone in its way was changed by it. The women described instances they felt damaged their partners. One man told his wife he was physically ill after seeing horrific things.

Another woman said her husband went looking for friends and found bodies in their burnt house. She said she found out through his mate and she knows of other things but he won't talk about any of it. Others, too, saw remains of people, and mostly, took 'a while' to tell their partners. Women explain the lapse of time by wondering if it was to protect their feelings or because the men were having trouble dealing with their experience and couldn't verbalise it without emotion.

Some of the women had partners who were fire-fighters, at the front line of an unprecedented disaster. Their training would not have been adequate preparation for what they had to face, and the sight of injured and burned people. Community members, too, witnessed these sights. The stress of that day and the following weeks of high alert must have been intense, as were the months of the recovery effort afterwards.

*So the boys have been through quite a bit and it's just hard, and of course afterwards they don't know how to deal with stuff and anger seems to be the easiest way to deal with the fear. (Angela)*

*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, like council makes it really hard for people to get their lives together 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)*

*I think the trauma with him had just made him – I think that's how he showed his emotions ... he just got a bit angry ... (Sally)*

*Her partner was a firefighter and had been part of the massive fire fight. They would have been in the front line (most people were fire-fighters or not) and seen the most horrendous of things. He had been part of a very traumatic situation. (Yvette)*

*My husband ... stayed to fight the fires. He experienced significant trauma during that event, including fearing that he was about to die imminently and very painfully, and suffered a debonding experience as a result of that ... Oh yes, the lack of acknowledgement. They are the professional fire-fighters, it was their job to stop the unstoppable. They bear the grief and the loss and the guilt and they had all those people die, and we knew them all... I went to 24 funerals ... The whole community is traumatised, but the DSE boys silently bear the guilt of it because they were the professionals. This is their mindset ... they feel like it was their job to stop it, they feel they failed, and they feel their friends died because of it. And I could see him reliving those moments, where he could have done something differently and saved a life. (Emma)*

Women made the connection between the men's experience of Black Saturday, their feelings of anger, and the seemingly uncensored way they expressed that anger. Where there were indications in the past for some women that their partner might be capable of violence, the fires seemed to dismantle the capacity to regulate behaviour.

*It's in him – and what's happened since the fires is, there seems to be no control on his emotions. He's just completely reactionary, when once he was able to moderate or there was at least some kind of understanding to his rage and anger. There was some context. Now there's no context to his rage. It just seems to be completely random. (Madeline)*

For other women, this lapse manifested as a mask falling from their partner's face, as they sensed another person emerging, or perhaps the real person. One spoke of seeing glimpses of a dark chauvinism, another of some inner turmoil, and yet another of a callousness becoming apparent through his post-fire response to her depression and to the death of his mother.

*He could be a really cold, cold bastard ... Actually this is the thing, it's like I'm seeing this side of him that I never knew existed ... it's almost like a 360, this person you've gone from loving, you start thinking, 'I don't even know who you are mate'. (Gaye)*

*So I really don't know what's going on with my husband except that the person I married has disappeared, or the person I married was actually this person and [now] this person has emerged. (Michelle)*

*[This] is something that's been in him for a long time and I never really made the connection ... After the fires I could clearly see that ... I'm not even saying boo to this guy and I'm not hassling him [or] doing any of these nagging things that you could sort of say that's why he's angry ... [He was] just taking it out on the person that he could and I was the strong one and I kept thinking, 'Better me than the kids'. (Madeline)*

Black Saturday appeared to present these men with an excuse which some men used as explanation for their destructive behaviour. And, indeed, for not working or contributing positively to the family.

*He says, 'I nearly died, so I should be able to ', which I can understand, but it took me months and months to work out that I nearly died too ... He would get angry, every emotional response became anger ... it just kind of gave him permission, because if anyone said anything to him or said to me, '[He's] a bit harsh' or 'He's a bit short' he can say, 'Yeah, well I've been through this and I'm a bit rah rah rah'. (Karen)*

*A lot of it was very embellished ... it was more like he was able to be a bit more outward with his behaviour, his moods and stuff. 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)*

Angela herself became angry at the way her community excused her partner's behaviour.

*You don't want to upset [him] because it just gets big. Do you know what I mean? ... At what point do you go, 'I'm sorry but your behaviour is bad and I'm pointing it out to you', instead of going, 'Let's not say anything cos he'll get upset'. So he gets away with being rude to people because he's unapproachable and people feel intimidated. (Angela)*

*I think [my sister's] friends may be aware of a certain level of abuse in the relationship, but it may be that like a lot of people it is considered part of the stress that follows such a traumatic event ... There is an acceptance that there are relationship pressures and breakups. In a general conversation with some women at the local bakery one day, the comment came up regarding breakups and 'fights' where police were called. It was accepted that it was just because of the fires. I felt that this was not ok, to just accept it. (Yvette)*

*I think everyone put up with stuff they never normally would have put up with. I know a lot of the call outs to the local police in the first 12 months weren't reported ... Everyone was just looking after each other and they all knew it was the fire impact. (Libby)*

**W**hen I spoke to friends about it [severe physical violence], they would turn a blind eye to it and say, you'll sort it out. (Shelly)

*The fire took all of our boundaries away, too, so that was interesting for the first 12 months because everyone would accept bad behaviour - even up to now. Bad behaviour was acceptable. (Libby)*



Women seem to be an easy target if they voiced any concerns about their own situations and actually spoke about violence from a partner.

*I tried to talk to his friend who was monitoring things and at one stage he said, 'You stupid bitch, don't you know he saved your life the other night?'; I'd say, 'Hang on, fires are doing that, he's just an auxiliary and I've been told to go on with my mindless menial domestic tasks of feeding everybody'. (Beth)*

The silencing was managed by individuals and media, and any public discussion of negativity censored.

*I wrote some articles for [the local newspaper] and they were heavily edited, anything that said [for example] when I wrote about the Couples Night over here, [I wrote] 'It was sad to think of those couples who were, for various reasons, unable to attend' and they read into that, 'dead or separated'. So all they published was positive. (Beth)*

Even in relationships not marred by violence, men who were previously easy going and happy changed and became angry. Women spoke of walking on eggshells, and becoming angry themselves.

*Well because he'd gotten, in a way he was sort of a bit angry ...and was being critical and so, more and more, I felt like I couldn't talk to him and didn't know what was the right thing to say, whether something I said was going to make him snap at me. He was never violent towards me and he would never be. (Rosie)*

*I have learnt now not to ask what's wrong because he yells at me ... I am always on edge ... everything I say or do is wrong ... I'm not going through violence at all, but I don't like the way I'm being treated from some people. I have experienced it before and I won't again. I'm not frightened, I'm not scared for my safety. Just angry. (Holly)*

*I just think, 'Fuck off! Stop bloody going on about something that's finished with for God's sake'. This is not my normal self and so we're having to deal with that side of things. (Carla)*

Erica described the change in her husband from being known as 'Happy Sam' (not his real name) to being short-tempered and wanting perfection from her and the children and from his employees. She described his manner with them as 'quite brutal', and this was new, since the fires. His parents witnessed him smashing his own equipment in frustration. In the community, the change was even more obvious. She recounted a disturbing incident when the family had been eating at a sidewalk cafe and saw a minor car accident involving someone else's parked car. Sam asked the young driver and his friends to leave their contact details. When the young people realised it wasn't Sam's car, they asked why he cared:

*And [he] just snapped. He just jumped out of his seat—he didn't even realise he knocked the table, he knocked the kids out of the seats, we lost our dinner—and he jumped up and just sort of went into this gentleman's face and started yelling and screaming about, 'It doesn't matter if it's mine or not, you've caused damage, that's not the right thing to do'. And I could sit there and know where this is from, this was about our property and he was very angry, and I was concerned he was going to start a fight. Now my husband's quite tall, this gentleman wasn't as physically of similar stature as my husband but he was a local and he had friends around the area and we're here with our kids, and fortunately one of the other girls sort of intervened whilst I was picking the kids up off the floor and I just packed up and said, 'We're going' and hopped in the car ... When I said, 'Do you realise you knocked Jimmy*



*(not his real name) out of his seat onto the ground, you knocked the table over and the food on the floor?’ he didn’t know. And he didn’t believe me. And it was only because the kids told him without me being there that ... he realised. (Erica)*

Women, too, were angry, noting their tolerance levels had changed. They felt on edge, with raw emotions, and knew this to be a common occurrence.

*The first session we did, the therapist asks to put down how you felt you were. Some people felt that they were bruised ... still hurting from what was going on because they were really knocked about and are still in the healing process. They were angry. One said she wanted to kill her husband. (Janet)*

**I** *don’t care what he does, because part of me also goes, ‘I wish he’d die, I wish he’d drop dead. Please have a car accident today’. And I have that feeling strongly. I just wish he was dead ... ‘You should have died on the fucking day’. That’s part of it, and, ‘I was there that whole day wishing you weren’t dead and now I wish you had died’.*

*What does he say to that?*

*I haven’t said it to his face, I’ve started a whole series of drawings to come to terms with the transition from life to death, and they’re all called ‘I wish you were dead’.*  
(Michelle)

One woman told us of her own anger that resulted in a physical fight with a neighbour over the events of the day, despite her intention to just sort out the disagreement verbally.

*So I rang [my husband] and I told him ...what happened. And he asked where the kids were and I said, ‘They’re with me’. And he said, ‘Drop them off ... and take your wedding rings off’. I said, ‘I’m not going to get into a physical fight with her, I don’t want to but I am going to go and talk to her’. (Nicki)*

### **Breaking the taboo — in safe places**

Some women sought help to cope with depressed, angry or violent partners from their peers at support groups, and spoke there about what is taboo in everyday settings with friends, family, church or mainstream health providers. In these settings, women felt safe to talk about the relationship stresses reaching breaking point.

*I have women coming here who have been abused physically, and my friend — they’ve been married 20 years and he assaulted her and she had to get a restraining order on him. (Di)*

*[What about the men?]. Oh they’re all fucked ... We were seriously talking about one of the women putting anti depressants ... in her husband’s coffee. Every woman in our support group is affected in some way and is not getting help. (Karen)*

*We’re doing the six sessions [of group therapy] ... It’s very interesting to see where the different women are ...One said she wanted to kill her husband. So that marriage has broken up. (Janet)*

## Changed identity and status

Women spoke of reassessing their entire lives — where to work and where to live and who to love — even decisions about how many children to have. Everything was suddenly up in the air. The wreckage and tumult brought by a disaster is clear in a physical sense, and the emotional upheaval is just as profound. The women spoke of a complete shake-up of their lives and values as they strove to get back on their feet. It was not just a case of putting material things back together and back in place. Relationships and sense of self had to be rebuilt — one way or another.

*So everyone's in that sort of self-assessment time, but at least we understand each other (Annie)*

*I don't think he'll ever be the same person. I don't think any of us will ever be the same people. It puts that different perspective on mortality and the importance of things (Erica)*

*He questions his career a lot these days. We both are, and what we're going to do after this house is built. We don't know what is going to happen in the next six to twelve months. I've got all these ideas in my head but everything's just in shambles at the moment. (Holly)*

Some expressed the same sense of re-assessment, but as something they had now moved through to a new state of freedom and certainty.

*So it's rearranged our priorities and things that used to be important no longer are. Our kids and our life are what are now important, not work, and all the other things we used to think were. (Nicki)*

*I want to do all of the good things, and I don't want to be rich, and I want to give to my community and I work a lot for my community. That's what's important to me now. (Andrea)*

Previous disaster research has found that disaster can, indeed, be a force for positive change and present an opportunity for wholesale restructure, both at an individual and community level. The over-riding sense from the interviews was one of ongoing, intense and multi-layered struggle. Yet some women felt inspired by the struggle and felt that they were better people for having gone through the Black Saturday bushfires.

*I have more empathy for other people, a heightened awareness for things, much more compassion and patience for other people. I used to be quite intolerant of people I considered to be intellectually inferior. I'm not mean, I would never be mean to them, but I'd just go 'I'm not interested in you', just in that really offhand arrogant way. I don't really feel like that anymore, now I've got more compassion for everybody, it doesn't really matter. So a lot less judgmental. It's lovely, it's been like a real opening. (Michelle)*

Some did, in fact, speak about a renewed involvement in the community, and a new relationship with their community. At a basic level, they knew more people, made friends with people they had previously lived alongside but hadn't really known. They felt more connected through becoming active, for example, through arts programs for children or mental health. Two women believed they had greater standing because they chose to stay on in their towns, persisting with their businesses to try and help re-establish their community and help individual people through the services they offered. They were taking yet another financial risk in trusting the community would support their businesses and gained a new respect for that.

Some women, men and children felt empowered by facing death and surviving the fires.

*One woman said the disaster had strengthened her relationship with her husband and that her family is now closer and stronger ... We had to do things we thought we'd never have to do in our whole lives. I stand up for myself a whole lot more now, and for my family, and I'm not afraid of saying how I feel. Before, I was meek and mild and would go with the flow, but it's made all of us a lot stronger. (Vicki)*

*Both my older sons, my 14 year old and my 15 year old were out there fighting with mops and buckets and spades and rakes. They came out rather empowered because they faced the mortality ... they fought the fire. To them it was an empowering thing. They've come out quite strong. (Madeline)*

One woman spoke enthusiastically about her new studies in psychology and her future plans to work with people.

*I feel like I'm going to be the person I should have always been. (Michelle)*

For two women, there was ambiguity in their changed status after the fires. One feeling empowered, yet carrying great sorrow.

*I feel somewhat broken-hearted but at the same time I feel empowered and strong as well. It's like I've got my life back finally and his problem isn't my problem anymore. (Madeline)*

Another woman reflected on the past 20 years and her struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Before the fires, she felt excluded and misunderstood by her community. Now the whole community is suffering and she feels more a part of it.

*I feel everyone got me for the first time in my life. Because I was always the one who was a bit out there. I would say things or I'd let my man sleep with other women because life's too short ... he's only got one life here. People never got me. They thought I was fucked up or wrong or crazy but, I don't know, to me that's how it should be ... You wouldn't wish them to understand. I could never wish anyone to go through what I went through... just to understand me ... I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Same with the fires or the floods. (Sally)*

Another two women told of a new place in their lives for organised religion. One observed her husband's secretive conversion to a cult-like organisation which concerned her because of his vulnerability after the fires. For the second woman, it was a more positive influence as both she and her husband began to attend a Christian Church and were helped by this involvement.

*And I'm going, 'Since when did you become a ..' and but he is just so vulnerable ... and they can see that. (Sally)*

*We were starting to realise that the Christian groups are starting to help us and be with us and we've ended up becoming one of them. That's made the very biggest change in our lives and in Michael's life and to stop his drinking and get control of himself and to have respect. (Jenny)*

Women spoke of the loss of control they felt, as did their partners. First, the fire swiftly removed any illusion of control, and this was followed in the aftermath by a loss of credibility and decision-making power. People were thought of, and talked about, as having 'fire-brain'. They felt patronised.

*All of a sudden, after the fires we had no control of our lives. It was taken away completely. People were making decisions for us and it was a position we had never been in before. (Vicki)*

*When we were outspoken it was almost like being patronised. 'Now, listen to Rob Gordon, you're almost through that stage now, and you need a holiday, dear'. You fit into this package and when people were worked up about industrial estate, they'd say, 'Don't worry about it' and we would think, 'Hang on, you're completely going to change our community'. (Celia)*

*It's in little factions, some are not so good. It's always has been a bit like that I think but there's this incredible group of forward thinkers. I mean we're a community of scientists, bricklayers, artists, doctors, psychologists, authors and bludgers, everything. We've got a lot of really smart people and the authorities treated us like we were all dropkicks. (Andrea)*

*We had a massive loss of confidence. Fatigue will make a coward out of anybody. (Carla)*

Essentially, women spoke of being identified as a Black Saturday bushfire victim, and they resented that limitation and the set of assumptions it conveyed to others.

*You become a person that went through that bushfire. That's what you've become. That's your identity. Not so much now, well we are, but that's your identity. You're one of those people from Kinglake. (Gaye)*

*We have all chosen not to be looked at as fire victims any more. My children hate that label. They hate me saying I come from [this town]. They just want to be them again and not that fire victim. (Vicki)*

## **Support services**

Within a week, the towns affected by Black Saturday were inundated with help through the rapid response organised primarily by government, church and the health and community sector. Local people were overwhelmed by the generosity of people and the support they received. The help offered was practical, monetary and medical. Equally prioritised was mental health, and women spoke of counsellors and church staff being 'thick on the ground' in the early weeks. Many noted that a great comfort was simply talking to people who had been through the same disaster.

*It's true that just talking to others who have been through it is a tremendous help. Talking to people who haven't — well you know what? They don't get it. (Yvette)*

*I actually went to the same counsellor twice and it just didn't — I had a friend at work, so I'd done a lot of, yeah, conversations. That's been my counselling I think. (Janet)*

## **Case managers**

It is clear that when people were allocated a case manager they found helpful, it was enormously valuable. Nine women spoke about how valuable their case managers were, stating they were really helpful, one was 'absolutely brilliant', another 'fantastic'.

*It turned out my case manager was a mental health counsellor, so it all worked out real well. The third one we had, that was. (Sally)*

*We had to chase it up a few times but eventually we were given a case worker who was an absolute star, and we've become close friends with her. She was absolutely wonderful and*

*practically bullied us into chasing up some of the things that we should get, and bending the rules to enable us to get some of the things because we had nothing. (Carla)*

The delay in being assigned a case worker — or the lack of eligibility — was of great concern to some women — adding to the burden of pressures.

*Did they give you a case worker? No...I think that's wrong really, because I had nothing, I was paying rent that was way above me and I lost my job and I had nowhere else to go [because of the fires]. (Shelly)*

*We were told we can all have case workers so when ... we said, 'Oh, we need a case manager' ... she said, 'I've got to place orphans. You are not a priority'. We were told that! 'You are not a priority. (Jenny)*

*I remember my first case manager saying to me, 'We're winding up now and you're probably low priority for another case manager', but I pushed to get another [one]. (Karen)*

*It was interesting, because I was also trying to get a case manager at that point, and when I did they said, 'Oh you found a place?' and I said, 'Well yeah, but I could have used your help a week ago.' ... I didn't get one until late Feb/early March, and I rang the day it was announced because I'm a [health professional] and I know that case managers can be very helpful. (Karen)*

For many of the women in this research, the process of getting and keeping case managers seemed fraught with difficulty, and the high turnover was almost universal amongst them. One woman had nine different case managers, one after another.

*Another case manager who was wonderful, and we lost her because she had too many clients. (Vicki)*

*He's had three different case managers ... and he won't ask for anything. He's not a very demanding personality. (Janet)*

Other women had less than satisfactory experiences of case managers:

*I guess in my situation we had the case managers which I don't think we benefited from, I think I've had nine ... And some I never even met, just over the phone. Some were from Perth living in hotels in Box Hill. (Erica)*

*[I didn't have a case manager until] about two or three months after. I think I got found in a crack and they went, 'What are you doing without a case manager?' (Angela)*

*There was one good one at the beginning but she was only there for about five months. It took us six months to get a case manager. It would have been about July/August before he got a case manager, so the crucial time was sort of gone and he didn't fit the criteria because he got off his backside and got this new business going ... I don't know ... what the setup was with the case workers ... whether their loads were too big or they were just inexperienced. The delivery of service standards I didn't think was particularly good ... obviously the scale of what happened in that incident was huge and it is hard to manage those sorts of things but being able to access good staff for those sorts of things is crucial to people's recovery. (Janet)*

One of the women suggested a better option would be for a case manager to be assigned to each family rather than each individual. Her personal experience shows the range and effectiveness of case managers.

*Every family should have been part of one case manager. We had three. Scarlet, me, Josie (not real names). We all had one. Scarlet's case manager did nothing, Josie's supplied the counselling but no practical help, and mine did everything. (Sonia)*

*One of my case managers, I've had three bush fire case managers and I'm getting my fourth today, one of them was helpful ... Because I think a lot of them come from those church groups and they're not actual professionals, they haven't had enough training ... They are quite variable in their effectiveness. (Karen)*

*Basically, there was just a phone number ... I know in the early days there were men who did ring and they didn't get a call back. They needed someone to talk to, and for some people, that's a big thing to admit that. So a friend decided to ring and register to see what would happen if they would call back, or say, 'Oh, we can see you in two weeks'. No-one called her back. (Celia)*

Yet there was recognition that this was a demanding task – to manage the competing needs of so many people in the highly volatile context of this unprecedented disaster.

*They have tried really hard, all the services. I was not aware of all the services before the fires, so was quite impressed by the support that has been there. It's been a massive learning curve even for the services. (Vicki)*

## **Counselling**

Counselling was provided for bushfire victims from State and Federal Government funds and from donations through the Victorian Bushfire Fund.

Most of the women sought out counselling for themselves and their children and many tried to persuade their partners to take it up. There was a strong sentiment that counselling was a significant help to most women. For many it was ongoing and essential. Some spoke of counsellors going out of their way to help, and indicated that the counselling they received was what made the difference in overcoming difficulties.

*The counselling is very helpful, just to work through problems and set goals for myself and problems with my kids, helping them pretty much as well. (Shelly)*

*I said, 'He just can't do it after work ... so they started coming on a Saturday to see us ... And that's how we got through it, they were wonderful. (Beth)*

*Counselling was offered and still is. I have taken advantage of it. Dr. Rob Gordon was doing group sessions and [VBAF] has provided professional counselling to any family that wants it for no charge. In the early days, the Salvation Army and every second person walking around town was offering counselling. They had an official badge and you could just sit down and have a cup of tea with one of them. (Yvette)*

Several women wondered about the qualifications of the many 'roving counsellors' in the first weeks (and they were in fact, personal support staff or volunteers, for example through the Salvation Army or Red Cross, rather than qualified counsellors). The women who wanted counselling were generally able to access it, although working through the system was not always simple. As with case managers, the high turnover of counsellors and health professionals led to people having to see different counsellors in quick succession, leading to frustration. Sometimes people simply gave up.



*Case managers were meant to be able to refer you but that didn't seem to work ... You talk to various people and they say ... there is unlimited counselling available to bushfire-affected people, but I'm struggling to access that and I'm a health professional. (Karen)*

*We had to chase [the local service] very hard for it over many weeks, and got two very nice chaps who actually came from a marriage counselling/marriage violence background so they weren't able to contribute on the fire side of things because they were in shock themselves We were going through all the baggage things and then they finished up and we had this other lady ... I only saw her twice unfortunately, because she actually had trauma training and she has a gift. I was so upset that we just got started with her and she had to go. And this new guy came along ... I thought he was unprofessional ... and he was supposed to be here this week to see [my partner] and he hasn't turned up and he hasn't contacted her in a week either. (Carla)*

The other issue, particularly for men, is the stigma that some feel is attached to seeking counselling or other psychological help. This reaction is complex and rooted in established norms of what being a man means. One woman noted that counselling was available and lamented that her husband refused it.

*It's a case of lead a horse to water but can't make them drink. There's loads of services [for staff] available through the DSE, but you have to be willing to do it. I've seen a counsellor, my children are all in counselling, and there was so much counselling available. (Emma)*

Just talking to others who had been through the bushfires was often a great source of solace for some.

*It was comradeship of people who got together who'd had such a huge loss – and I don't think that even if a counsellor was standing there right there and then, that's who they would have lent on. They would have lent on their mates and the close-knit community. We know what happened and that's why when the others came in it's like, 'You don't know what happened'. (Di)*

## **Church**

A great advantage of Church based services was the lack of paperwork! Women spoke of all kinds of practical and monetary assistance organised by the various Churches following conversations about what was problematic in their lives. They could give money to people 'who didn't have to fit a box'. The women spoke of Church based groups from Buddhists to Anglicans to the Salvation Army — all providing a unique service. The Red Cross door knocked to make sure people had what they needed in the early weeks after the fires. One woman spoke of becoming a Christian because they were the only people to help them in their time of need and because of the genuine friendship she and her partner found there. Another valued the human approach of the Uniting Church and observed members of the Church quietly noting who amongst the community seemed to be not travelling well and then doing practical things to help.

*And then he just organises for someone to come and cut the wood for the person.(Michelle)*

*He was a born-again Christian fellow ... That's made the very biggest change in our lives and in [my partner's] life and to stop his drinking and get control of himself and to have respect. (Jenny)*

*It was only the Buddhist community who came to help me out. (Di)*



*[The] pastoral worker [here] for the St Mary's church, she's been more value than 10 case workers. She actually goes and sees the people and knows what's going on and helps people and does it discretely and it's not like you have to go and apply, 10 sheets of paper ... just finally giving people what they actually needed. (Janet)*

Informal partnerships between case managers and Church employees were formed to provide essential help to people that otherwise could not be found.

*[Our case manager] attempted about four different organisations to help [and] nobody was able to help. Between our first case manager and CentaCare they've come up with the funding to help us rebuild... so we can actually get access to our property. (Janet)*

In the early days, community meals were supported across the fire-affected communities by Churches, the CFA, Global Care, the Red Cross, Salvation Army and local people themselves. The army set up mobile kitchens in the first weeks to the great appreciation of people struggling to live in damaged properties – sometimes without transport, water or functioning kitchens. Community meals provided a place for people to get together – as well as taking the pressure of trying to cook meals in temporary or shared accommodation. Indeed, the community dinners seemed to fill a need for people who would not access other formal services and offered a gentle, step-by-step way back into socialising.

*At the Church, they had a big tent, 300 meals a day. Once that had to stop, it continued with a Friday night meal. That was really good and a chance for people to get together and support each other. (Celia)*

*Okay, the one thing that we did do was the community dining. We never stopped that, that food and sharing food with people became very, very important and even though we would go to the dinners and not really socialise it was just nice to be with people. Like I'd just like to go and sit in a corner and just be around people and then we'd leave ... you sort of got to know people in a very non-confrontational relaxed way cos you're sort of eating together. And then I started to cook and help them cook, and so you're chopping vegies and over that time you just start to open up. That is a very valuable thing, I can't emphasise how valuable. (Michelle)*

Somewhat controversially, the community meals were stopped after approximately two weeks to prevent 'a dependent community' and to ensure there was no negative effect on local businesses. The recommendation to VBRRRA that meals provided by the army be ceased apparently came from some local people, but it was a recommendation that was vehemently not shared by all.

## **VBBRA**

The women appreciated the flexibility of funding received from VBBRA. The Bush to Beach retreats, funded by VBAF, coordinated by VBRRRA and organised by local women, have been a particular highlight for women, as have programs run by the Firefoxes.

*And then finally I received an email through the Firefoxes here, and they had a boot camp start up and so I put my hand up to join the boot camp and I did a six-week program at the gym. It was great. (Annie)*

*I went to the retreat at Lorne and that was wonderful. I realised [our town] was not the only area affected. It was massive, where the women had come from and that I wasn't going crazy there were others in the same boat as me. That was wonderful. You got the feeling the people were trying to help. (Vicki)*

## The Army

The army, too, was exceptionally welcomed by all. Their presence seemed to bring comfort to the fragile communities. Everyone who spoke of the army spoke in glowing terms. They were on the scene quickly at makeshift camps and set up tents and beds, then stayed to work on supplying water, and help with fencing, bridges and meals. The practical help extended to emotional support that seemed more acceptable to men than formally speaking to counsellors. The unquestioned masculinity of the army officers gave credibility to their assurances. One woman spoke of an army officer reassuring her husband that his emotion was understandable given what he had been through.

*Those first few weeks after the fire, when the roads were closed ... the army came in and started cleaning things up and providing meals, and people really felt the generosity of Australia and the whole world. It was like a big hug. (Ruth)*

*The day the Army came to Kinglake was a wonderful day for me. It just felt fantastic. We were in such chaos, everyone was running around like chooks without their heads ... and it was great to have people show up and just follow orders, you could see somebody in command and somebody else saying 'Put up a tent' and people didn't go 'Well I don't think that tent should go up like that blah blah', they just went 'Yep, put the tent up'. 'Put the food out' ... And they just served food and just said, 'What's yours, love?' and that was it. You know, nobody sort of said, 'And how are you today?' and stuff, cos you just wanted to punch people who did that for quite a long time. (Michelle)*

The army were pulled out after two weeks. Research participants were told this was to return to normality and prevent the communities becoming dependent. It was apparent, though, that this was an unwelcome decision. No-one wanted to see them go. One woman commented:

*Well we had the Army come in soon after but some dickhead in town decided 'No, we need to get back to normal, it's inflicting against local businesses', and sent the Army away. And we went 'Don't go, we need you'. The only person who helped my husband initially was an Army captain who came as a counsellor, and it was pretty thrilling to have a guy in camouflage in your kitchen. A guy in uniform anytime! ... There he was this guy who said to [my husband], 'Mate, I've been in Iraq, I've been in this, I've been in that, this is every bit as crappy', and he made [him] feel like how he felt was valid and he got such a lift from that. (Andrea)*

## Childcare

Another practical and essential service was the provision of childcare - both for parents and children.

*Luckily on the Monday, the 9th, I took [my child] to day care. The director of my day care centre lives in the [valley], and had it not been for the wind change she would have probably lost her home, so she 'got it'. She was really great. They helped with [my son] and if it hadn't have been for day care, he'd be a lot more traumatised than he is. (Karen)*

*My maternal health nurse ... said, 'There's nothing, there's nothing I can access that supports me as a mum with a preschooler', and we started talking and they had the capacity to divert some funds to set up a group ... it was about bringing people who lost their homes together, who had preschoolers, so we just started meeting. The ladies they had looking after the kids were fantastic and very flexible, so if the kids were upset they'd just bring them in and do an activity in wherever we were sitting. (Erica)*

## System failure for women affected by family violence

### Lack of accurate statistics

During the worker interview component of this research (Vol 4), we were advised by VBRRA that the case management system was established to deal with a range of needs, including family violence, as they were aware that family violence was likely to increase after a disaster.

The Victorian Bushfire Case Management System (VBCMS) began only days after Black Saturday, on 13.2.2009 and involved the coordination of 74 Federal, State and Local Government and non-government agencies. It was overseen by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and aimed to provide a case manager for up to two years to every fire-affected household. The DHS evaluation of the system reported that by June 2010, 5506 households had been allocated a case manager — 2,211 of these in Murrindindi and 379 in Mitchell Shires (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, pp. 28,30).

*The objective of the VBCMS was to ease access to the plethora of services, grants and information available to people; to strengthen the capacity of traumatised people over time; and to contribute to a reduction in the stressors affecting people through their recovery. (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 2)*

In the two years since the Black Saturday bushfires, DHS case management statistics show that in the Hume region there were only nine cases of family violence recorded by case managers (statistics provided at interview). The Hume region covers a fifth of the State and includes 12 Local Government Areas including Mitchell and Murrindindi and the fire-affected shire of Alpine. The explanation suggested for this incredible figure of nine cases of family violence in two years of case management is that case managers would have been sensitive in how they chose to record the presenting issues and would have recorded the main issues. The low figures are likely to reflect the taboo many women faced in revealing their partner was violent towards them. Many case managers were not qualified to work with family violence, and it appeared that family violence was not recorded at a broader systems level across existing and new services after Black Saturday (Parkinson, et al., 2011).

*The case managers didn't even ask about it [family violence]. All they wanted to know is what people needed. (Di)*

*They didn't all have the exact same training. The case managers [were not] asking the question about domestic violence at any point ... The same with children who've been abused, no-one asks. People are suspicious but they don't ask. (Sonia)*

The DHS evaluation reports that it may not be possible to achieve the recommended target of Bachelor degree qualifications in a health or human services or related field for all case managers in a massive disaster like Black Saturday. The qualifications of case managers fell well short of this target:

*A survey of case managers in June 2009 found that just over half (53%) had completed study in a relevant area. Some 36% of case managers were qualified social workers, nurses, occupational therapists and psychologists; another 18% had qualifications in fields such as community, welfare, family and youth studies. Of the case managers who had not completed study in a relevant area, 20% had qualifications in a range of other areas including law, science and arts. (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 50)*

In its evaluation, the 510 respondents were asked how satisfied they were with assistance from their case manager in 27 different areas from counselling to mental health to accommodation, banking and childcare. There was no item for family violence (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 45). The report includes a section on the special needs of vulnerable groups but women experiencing or at risk of violence are not mentioned.

*The case management and disaster recovery literature indicates that there are certain population groups that are particularly vulnerable following disasters. The literature points to people with pre-existing vulnerabilities including people with disabilities, children, the elderly and individuals with limited English proficiency. (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011, p. 65)*

Local workers, too, were frustrated by the lack of accurate statistics recorded by authorities.

*I had this discussion with ... DHS yesterday...I said, 'Can you please explain to me where your stats come from?' She said, 'We get them from all over'. And I go, 'No you don't because I know from Centacare you haven't got any off them and they've got six counsellors and they're fully booked and you haven't got their stats'. (Libby)*

### **Police and Legal responses**

The actions of police regarding family violence in the aftermath of Black Saturday have been described by some community members as appropriate and sensitive to the circumstances of men who had been traumatised by the fires. Yet, this cautious approach means police data may be incomplete, given the accounts in this report that family violence incident reports were not always made by police despite their attendance. A second issue is the question of whether family violence was informally relegated to a low priority as demand on policing increased following the disaster. This research suggests that police may have had a greater tendency to excuse the men's behaviour because they knew the man and the stresses faced by Black Saturday survivors.

Some welcome this approach as sensitive and sensible, fearing the effect of a police report or criminal charges on the health and wellbeing of already scarred and suffering men. Further investigation into family violence after disaster is warranted and should include recommendations for preventative and punitive measures that are sensitive to post-disaster conditions.

Our stated position is unequivocal — that women, too, were survivors of Black Saturday and it is not acceptable to expect them to suffer further assaults because their partner is not coping.

*[Police not charging] has been really good. I mean it probably isn't good for some people and in really highly physical violent relationships it wouldn't be good. But it was good for the community because people were behaving and doing things that they wouldn't normally do, out of not knowing how to cope, like drink driving... Local coppers would come up and say, 'Settle down' and they'd talk to them and they'd try to sort it out and refer them to different services but they wouldn't write a report on it which was really great. I thought it was really great because ... they were doing a lot of community building at the same time ... They're great blokes and they're very supportive like that – because it was just creating secondary trauma again. They know all the locals really well and they know it's not their normal personality. They're not going to charge them for something because they know it is going to exacerbate their condition ... Knowing it could send this guy over the edge and then commit suicide, or this family environment is going to be heaps worse off because you know he's going to go to court and be fined or put in jail. As a community we all work with these families but statistically it doesn't show. (Libby)*

In addition to ethics approval received from North East Health and Monash University, WHGNE applied for research approval from the Victoria Police Research Coordinating Committee (RCC) and the Victorian Police Human research Ethics Committee (VPHREC) in order to include Victoria Police in this research. The RCC declined to approve the application, stating there were 'a number of reasons for the decision, including that the participation of members was not supported by local and regional managers'. We were invited to submit a revised application addressing a number of issues including: 'The Committee suggests the recruitment draft flyer for women

be altered to be neutral, to allow for a more representative sample of participants. Specifically removing or altering question three 'Have you experienced violence since the Black Saturday bushfires'. Resubmission would have meant omitting the two key features of the research which is that it was about women and about violence. (Victoria Police RCC did allow our research into partner rape in 2007. It was well received by Victoria Police and received an award from the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2011.)

The response of police to family violence after a disaster is complex. An understanding of what guides police action after disasters is essential to future planning. We would urge further research into this.

Six women in this research had police involvement. Table 6 gives a summary of what happened.

Table 6: Police response to family violence for six women

<p><b>Yvette</b></p>	<p><i>[My sister] said a neighbour or someone must have called the police. When they arrived, the police were told that everything was fine [so nothing happened]. This was a case of severe and ongoing family violence.</i></p>
<p><b>Tess</b> said police attended two hours after she phoned, and a day or two later contacted him about his alcohol problem rather than the violence against her. She has never received a follow up call from police or from Family Violence services referred by police.</p>	<p><i>I think it must have been just before Christmas I called the cops at one point. I called 000 and it took them two hours to get here. I mean I was scared, I wouldn't have called them otherwise ... I went to the police and then he didn't even know that they'd come because he was in bed, it was blown over by then. And they told me they were going to ring in the next few days or something to see how I was. I never heard back from them at all ... But then he [called me and] he said to me, 'Oh, the police called me and asked me did I want counselling for my alcohol problem' - cos he had no idea that they'd come—and I said, 'Okay, what did you say?' and he said, 'I said how did you get my number and I haven't got an alcohol problem'.</i></p> <p><i>But I thought that was a bit—I mean they knew he'd gone to bed ... I was scared stiff.</i></p>
<p><b>Annie</b> said the police laughed at her when she showed them a death threat in a text from her ex-husband.</p>	<p><i>After I had the death threat, because then I was living in this house that I didn't know and I had things happening to the house, people knocking on the door, I was too scared to open the door, I didn't know if someone was going to be there about to blow me away.</i></p> <p><i>What was the police response with the intimidation?</i></p> <p><i>He laughed at me.</i></p> <p><i>Why would he laugh at you? Did you show [the death threat text] to him?</i></p> <p><i>Yes I did.</i></p>



<p><b>Gaye</b> called the police. They attended and advised her that they had known him for a long time and he was a good bloke.</p>	<p><i>The police made him go, I stayed in the bungalow. It wasn't good. And the dogs were locked up and the police gave me, I think, till Tuesday to get out .. And you knew that this is it, there's no going back here, this is it, we're finished. And then of course you've got the time to work out whether you're going to get him charged,</i></p> <p><i>And the police were helpful?</i></p> <p><i>No, no they weren't helpful at all actually ... No, they were very chauvinistic about it all ... They just weren't helpful. It was like, 'We don't really want to know and we've known [him] all his life... He's a good bloke.</i></p> <p><i>Was there a report?</i></p> <p><i>No, I don't think so, and that's what ... my case manager said, she said, 'When there's been a report of domestic violence they've got to do something about it' ... No, they didn't do whatever they were meant to do ... [My case manager] is very professional—and even she concluded that they were dick heads. And that was that. And then [the police officer] rang me when I was in Seymour just to follow up, and I thought, 'Yeah you've been given a bloody rah-rah-up from the big boss'.</i></p>
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<p><b>Emma</b> said police came quickly to her ex-husband's suicide attempt and put him in custody, but he texted her all night with death threats while he was in police custody.</p>	<p><i>I call the police. He goes back and he locks the door. I'm afraid that he's going to hang himself, I know it's going to take the police 10 minutes to get there and I know that he can die in three ...So I'm banging on the door, I'm screaming out for whoever there is, somebody to come with a bar and help me get this fucking door open because my husband is going to kill himself. The police arrive. [My husband is] aggressive, he's hostile, swearing, he's out of control, he's drunk out of his mind, he's so off beam. He says he's not going to do anything while I'm at the scene, so I go a little further away and let the police do what they need to do. They get him into the car, they section him under the Mental Health Act and they take him... While he is in police custody, he texts me that I will die from his hands ... if he every sees me again he'll punch every tooth out of my head and it continues, it continues all night. I think eventually his phone goes flat. He calls me the next morning, 'You filthy whore... How could you do this...' It's all recriminations, all nastiness, so I am genuinely worried at this point that he is going to make good on his threats, I'm worried for me and the kids.</i></p>
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## **Shelly**

couldn't get police to attend on a number of occasions. She put it down to them being busy on important fire-related issues. When they did attend, they failed to attend court for his breach of the Intervention Order.

*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. I rang the police, they came, he admitted it, they arrested him, and the police said to me, 'He'll be going to court again because he just breached the intervention order. We'll speak to you tomorrow', which never happened. And he ended up going to court and the police didn't even show up there at all.*

*So the police didn't testify?*

*No...*

*I should have put a complaint to the police for not going to court ... if they had done their job properly I would not be in this mess now ... They never told me [why]. But speaking to my [police officer] friend ... she said they were very busy, they were all dealing with the fires ... Apparently I'm not that important.*

*You said you contacted the police four times for breaches, what kind of conversation did they have with you about it?*

*One of the police officers ... suggested to move to Rosebud, he said, 'A lot of single parents move to Rosebud, you should go down there'. My mum was there and heard all that.*

*So where are you at now with your ex?*

*I have to see him every week. The court basically downplayed a lot of the violence and he actually has to come to my home to get the kids now, and I said all along I want a public place and I can't do anything about it. I've spoken to the police about it and they said 'Sorry love you can't do anything about it. '... Legal aid could not represent me because my ex had used legal aid in the past.*

*... It's funny because the first time I reported the domestic violence to the police, the police attended and it was 2am, they would have to have been called from their homes. They were badgering me, saying most women who go through something like this just turn around tomorrow and withdraw, and they didn't want to do anything. These were two male police officers. They were not very helpful. They were pretty negative about it ... The police said we can't do much about it, we can't get him out of the house, even though he was drunk, and he was violent. They left him in the house and I left, I was safe at my mum and dad's. The next day he rang me and said I'm going to trash the house. I rang 000 and I said what happened, and they said there are no police officers to attend. Next day I went to the doctor, to the police station, made my statement and then went home and the house was destroyed. I spoke to the main officer that was dealing with it and he said, it's his house as well, we can't do much about it ...*

*[Regarding his lack of care with the children] They caught him, but they gave him a warning, they didn't fine him, because, from what I understand, and also knowing a police officer, they need to get the locals' trust, they can't be too hard on locals. Yet, I've got a young child jumping all around in a car seat! .. I said I definitely need [an IO] after today. [The police officer] said, 'Are you sure about that? It's going to really affect him'.*



## The health and community sector

Women seeking help with family violence were ultimately not well served by the health professionals they saw. When women did break the taboo to speak about their partner's violence, they felt disloyal to their partner, and sometimes felt reprimanded by the person they confided in, which effectively cut off seeking support from other people. Some women feared they were just complaining and wastefully accessing services that others could more justifiably benefit from. In the aftermath of Black Saturday, they felt that others were so much worse off. This misconception was, surprisingly, reinforced by one woman's counsellor.

*We are so fortunate and have and all this kindness and generosity. And how can I complain about anything? (Ruth)*

*I said, 'You must get sick of people and their sob tales' and she 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 and James are comparatively easy'. (Beth)*

The comparatively easy situation was one where Beth's partner choked her, only dropping her when she was gasping for breath, and breaking her kneecap on the tiled floor. It is clear that few case managers had any knowledge or understanding of the dynamics of family violence (Parkinson, et al., 2011) and the women's accounts told of some case managers, counsellors and psychologists inadequately responding to signs and even direct requests for help.

*He was getting very angry at a situation and then he would jump to another situation and get angry at that ... So they sent a psychologist to the home, he answered the front door and, 'No, no, there's nothing wrong, everything's wonderful' and the psychologist went away. (Kate)*

*I rang [his counsellor] and said, 'Listen, you need to know it's not all rosy here, he needs help, he's angry, he's scaring me, this is not healthy for a baby, not for a [child] to be around, it's not right'. And then as soon as she started talking to him in the next session he comes home and goes, 'That was my final session, she says I'm doing really well'. And it's like, 'Yeah, I know mate, yeah sure'. (Angela)*

*He's under a psychologist at the moment, which he loves ... He saw him yesterday and I said, 'Did you tell [him] that you're back on the drugs?' [smoking dope] and he goes, 'No, why would I tell him that?' (Libby)*

Generational change in how we raise boys and girls seems further away now than for the last generation. The conservatism of the 21st century has seen a move towards more rigid gendered roles than in previous decades. With more extreme weather events caused by climate change, disasters are already a more frequent occurrence. Acknowledging that men are overwhelmingly reluctant to seek help for any personal problem, physical or mental, the women considered the inadequacies of the help their partners were offered — or not offered.

The very male cultures in the CFA and DSE undermined successful interventions. 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.

*There should have been help straight away, not six to eight months later, when they put their hand up for it [which is] only when they are at the point that something bad is going to happen. It's a very tough manly man thing [in that organisation], and it was seen as a*

*bit of a stigma, not so much now, but it was. They had all these group counselling sessions. Guys aren't necessarily going to open up to a group of guys. (Holly)*

*Everyone has to do it so they're not stigmatised. He kept saying 'If I go and have counselling I'll lose my job.' It's so crazy, but he was crazy! He was not thinking straight. In that processing, in that malfunctioning process that was actually the case. He would lose his job if he sought help. And he just didn't want it anyway because it was just too hard. (Emma)*

In the broader community, too, efforts to engage men have not reached these women's partners.

*I don't know how to make it more accessible. They've tried, they've done the talks at the football club. Because there is this mental illness in the men and children ...I don't know how. You need to ask the blokes how to fix the blokes, don't you? (Karen)*

*It's largely come about because men don't talk about what they're going through, they keep it all in and they're in denial and I don't know how you get someone like my husband particularly, and there's plenty more like him, to talk about it, to go and see someone to talk about it [...] he just won't. He still hasn't been to see anybody professionally ... he won't even go to a GP. He absolutely refuses to come to any, and I have begged and pleaded for him to come to any counselling but he absolutely refuses, no way. He tells me he's alright and then only, Thursday, some friends of ours from Queensland called in that we hadn't seen since before the fires and we were sitting down and starting to talk about it and he just had to get up and leave. He got up and went outside. He's always saying, 'I'm fine, I'm fine.' (Rosie)*

### **'It's alright to talk about it, but sometimes they've got to actually follow through'**

Counselling seemed to be offered as the panacea for all. However, women and children living with a violent man need more. As Tess said, 'It's alright to talk about it, but sometimes they've got to actually follow through'. When women were able to overcome the silencing by a complicit society and voiced their concerns – to friends, family or health professionals – it was sometimes useful, and at other times, added to the damage.

There was unspoken yet enormous pressure not to be 'disloyal' and not to speak about men's violence for all the reasons of what they had been through, and how heroic they had been, and how they were acting out of character, and it was just the alcohol and they were depressed or feeling suicidal. Despite this, some women had the courage to speak about their partner's violence and to ask for help. Even then, women were not heard on this topic.

Vignettes from eight women follow. They show that when women went to family, they 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 and sometimes fearful of violence or confrontation themselves, leaving the woman unsupported and making excuses for the man. Sometimes, women just kept trying to get help from different people, different services. 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 pass 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.

**Ruth** found counselling very useful and was about to begin joint counselling with her husband. She told her husband's family of their relationship troubles and she said they witnessed his changed behaviour on a family camping trip but they felt he was throwing himself into his work

and dealing with it in his own way.

**Gaye** told her friends at her two workplaces. She regretted telling one workplace because their reaction was to be fearful that her partner would attack them. The other workplace offered good support and counselling.

*I told all my friends, I told them at work, I told them at [my other workplace], I think that was a stupid thing to do ... I don't think that helped. I probably shouldn't have said anything to them ... I think they thought that [he] might come down and belt the crap out of me [there], and [the boss is] only about this big. (Gaye)*

**Angela** told friends who were reluctant to come around because of the tension. She said she felt unsupported because they did not want to upset him and excused his bad behaviour. Although her partner stopped his sessions when Angela told his counsellor about his violence, her own counsellor was helpful and gave her referrals to Family Violence services.

**Karen** sought help with family violence issues from her bushfire support group, her case manager, and her Maternal and Child Health Nurse, who phoned with Family Violence contact numbers. The group facilitator was preoccupied with her own situation and didn't offer to help. When she told her partner's family, they suggested she was over-reacting and not caring for him properly. She spoke to her counsellor:

*So I said I was frightened, and the counsellor ... said to me in front of [my partner] 'Are you frightened physically?' and I said, 'No' because I wasn't about to say yes in front of him because God knows what would have happened if I had said that. And she never followed up, she never phoned afterwards until she heard, when we were due for our next appointment, that we had separated, and I got my bush fire counsellor to call her. We played phone tennis and then I gave up. (Karen)*

**Sally** had a quick turnover of three different case managers and phoned a leading disaster psychologist. 'He talked to me for two or three hours on the phone because he didn't have any room in his case load ... so we've tried a few ... We have tried just about everything.'

**Beth** told her counsellor, during a joint session, that her partner blocked her airways and broke her kneecap. He denied it and it seemed the counsellor thought others more deserving of help. She then told her partner's friend, who proceeded to be verbally abusive to her. The best support she received was a conversation with a casual acquaintance.

**Shelly** had good support from her parents who shared their home with her and her children for about seven months on and off. She was refused a case manager. Her Family Violence worker was unable to provide effective assistance and wrote a case study for publication detailing the ways the system had failed her.

**T**ess wanted help to leave her husband after his violence escalated after the fires. She called a DV service and spoke to two different workers.

*They were really nice, they took all the details, and I told them stuff that I'd never told anyone, I really let it all out ... And so it came out in the conversation with Berry Street [that I was going to see a new bushfire case manager], and then it was like, 'Okay, you should tell this case manager about all this' and I said, 'Oh, I don't know her, I've only spoken to her on the phone, I don't know her, I don't know if I'd feel comfortable'. 'Well, see how you go when you go and see her' and whatever ... I didn't feel comfortable talking to her. That wasn't her focus ... I never said a word to her ... I really felt like the last one, the case worker, I felt sorry for her because it was just dumped on her and I'm not sure what her qualifications were or whatever.*

*So they didn't put you on to a domestic violence worker?*

*No. I think the two that I originally spoke to ... were, I only spoke to them on the phone but they didn't offer for any counselling or anything.*

*And they didn't help with any accommodation?*

*No, as soon as they knew I was about to see the bushfire case manager it was like passing the buck. That's what it felt like ... I think it was a lot more than what she'd signed on for as a bushfire case manager. That was sort of the end of it. It felt a bit humiliating,*



# The way he tells it

Relationships after Black Saturday

Vol. 4 A Gut Feeling – The Workers' Accounts



Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. PO Box 853, Wangaratta, Victoria, 3677.

Phone: 03 5722 3009 Fax: 03 5722 3020

[whealth@whealth.com.au](mailto:whealth@whealth.com.au)

[www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au)

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Written by Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara.

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## Introduction

This part of the research began as WHGNE sought advice from workers ‘on-the-ground’ in the fire-affected Mitchell and Murrindindi shires as to the sensitivities in the communities and the best time for us to approach women for interviews. It was striking that much discussion focussed on whether it was appropriate to investigate women’s experience of violence post-disaster. Some workers suggested removing the word ‘violence’ from the recruitment flyer, and others agreed to posting it in their workplaces but warned that women would not respond to it. Victoria Police, too, in our negotiations to obtain ethics approval suggested removing references to violence. Permission was ultimately not approved by the Research Coordinating Committee (see ‘Police and legal responses to post-disaster violence’ in Vol. 1).

In this section, workers reiterated what the women told us about relationships and communities in the aftermath of Black Saturday. Yet, where there was a clear sense amongst the women (see Volume 3) that violence had increased after the fires, this was not universally accepted by all the workers. Some workers rejected this, stating that family violence was occurring only in relationships where men had previously been violent, and that relationships that broke up were only those that had been troubled beforehand. The opposition to the possibility of increased violence against women after this disaster was curious. While Victoria Police were transparent that they did not support the participation of police members, several workers who did participate in the interviews echoed the sense that this research was unnecessary.

It became clear that this reluctance came from a desire to protect a vulnerable community.

*There was a sense of tragedy. The world was not a safe place anymore. My response was different to the work I’d done before, even in hospitals - in all sorts of hospital situations. It’s very different when it’s happening at your back door. (Mental Health Practitioners - 2 people)*

Perhaps our role as representing a women’s health service that included the two shires in our region and that had attracted funding to run a Women Gathering program to support women’s groups after the fires, however, allowed our presence during this sensitive time.

Despite the obvious sensitivities involved in researching the possibility of increased family violence after Black Saturday, and concerns about further traumatisation that may be caused by this research, one worker poignantly captured the essence of why family violence cannot be ignored after disasters.

*[With] one family in particular — we’ve been helping a lot with referrals for domestic violence — there have been a lot of tragic things happening in that 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. His wife also reported to [a community worker] that he had been suicidal for some time, and did, eventually commit suicide. (Community development, health or social worker)*

The details of this account have been removed to preserve confidentiality and avoid charges of being injudicious. The sensitivities are raw in these communities and many of the accounts we included in the draft have been removed after requests from research participants.

We do not intrude on sensitive, traumatised communities in order to blame men and bring further hurt. This research aims to draw attention to increased family violence in order to prevent or effectively respond to it.



## Notes on the sample

The sample of workers is described in Vol. 1 (Methodology). Table 7, below, groups the workers into categories as a way of preserving confidentiality and indicates whether they were interviewed individually or were part of a focus group. The bracketed numbers in the 'Focus Group' column show how many people were involved in each focus group. Total consultations show 49 as two people were interviewed alone and also attended a focus group.

Throughout this Volume, quotes will be identified to show the source, e.g. Case management FG 1, Mental health practitioner 2. Where there were focus groups, the identifier states how many people were present.

Table 7: Workers consultation matrix

	Focus Group	Individual	Total
Community development/health or social worker (CHS, Local Government, Church, etc.)	4 (3,3,3,2*)	4	15
Case management	2 (6, 2)		8
State government/ VBRRA/ Community recovery	1 (4)	8	12
Mental health practitioner	1 (2)	2	4
Canberra fires		1	1
Ash Wednesday fires		1	1
Community volunteers	1 (8)		8
	<b>33 people 9 focus groups</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>49 (47 individuals – 2 repeats)</b>
Withdrawn		1	1
Not included	2 (2, 6) **	1***	9

\*Number present at each focus group \*\* Information not relevant \*\*\*Police Officer interview could not be included

## Impact on workers

Many workers involved in the recovery and reconstructions efforts in the aftermath of Black Saturday were locals, having lived decades in the one area. They often knew the people who were victims of the fires as friends, neighbours or acquaintances or knew them through their children. Some workers had fought and survived the fires, some had watched with fear as the fires approached. Some suffered personal and property losses.

In the aftermath, upon return to work, their own loss, fear and anguish had to co-exist with their professionalism. Many did not know what was going to happen to their own lives, families and homes, yet attended to others from nine to five.

*All the council staff who had houses in the area [were affected] but they had to be working and doing all sorts of things. (Community Development, health or social worker – 3 people)*

*The bushfire stopped six minutes from our house. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*As workers it was chaos. There was confusion. It was awful. We were living in it. The smoke was there constantly for a couple of weeks. The fire kept burning for weeks. Black Saturday was like Black Fortnight really. We all live on land and we were all concerned. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*From day one after the fires, on Feb 7, I was on the first strike team down to Kilmore East and spent the day fighting fires. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*There is a parallel process between workers and people because all have been affected. (Mental Health Practitioners — 2 people)*

Many workers shared the symptoms of their clients, with feelings of anxiety, sleeplessness and nightmares that continued long after Black Saturday.

*The event was overwhelming for everyone and everyone was hyper sensitised. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*I'm exhausted mentally, and physically a bit too. At the time, I didn't realise how much it impacted on us. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*It really impacted on me, and we have decided to move. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

Daily work was filled with recollections of the days of fire threat and impact. This inevitably affected even the most professional of workers.

*We never knew what was going to walk through that door. The stories people came to tell us! After a while I'd get home and switch off the news. It was overload ... In the initial months it was harrowing. There was no escape from it. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery — 4 people)*

*I need to make a space to be really present with that person. When I leave, I think, 'What do I do with all of this?' and it will take me a day or two. (Mental Health Practitioners — 2 people)*

Case managers — employed urgently to meet the ever-growing needs of people in crisis — took on workloads and tasks that many were not trained for, and their own health and wellbeing may have been affected.

*Case managers are not used to hearing those stories. And when this system closes we will have a group of people affected by vicarious trauma who are not aware of it. It is a big issue. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

As we checked this report with workers and women, some pointed to their own recovery and stoicism as evidence that not everyone carries the scars of Black Saturday. Yet, typically there was a strong sense that many — perhaps most — people have not recovered and that any expectation that this would have happened is misplaced. Many workers conveyed a sense of ongoing struggle that is the legacy of this disaster.

*One of the things that we saw was the mental illness that comes out of these disasters ... We haven't seen anything like what we're going to see in another six, twelve, eighteen months time. I just see it festering in people. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

## The context

### Workers' descriptions of fire-affected communities

The data from worker interviews was wide-ranging, covering issues related to the mechanics of the recovery and reconstruction phases and bureaucratic decision-making. However, as other research had this focus and as we are funded to consider issues affecting women, this research concentrated on women's experiences and on relationship issues and family violence in the aftermath of this disaster. Our purpose is to improve disaster response to women, particularly in relation to family violence.

We first sought to understand the sensitivities that existed and the workers' thoughts on the best time to begin consulting women. The workers' responses provided a wealth of information on how Black Saturday affected the communities they lived or worked in — sometimes both. Their reports painted the same picture as the women's would later (see Vol. 3). They told of communities struggling to cope with the traumatic events of the day, and the ongoing burdens that accompanied recovery and reconstruction. They told of previous traumas exacerbated by Black Saturday, of mental health issues, community violence and widespread use of alcohol and drugs. Some spoke of the detrimental effect of the disaster on young people.

*You feel like we're all capable of anything. We didn't know that before. You had your parameters and now we're just all bobbing around bumping into each other. The things we knew before without question are no longer there. There is fragility that comes with knowing we have a tenuous grip on life. We all got up that morning that hot summer day and none of us knew that could be our last day on earth. (Community Volunteers - 8 people)*

The strands of stress, alcohol, drugs and violence seemed to be interwoven in conversations with workers. There was clearly a cultural acceptance of alcohol as a valid response to events yet, for some, it became a trigger for abusive behaviour and relationship breakdown. Workers had observed some people respond to the stress they were under by becoming violent.

*I think we can't mention this stuff [family violence] without mentioning the impact of drug and alcohol misuse. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

*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)*

It appeared that alcohol and drug use increased post-fire as people struggled to cope with the wholesale destruction of property and life and ongoing frustrations. Workers described many people self-medicating with alcohol to escape the pain and they linked the increased alcohol to men's use of violence.

*Both women and men are admitting to engaging in a lot more drinking and smoking both legal and illegal substances. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*The people that say they shouldn't do that, well who are they to say they shouldn't be doing it? ... it's a matter of, I guess, how much they're drinking and what's then happening when they're going home. But them being allowed to do that, that's what blokes do. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

Alcohol is very much a part of the Australian culture and some workers viewed its use as an understandable, if not legitimate, response to the fires. People's use of alcohol served as an alternative to formal counselling and a way for people to open up to others.

*We put on special events which often involved a slab of beer in which the men would talk about that stuff. (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)*

*The blokes get a few drinks into them and they talk about shit and that's their form of counselling. That's what they do. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

Yet, rather than alleviating stress, for some, alcohol was said to ease the shift from stress to violence.

*It's obviously when people have a violent tendency or didn't have one before and now have found they do have one, it's frustration that starts it off. Alcohol is coming through as an issue and I imagine that changes people. I know that's apparently been a real issue ... Again, in some of those areas it would have been there beforehand but apparently it's worse. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)*

The artificial social atmosphere that occurred when people were confined to small temporary living quarters or compelled to share housing further added to a climate where alcohol (and often drug) consumption, became, for some, the norm.

*When you have people living in other people's houses together ... you'd be being together and having a few drinks and a few more drinks and a few more drinks, and for some of the men it would be a way of ... talking about what their feelings were. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

*A lot of heavy drinking went on with men early on ... The socialising happened around the pub and that's where you console yourself. Especially in winter, with delays in building, you're stuck in a small space, with a lot of relationship problems. (Case Management – 6 people)*

There was a two-way link between finance and drugs and alcohol. One worker explained that the increased and often excessive drinking and smoking added to financial strain, and another noted that disaster relief money was sometimes spent in this way. He suggested that, instead, relief could be provided in food vouchers or necessary items.

*The financial strains are significant and exacerbated by the increase in drinking and smoking. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*You don't go [to] people who've just gone through a disaster and say, 'Here's a couple of grand mate, go and get pissed and you'll feel all right' because quite frankly, that's what they did. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)*

### **Changed communities**

The communities changed. The physical change was striking with damage and devastation to property and landscape. The population, too, changed as people left their communities to find accommodation or employment. Many still had not returned almost three years later. Until the 2011 ABS Census is released, the extent of population reduction will not be known. From observation, workers described a much reduced population

*There was originally a population [here] of approximately 1200 and now it's about 400.  
(Community development, health or social worker)*

*We've suddenly lost 72% of our housing, our town looks different, it's completely different.  
(Community development, health or social worker)*

For residents who stayed or returned early, turmoil in personal circumstances was reflected at the community level.

*People are behaving in unexpected and unfamiliar ways ... I think we could say we are all different people. Nobody is the same as on the 6th of February. (Community Volunteers – 8 people)*

*We all fessed up that we spent hours crying in the car ... I was completely insane in charge of a motor vehicle. We were all getting around like that. We were a very seriously flawed community. (Community Volunteers - 8 people)*

*I hardly recognise the place now. I look around and I don't know what ethos it is we hold on to. (Community Volunteers – 8 people)*

The Black Saturday fire-affected areas are sometimes represented as a homogeneous group whose collective suffering and loss somehow unites them. The reality is of course, vastly different. Our research was confined to the shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi. Geographically they share a border, yet residents felt the communities within these shires differed greatly. Briefly, Marysville was predominately a tourism town, with 'Bed and Breakfasts' the staple of a well-established and older cohort, many who lived away from the town. Flowerdale, in contrast, is picturesque, yet sparsely populated and less affluent. For some wanting anonymity, it was a haven. Kinglake is often described as being split between the haves and the have nots, with divisions between Kinglake and Kinglake West far preceding the fires. These are generalities, yet the conflicts that arose after the fires in some ways reflected tensions that had bubbled away under the surface for a long time.

*There's always been violence in the community. It's part of Kinglake. It's an ongoing thing.  
(Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*Kinglake/Kinglake West how fractured that is, and Clonbinane ... in the eastern region, you know the people never spoke to each other before the fires so they certainly don't speak to each other after the fires. (Case management — 2 people)*

## **Community violence**

Anger emerged within communities with conflicting views of residents leading to factions as to what the new 'normal' might look like. Communities struggled to imagine a shared future. While some people retreated to heal, others came forward to take lead roles in the community. Yet others claimed bad behaviour as their right as survivors — a right that was often accepted by others.

*People whose behaviour was one particular way beforehand, it is exaggerated now. People are more over the top now. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*In the end, men were not coping with their own grief and not letting it out safely. Instead they were letting it out in inappropriate forums and looking for release in some way. And while I can make some allowance for that, the cost of that has been very high. (Community Volunteers - 8 people)*

Decision making in this vulnerable time was, at times, fraught with conflict and disagreement. One worker spoke of a violent incident he witnessed.

*Some communities seem to be coping remarkably well but I personally saw a violent incident – a person getting physical with someone else over a difference. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

In this atmosphere of confusion overlaid with grief for personal and public losses, survivors were asked to navigate services and grant entitlements and rebuild community. For many people who had lost homes, building was not something they had ever anticipated, let alone at this critical time. Pressure — from politicians wanting to see results, from media tracking progress and from their own communities and families — further strained personal resources.

*People were making decisions in a depressed state of mind, like staying in a relationship or staying in a community or rebuilding. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*...the adrenaline and cortizole phases of how your mind works affects your ability to plan. It's a physical state where they can't think strategically or use higher brain function and yet they're being asked to make critical decisions. (Community Development, health or social worker – 3 people)*

*For a few people you can think of, it's like they're got a lid on and you're just waiting for them to explode. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery – 4 people)*

*We're tiptoeing around though. At home and in the community. It's just normal you say, 'G'day, how are you going?' I would do that [to] a particular community member who lost people and I got, 'How the f do you think I'm going?' ... I fully understand and would hate to be in that position but at the same time, it's not my fault and I don't know how to deal with that aggressive response. (Community Volunteers – 8 people)*

It appears that many incidents of private and public violence have gone unrecorded and remain anecdotal. Community cohesion is after all, the collective brave face that is so often presented to the world. However, to really understand what can happen to communities confronted with sudden, traumatic and permanent change, we must seek out those unrecorded voices.

*There is a lot of violence generally where every second day, or two or three times a day, the ... police are called to [this town]. (Community development, health or social workers – 3 people)*

*There was one incident where someone spat at someone and threw a rock. It was two mums. Stuff gets stolen out of the communal kitchen fridge. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

*I know Marysville have had major concerns with violence and it's not dying down. Well, it's not escalating but it's certainly there. Kinglake's had issues where they just want to punch each other's heads in during a meeting. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*



## Trauma

In the days following the bushfires, case managers flooded in to the affected areas to meet the complex and changing needs of entire communities. Both workers and residents were traumatised by what happened and by all that continued to unfold as more and more stories of death and destruction filtered into Recovery Centres and spread throughout the remaining communities. Some people spoke to counsellors early on while others remain reluctant to voice their experiences. The constant imperative to relive their story added to the distress for some.

*You've explained the same story to 10 different people, you're traumatised already and if you weren't traumatised, you're really traumatised now. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

The trauma and grief experienced in the fire-affected communities was on a scale not experienced before in Australia, yet some questioned if there were enough trauma specialists.

*Looking from an outsiders' perspective it looks like there is enough counselling [but] I don't [think] there's enough Level 3. That's the stuff that deals with PTSD, and that's what a lot of people are presenting with, particularly around children. (Community development, health or social worker)*

The manager of one service, however, felt well qualified and well staffed to deal with trauma, and the Austin Health Post Trauma Victoria Service (PTV) was funded by the Department of Health to provide clinical and training support to services operating in all bushfire-affected regions.

*... there were experienced counsellors and my background is trauma ... In the team here, there were social workers and psychologists and at least five years experience each. We had one junior counsellor but they were generally experienced in the area of family violence and trauma. They had that expertise. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

Workers reported random triggers in themselves and in other community members that brought back the fear and anxiety of Black Saturday. Long after the media had moved to another story, the effects of tragedy remained in the memories and subconscious of survivors. People who appeared to be coping well reported being shaken by weather conditions that they knew held no real threat.

*Last weekend was the hottest for a while, and when we were doing deliveries, one guy said, 'If brains are being given out, I want one'. It was a hot day, and windy. He said, 'I don't want to go through it again'. His family has been there for 100 years. The anxiety comes out in the hot weather. (Community development, health or social workers – 3 people)*

*In Narbethong they were doing a burn off and on the left side was a column of smoke that looked just like Black Saturday ... It was scary. You know it's a burn off but you're driving towards it and everything in your head is telling you that you shouldn't be driving towards it. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*Not long ago, we were looking over Marysville and there was a cloud that looked like smoke. It was raining and although the brain is telling you it's not a fire, I spoke to three others who saw that same bloody cloud. At Whittlesea they are burning near the water catchment and that's sending the residents into a state. (Community Development, health or social worker - 3 people)*



For those who needed generalist counselling, the VBCMS evaluation found that 93% of people were very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the level of support from their case manager and one of the most valued supports was one to one personal support in addition to referrals for mental health services and counselling services (Urbis prepared for the Department of Human Services, 2011).

### **Previous trauma**

Memories emerged from the almost forgotten past, such as this, triggered by our questions.

*It was the same as '97 ... fire. I thought, 'I'd better go to Belgrave'. Well, my life changed. All of a sudden, I had 50 people with me, I'm the incident controller. All the messages, the captains screaming down the phone, they want another 50 trucks, can't get them. Towns burning, this is happening. I'm thinking about that now because I'm talking to you about it. That's how it happens. I didn't think about Ash Wednesday till Black Saturday. And there are other men that are so traumatised that they still talk about their experience that night of the fire, even now. A bit like war stories. They're war stories. There are people whose lives will be forever defined by that one day. Forever. (Ash Wednesday CFA Chief)*

Workers noted that after the Black Saturday fires, old traumas — even unrelated to bushfire — resurfaced. Past emotional scars, thought well-healed over, split open as painful and raw as if brand new. This created yet another layer of distress and anxiety.

*The trauma evokes previous traumas and if the trauma has not been processed significantly, the past traumas present again. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*Some people who had suffered from post traumatic stress earlier, in another incident, then they were re-traumatised. (Case management — 2 people)*

*Disaster escalates pre disaster issues, there's no doubt about that. So if people have some sort of mental issue I think a disaster draws that out, escalates that. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*I'm finding over and over that like any life crisis, whether it's the first baby or rape or whatever, it's bringing people back to their primary emotional painful spots. ... A lot of people may not look like they've fared badly in fires, but it's taken them back to some very scary point. (Mental Health Practitioners — 2 people)*

### **Young people**

With homes and communities destroyed, the friendship groups of young people were scattered amongst 24 schools in surrounding areas. Many young people missed out on support services as responses were prioritised to those directly 'fire-affected'. As a result, young people who had not lost their homes but were grieving, traumatised and angry were left largely unsupported.

Workers who participated in the research told of incidents of violence amongst young people after the fires and increased use of drugs and alcohol. For some, the relaxation of boundaries by parents struggling with their own issues left spaces where young people created their own — often destructive — ways of coping.

*There's been lots of violence amongst the children ... Schools are reporting lots and lots of issues. (Community Development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*There are not a lot of boundaries around the kids. Some are driving under age. Since the fires, schools have been saying that parents no longer know where to draw the line. They are allowing the behaviour to continue in acknowledging that the kids had been traumatised. Schools didn't know how to respond. (Case Management – 6 people)*

*For teenagers, their anchoring point is their peers and it's about, 'I feel valued, loved, connected and accepted amongst that'. Now if those people are spread to the winds and your parents aren't particularly stable at the moment either ... what do you do to make yourself feel good? Often you turn to things that perhaps you shouldn't. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

More than one case of sexual violence was referred to by a worker, who suggested that the perpetrators were unlikely candidates for this extreme and violent behaviour.

*[There is violence] towards each other, sexual and physical. So we're almost ... saying it's okay, if we're not going to give the teenage kids something to do and to help them ... They're going to drink and [take] drugs and as a result of that there is violence that's happening. [So you're saying rapes as well?] Absolutely. I don't know how common it is, I know it's happened more than once, and I think the people involved in it were as shocked themselves about that it actually happened. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

## **Family violence response after disaster**

### **Priorities in the face of disaster — the emergency response**

This research argues for a systematic approach to disaster response, recovery and reconstruction which plans for an increase in family violence in the aftermath. Ideally, National Disaster Guidelines would include family violence as an issue that must be anticipated and effectively responded to. For example, the role of Parliamentary Secretary for Bushfire Reconstruction, the VBCMS and VBBRA would prioritise family violence along with other pressing and urgent needs.

In the disaster response after Black Saturday, family violence was not central in anyone's responsibility. The role of Parliamentary Secretary for Bushfire Reconstruction was established a year after the disaster, but was not briefed on the need for family violence to be identified and responded to effectively by trained people.

*Was there anything in place to address the possibility of increased violence against women after the bushfires? There are counsellors and medical centres along with the hub set up at Kinglake and Marysville with supports for people. As well, there are the case managers to direct people to what they need. There are counselling vouchers, which have had varying degrees of success, and there's also a huge volunteer army that are still there in part. But, have I seen a violence strategy as such? No, I can't say I've seen that. (Parliamentary Secretary for Bushfire Reconstruction)*

Responsibility for family violence was not part of VBBRA's role and the extent to which the VBCMS was responsible is unclear as it was not explicitly part of their charter. Yet others in the disaster response structure looked to the VBCMS to monitor and respond to family violence.

*I think we were sort of relying on the case workers as part of that, to identify and then to look to provide people with support ... There's still 200 there dealing with about 5000 cases,*

*maybe a few less, but the point is that they were to be obviously aware of the issues and then look to find the support service for people. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

This same leader in the recovery was alert to the possibility of increased family violence, asked relevant workers about its incidence, and believed the case management system, combined with the availability of family violence information in community hubs, would provide good support.

*We talked to [a service with FV services] the other day about this and their workers are in fact identifying it... I think having places like hubs which do have information about family violence available, and people can go into without feeling like—like sometimes people won't go into women's refuges for instance—but in this case these hubs are open, they've got internet, you could be going in there for any reason, and I think that's been a good support for people. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

Another key leader agreed that the surfeit of generalist support would address family violence.

*I think the fact there has been so much in the way of support provided would have helped prevent some of it. If people were left to flounder on their own and there wasn't the concentration of case managers and counsellors and various services, all those things would have been worse and things would have been exacerbated. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

Although not stated or formally written, it seemed that case managers would be well placed to identify family violence and provide referrals. This lack of clarity, and therefore, lack of training to ensure case managers had the required skills, is an area that must be addressed in planning for future disasters. The VBCMS was established speedily in the days after the disaster.

*Planning? That's a nice word ... We had no planning time, it was virtually just go to a meeting on Friday and start the service on Monday, so there was no planning. (Case management — 2 people)*

A future response could engage case managers in the identification of family violence and effective referral by ensuring they understand the dynamics of family violence or are given training as part of their intake.

*The training they received was around trauma, around working with people who may be suicidal, and more broadly around doing assessment, but there was no stand-alone [FV] training ... [Family violence] never at any point stood out to be strong enough to need a stand-alone training program. (Case management — 2 people)*

Some nine months after the fires, case managers received CRAF training to identify family violence after one case manager reported an incident.

*I know why we put the training into the north and west...we had an incident where a case manager was in the family home and things were escalating and she didn't know what to do. She wasn't really familiar with how to remove herself and make herself feel safe, and also how to follow things through. (Case management — 2 people)*

Many case managers had no expertise in family violence (Parkinson, et al., 2011) as the case management system was established quickly and purposely drew on people with a diverse range of backgrounds. This approach was welcomed by many.

*In the most part, the wisdom of Berry Street to get people from lots of walks of life as case managers is a really good idea. It's practical, being an advocate, being a human being. Understanding, 'How would I want someone to treat me?' (Case Management – 6 people)*

*I think the case management system — a piece is recognising that you need to have these people in place who can understand what is going on in families and with individuals, and then be available to support them ... I think part of it is where people come from, you know, in their backgrounds, and this has got a whole range of people involved in case work. (Govt/VBRRR/Community Recovery)*

*This is where the case managers were a major asset, even though there were lots of stories of how bad they were. The evidence would suggest 20% were a liability but 80% were really valuable and helpful and did a fantastic job. The people could work through them. They were enormously helpful. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

There were strengths in this approach as these comments reflect, and some case managers were experienced and dealt capably with families experiencing violence. Yet it is essential that one body within disaster response is charged with the responsibility to monitor family violence and ensure a system is in place to effectively respond to it. For example, a systems approach to disaster recovery that prioritised family violence could ensure all case managers received CRAF training (or similar) in the first weeks of their job with annual updates.

### **What was in place to respond to family violence?**

The family violence and sexual assault services that existed prior to Black Saturday in Mitchell and Murrindindi shires remained in place after the fires. These specialist services, including outreach, neither increased nor decreased until the period March to June 2011. A strong theme in the literature on disaster is that disaster magnifies whatever was happening in a community beforehand. Workers stated that family violence was not well resourced in Murrindindi Shire before the fires.

*We go through the fax backs and we've always had trouble getting them in some communities, like [this town]. 'Everyone minds their own business' sort of thing. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*Prior to the fires no one was doing one-to-one family violence in Murrindindi Shire. (Case Management – 6 people)*

Sadly, workers spoke of few alternatives for women post-fires either. Workers commented that the GP as first port of call was unlikely to lead to referrals or support for women suffering family violence. Even when family violence was evident and workers were trained, the service to women was inadequate.

*[Where would a woman with FV issues go?] She'd walk into the old Berry Street office. Other than that, I really think they wouldn't know where to go. They wouldn't go to GPs. They wouldn't get far. We'd still promote the number for the Women's DV crisis service and had training in referrals. Yes, there's a service and a name, but it doesn't necessarily mean that service will be available. It's, 'No we can't do it that day', or similar. (Case Management - 6 people)*

Specific family violence services offer the best response to women. Post-disaster, general mental health and counselling services were plentiful, but specialist expertise is irreplaceable. Family violence workers stated that even highly skilled psychologists may not have family violence

expertise. For example, ATAPS (Access to Allied Psychological Services) is a system that was established to enable easy and free or low cost access to psychologists for fire-affected people. Although a valuable service, family violence workers were concerned that not all psychologists would be skilled in this specific issue.

*[If people affected by FV seek services] some will be redirected to crisis services. The government is hoping they will go to ATAPS providers. Some ATAPS providers would be skilled in family violence and some not. The concern is, will workers ask, 'Are you safe at home?' (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

Housing was, of course, a critical issue after the fires, and family violence was considered and planned for by a senior manager.

*Our staff on the ground may liaise with domestic violence workers, but possibly they would have gone to case managers ... If there is domestic violence, they would contact the case manager and have a case conference that the services arranged as a result. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)*

In at least one case, there was recognition of family violence and procedures in place to take deal with it.

*A couple wanted to come into the village and there was domestic violence, so we gave accommodation in the village for the woman and other accommodation for the man. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)*

The system seemed to work in some cases. One worker had only the highest praise for the ability of the case management system not only to respond well to family violence, but to prevent it.

*The calibre of the workers was pretty significant so it may not have been an accident that we didn't hear about domestic violence occurring ... It may well have been that their work was so effective that where those tensions were occurring, people had access to the right options ... [If a woman needed help with family violence] she would just go in to the hub and if you wanted to have a discreet conversation you could, they had rooms around the place. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*A few families are talking about splitting up and one woman had domestic violence and had to be evacuated from her house. We had to deal with the end result and we helped her set up. In other cases I see how it cascades – the domino effect of the 'bringing on' of their situation. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery — 4 people)*

Yet, the accounts of the women (Vols. 1 & 3) run counter to assumptions by some workers that services were in place and were adequate to address emerging or escalating family violence.

### **Absence of family violence data**

The three key areas that could provide statistics on family violence incidence in the aftermath of Black Saturday are Victoria Police, The Victorian Bushfire Case Management System and the existing family violence services in the two shires. However, as discussed in Volume 1 and in a published article, 'A Numbers Game' (Parkinson, et al., 2011) there is no reliable statistical evidence available.

Indeed, all attempts by the researchers to quantify an increase from official sources were unsuccessful. The final attempt in 2011 resulted in advice from FAHCSIA that they were unable to provide any relevant data related to the incidence of family violence and the correlation to Crisis Payment in the fire-affected regions of Mitchell and Murrindindi, and further that they were unable to identify any alternative sources of data to assist with the information required (FaHCSIA, 23.11.2011).

The gendered nature of risk must be recognised and included in any disaster and emergency response. Part of this is the recognition of family violence and the awareness that accurate statistical recording will improve response to families experiencing this hidden disaster (Parkinson, et al., 2011).

### **Police not reporting**

Family Violence workers lamented the lack of action by police and the inference that women put aside their own safety for the good of the family.

*So much has been justified as a result of the fires. Eight months later, we ask women, 'Was he abusive before the fires? Has it been exacerbated?' So much has been fobbed off. So many women have gone to police and been told by police, 'Things will settle down again'. The responsibility is back on the women. There is pressure on women to support their partners and families, especially around relationship stuff. Children are upset. It's not just partner violence, but children are involved too. (Case Management – 6 people)*

*The violence against women ... of all the clients I've dealt with, possibly one had visible violence and even then, I worked with police and spoke to them about my concern. [The police officer] said, 'Don't worry about it'. It went on before the bushfire and we were called on a regular basis over the past four or five years. Each partner calls the police and makes all kinds of accusations.' I said, 'I'm following my normal procedure and I need to discuss it with you' ... talk to police and they say, 'What do you want me to do? We can take out intervention orders. [That's all.]' (Community development, health or social worker)*

*There was a lot of family violence ... It was interesting because workers in another service were saying there's lots of family violence in Kinglake and the cops were saying they were not getting reports ....The local police are part of the community. It was that enmeshment in community of, 'They are the good guys who helped out with the fire even though things might be happening [like family violence]' (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

### **Existing services and case management system not reporting**

As reported in Vol. 1, in the two years since the Black Saturday bushfires, DHS case management statistics show that in the Hume region there were only nine cases of family violence recorded by case managers.

The explanation suggested for this incredible figure of nine cases of family violence in two years of case management is that case managers would have been sensitive in how they chose to record the presenting issues and would have recorded just the main issue. It is evident that case managers were rarely qualified to work with family violence and that family violence was not addressed nor recorded at a broader systems level across existing and new services after Black Saturday (Parkinson, et al., 2011) .



*I sit in a program position where you need data to develop policy, to develop programs, to develop funding, and so it's frustrating when you don't necessarily get clean data. But I think at the end of the day if the work is really happening on the ground between the client and the case manager then that's probably the best we can hope for. (Case management — 2 people)*

*It seems the immediate demands of the recovery together with workers' heightened sense of protecting their vulnerable and traumatised clients meant that even when women spoke about family violence, it may not have been recorded. The apparent reluctance of workers to record family violence occurred amongst those without professional experience of family violence — and with experienced workers and police.*

Interestingly, alcohol and drugs were recognised as important and needing targeted intervention in the form of training for case managers, not based on previous statistics, but on anecdotal stories of their use and misuse.

The lack of clear guidelines for recording family violence by case managers contributed to the absence of credible statistics. It was reported that workers were left to make their own assessments and create their own 'labels' for situations.

*Every case manager has probably different styles of recording and might choose to record it as a drug and alcohol issue, they might not necessarily record it as a family violence issue. (Case management — 2 people)*

Some comments suggested workers' subjective response to family violence may have prevented accurate recording. There was, at least for some workers, a conscious decision not to record family violence as a way of being respectful to clients.

*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 ... I think the difference is getting through it and knowing what it is but actually respecting the client and recording it in their words. (Case management — 2 people)*

In the absence of a simple and compulsory way of agencies recording family violence, workers could choose which presenting issues to record and which to omit, and could choose not to draw out intimations of violence from clients. A rigorous family violence data collection system in place for future disasters would indicate a systematic commitment to recording family violence.

### **Workers' opinions of increase in family violence post-disaster**

In the absence of statistics, the workers who participated in this research were asked their opinion. Clearly, few were in a position to answer this question definitively. The answers from four workers interviewed together illustrate the range of responses — one knew of family violence, one had heard anecdotally, one knew of family breakdown more than violence and the fourth moved past a direct answer to suggest the pressures men were under and the emasculating effect of the fires.

*There have been quite a few incidents of family breakdown and family violence in Kinglake and others in Murrindindi. (Worker 1)*

*I've heard of a few — on the other side of the mountain. (Worker 2)*



*A few families have separated but only one I know of had violence. (Worker 3)*

*There are other relationships where it was strong, but with the amount of pressure on the male who has always been the provider — where he doesn't have access to the resources he had before to provide for the family — they feel nearly incompetent. The work they were doing before in business, or as a tradesman isn't here anymore. (Worker 4) (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery - 4 people)*

This qualitative research provides evidence that family violence has increased after Black Saturday. In Vols 1 and 3, sixteen women told us of their experiences of violence in the aftermath of the fires. The evidence from the workers is in Table 8. It shows that of the 24 consultations, 12 interviewees or groups suggested it has, three that it has not, five were unsure and four groups had varied opinions.

Table 8: Workers characteristics and opinions on FV

IV or Focus Group No	Lived in or near fire-affected regions on 7.2.2009?	Directly impacted?	Opinion — believed FV increased in the aftermath?
1	No	No	Yes
2	No	No	Theoretically, yes
3	YES	No (but on fire truck)	No awareness of FV
4	Most, yes	No	Generally, yes
5	No	No	Theoretically, yes
6	No	No	Yes
7	No	No	Unsure
8	No	No	Yes, escalated
9	YES	1 yes	Varied
10	Varied	2 No/ 1 missing data	Unsure
11	YES	No	Unsure
12	Yes	No	Unsure
13	Yes	1 yes	Varied
14	Yes	Varied	Varied
15	Yes	Yes	Unsure
16	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	Yes	No (but close to fire)	Yes
18	No	No	Yes
19	Varied	No	Yes
20	Yes	No (but badly affected neighbours)	Yes
21	No	No	No
22	Yes	No	Varied
23	Yes	No	Yes
24	No	No	No awareness of FV
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>Yes 12 No 9 Varied within group 3</b>	<b>Yes 4 No 16 No, but... 3 Varied within group 1</b>	<b>Yes 12 No 3 Unsure 5 Varied within group 4</b>

The knowledge of each individual consulted depended on their professional and community role and, inescapably, on their willingness to hear about it.

The three quotes below were from the most senior people in state-wide roles.

*And we're certainly, I think, 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, from that sort of level, you know, people saying that that's one of the major concerns ... whether or not people are being dealt with was part of their question. (Govt/ VBRRRA/Community Recovery)*

*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)*

*I don't talk to anyone with direct knowledge of domestic violence. 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)*

Other managers of state-wide services agreed that family violence had increased — one adamantly and one hesitantly.

*It's very bloody obvious. Especially for the first nine months. I haven't heard it so much in the last four to five months. Relationships have probably broken up and moved somewhere else. People have separated. I heard from my own case management staff and child protection staff that there has been an increase in notification, and women in those communities where staying there was increased violence. VBRRRA organised a big women's weekend in Lorne and apparently it was a strong theme that there was family violence and no services. After that they tried to get more services into those regions. Everyone there was pretty open about it ... I know the Family Violence services in Mitchell Murrindindi, I think they were asking for more money to put on more staff because they had noticed an increase ... Everyone says there's been a sharp increase. I'm not hearing it as much now. (Govt/ VBRRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*It was recognised that it was becoming an emerging theme ... The case managers were reporting that they had discussions with their clients and that the women were reporting—not all of them obviously, but a number. (Case management — 2 people)*

Workers from regional and community services, too, noticed an increase.

*The DV services in the area have definitely reported a spike in DV post-fires. That is definite. (Community development, health or social workers — 3 people)*

*We have Neighbourhood Watch and police attending community meetings since February last year. Apart from odd thefts and occasional driving offences, the police always stressed increases in domestic violence ... It has been a bit of a surprise the increase in DV. (Community Volunteers — 8 people)*

*The number of times the police are having to be called is on a regular basis — weekly, fortnightly. I think it's exacerbated. I've been hearing that from women. (Govt/ VBRRRA/Community Recovery)*

*Even though people don't talk about domestic violence a lot, I think there's an awareness on a community level that it's occurring. (Community development, health or social worker)*

One worker told of six men in his small town who had become violent towards their partners and families. All six had all been in the front line of the fires and seemed unable to talk about their experiences.

*There was a lot of family violence ... It was interesting because workers in another service were saying there's lots of family violence in Kinglake and the cops were saying they were not getting reports ... There were some relationships that had been violent years ago and now the violence reappeared. A huge onslaught didn't happen until two months after, when we got a big spike. I still don't think we've hit the high point. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*I think it has increased since the fires, but maybe because I'm here every day right now, because there is such a need. Maybe I'm hearing a lot more, I think it's increased. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*I'm talking yes, my gut feeling is that has increased. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

Some workers questioned whether it was an increase in prevalence or if there were other explanations for their observations. The increase, for example, could have resulted from the increase in available services post-fires, or could have emerged from former issues or tendencies.

*And probably the thing that we would be least confident in being able to say is when we were aware of family violence and trying to work with the family around it, whether it preceded the bushfires or whether it was a new onset following the fires because a great many of the issues we worked with had their antecedents prior to the fires, so that can include mental health issues, it can include drug and alcohol issues etc. (Case management — 2 people)*

Two key local workers spoke about the complexities involved in assessing any increase in family violence. With no comprehensive and reliable data collection to quantify even reported incidents after the fires, estimating levels of family violence that came to the attention of workers in the broad range of services now in place, was difficult. This was especially the case where workers had little to do with other organisations or networks, or had discrete roles in a particular area of health, or were unfamiliar with the communities before the fires.

Some workers in key roles, however, were clear that there were no indications in their line of work of increased family violence.

*People do keep to themselves so it's hard for me to tell. There's only a small number of people here.... I don't have any concerns within couples or family groups. There's the broader bushfire stress, but there are no signs of anything I'm concerned about...I haven't seen people move on, their relationships seem OK. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

*in terms of violence that we're being called out to that they've specifically said this is a domestic violence incident, it probably hasn't changed significantly since the fires. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

Sometimes, they pointed to reasons that explain why workers may not have heard about increased family violence. The traditional taboo around family violence is writ large after a disaster when small communities and lack of anonymity in seeking help was exacerbated by compassion for men.

*Domestic violence has a stigma around it, and to be able to ask for a support group around that sort of thing would be a really tough call, even more so in rural environment, because there's not the anonymity that you have in an urban setting (Community development, health or social worker - 2 people)*

*I can see it being quite outstanding in Katrina because of the breakdown of law and order and the loss of protection of civil society, but it would be much more hidden in Victoria. (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)*

Interestingly, one worker alluded to the subjectivity of individual workers to explain why there were diametrically opposed opinions on whether family violence had increased after the fires, and another wondered if identifying an increase was admitting failure.

*I just think workers who deny it don't want to accept it because it would mean they are failing and the system is failing. They push it under the rug. It's not there, we don't want to deal with this. (Govt/ VBRR/Community Recovery)*

*I don't understand why workers would disagree [that family violence increased] except in the sense that is a political issue ... We can have an opinion because of our own political, personal or professional history but it doesn't reflect the needs in the community. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

Our sense, as researchers, is two-fold. First that there is, indeed, immense pressure on individuals to show understanding and loyalty to their men and their communities. Secondly, the workers who were very much part of the fire-affected communities — either long-term residents or those arriving immediately after the disaster and who worked tirelessly to help restore lives — were less likely to recognise increased family violence. Those with state-wide responsibilities and an overview of communities were in agreement — their sense was clear that family violence had increased. This underlines the reluctance of community members to speak out about people they know and care about. Their understanding of the depth of trauma experienced by survivors of Black Saturday, may have led to reluctance to act in any way that would further add to their daily burdens and pressures. For example, there was evidence of resistance from members of one community to offering support to women experiencing violence from their partners.

*When I first started to notice that women were experiencing these issues, we set up a bushfire support group really early, and we had that running from the CFA shed. It seemed like quite a good idea at the time. There was a lot of negative comments that they received after the fires, which was really ridiculous. At the time, that's just how it was. That was a terrific group ... That was just after the fires, and we had just about five to nine people attending that support group. (Community development, health or social worker)*

We reiterate that this research does not seek to add to trauma or in any way to blame men for family violence in this context. However, it does unambiguously aim to recognise family violence after disasters so that men, women and children can be offered services to prevent this violence. Minimising traumatised men's violence, and de-prioritising victims of family violence in the face of urgent disaster recovery needs does not serve anyone well. The consequences of denying family violence in order to protect men can be devastating, as noted in the introduction, where a traumatised man turned to violence against his children and then committed suicide. In another case, a man used violence, which led to the breakup of the marriage, bringing unhappiness to all involved.

*It was people that lost their house. Two young kids — seemed to be fairly happily married ... the bloke was really getting it all bottled up, he was very much on the fire front on the 7th of Feb, saw a lot that no one else would have seen, and after probably a year ... started using the wife as the bean bag rather than probably the psychologist he should have been talking to. So he hadn't had this behaviour before that you knew of? No. And how does the story end? Separated, litigation, divorce, troubled kids, inactive learning at school, attendance rates down, and probably four unhappy people. (Govt/ VBRR/ Community Recovery)*

The evidence suggesting family violence had not increased came from workers who stated they had no indications of it in their professional or community role. Because the evidence now seems clear that violence against women does, in fact, increase after disasters in Australia — in line with global experiences — our argument is that all workers in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction be trained in assessment and referral.

*New Zealand has a greater understanding of political and social issues than Australia has. For instance talking about family violence and feminism would be important to mention in family therapy. It's about the weight the society [gives]. We want to believe that everything is fine in this country. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

**O**ne research participant drew out complexities in gender dynamics and was concerned about how his response to our question about increased family violence would be reported. It is cited at some length to ensure the full context of his answer is provided.

*You're probably going to notice that I'm going to be a bit cagey here. I'm a bit concerned the way the data can be used in situations like this. The short answer is yes. The more complex answer and what I've been saying since we started talking, is the dynamics is not as basic as perpetrator/victim, man/woman. That's not the way people I'm working with perceive it either. The wife does not perceive herself or him in those terms. It is not their normal way of doing things. I get as many calls from woman as men regarding specific issues. Women who would like assistance. I sit with couples to help them re-engage with their normal style of doing things. They all say his behaviour is out of the ordinary and they don't see themselves as perpetrator and victim... If women are being physically violent it's hard to come up with something that will be believed in our current community. I have four guys in the current situation. I am very concerned at the way the partner is treating the kids and them. Guys are in tears because they are really concerned about their kids and don't know how to respond to the verbal abuse and getting things thrown at them. They don't know how to deal with it. At least two women don't see themselves as having a problem ...*

*You have to ask, what is behind family violence? If it's a traumatic state of mind, that would determine how it would be dealt with rather than labelling the behaviour as abusive. I wouldn't be labelling the guy as a perpetrator and the woman as victim. I don't think that's what's happening. The loyalty is there and the woman may not be talking about it for the same reason. She would say, 'It's not his style, not normally what he does'.*

*'You may find workers have changed their definition of family violence to accommodate the emotional and psychological conditions people are experiencing. It's my speculation only. (Community development, health or social worker)*

The definition of family violence must not change. Women, too, are traumatised by their disaster experiences. Our unambiguous position is that women are reluctant to report violence and having done so, deserve a response that reinforces their right to live free from violence. Analysis of the violence described by the 16 women in Vol. 3 reveals all to be coming from a position of 'power' and most from 'power and control'. There is a sound and evidence-based reason why family violence is never acceptable — including after a disaster. VicHealth provide a compelling argument:

### **When intimate partners are subjected to violence:**

- women are more likely to be injured during assaults than men
- women suffer more severe forms of violence than men (such as abuse, terrorisation and increasingly possessive and controlling behaviour over time)
- women are more likely to receive medical attention than men
- women are more likely to fear for their lives than men.

### **When intimate partners perpetrate violence:**

- women are more likely to use it in self-defence; in other words, against violence that is already being perpetrated by their male partners
- men are most likely to use it as an expression of self-perceived and/ or societal-sanctioned 'rights' or 'entitlements' of male household leaders over other family members (WHO 2002) ...

### **Fatal consequences**

Studies from countries around the world (including Australia) show that when women are killed by their male intimate partners it is frequently in the context of an ongoing abusive relationship (WHO 2002).

- An Australian study of homicides (all types) over a nine-year period (1989 —98) finds that women are over five times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than men (Mouzos 1999). A decade later, this pattern continues. During 2007 —08, of all female homicide victims in Australia, 55 per cent were killed by their male intimate partners compared to 11 per cent of male homicide victims (Virueda & Payne 2010).
- A study of intimate partner homicides over a 13-year period (1989 —2002) finds an average of 77 occur each year in Australia. The majority of these (75 per cent) involves males killing female intimate partners (Mouzos & Rushforth 2003). Recent figures confirm this pattern. For 2007 —08, 80 people were killed as a result of intimate partner violence. Of these, the majority (78 per cent) were females (Virueda & Payne 2010).
- For the small number of women who kill their male intimate partners, their actions almost always occur in response to existing violence being directed at them in the form of serious and sustained physical and sexual assaults by their partners (Victorian Law Reform Commission 2004 ...

KPMG recently estimated the cost of violence against women to be \$13.6 billion for 2008 —09 (National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009a). The cost to Victoria was around \$3.4 billion (Office of Women's Policy 2009).

VicHealth. (2011). Preventing violence against women in Australia: Research summary Addressing the social and economic determinants of mental and physical health. Carlton South, Vic: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, pp. 3-7



## Excusing violence

The concept of men as ‘heroes’ in the disaster clouds our perceptions of their violent behaviour afterwards. Equally diverting is the observable fact that many men suffered during and after the fires.

*On the night of the fires, I came across one of the police officers based at Seymour. He said, ‘I have followed this fire all day. Don’t go out there. Just don’t.’ This poor man was standing with his back up against the wall and he was trembling. His whole jaw was shaking. I often think about this police officer and how he is coping. (Community Volunteers - 8 people)*

*It’s really heartbreaking thinking about the suicides ... I know of three people in Kinglake, all men. (Community development, health or social worker)*

The men’s trauma was perhaps exacerbated by ongoing practical and financial pressures but tolerance of bad behaviour, through to violence, seemed to increase as men were said to be acting ‘out of character’. Everyone hoped the adverse changes would be temporary and eventually resolved by time passing or progress in re-establishing family life and getting back to ‘normal’. It may have seemed disloyal and ungrateful to talk about the violent behaviours some of these men were displaying. To hold them accountable — out of the question.

*There’s one couple where the women says, ‘When we get over the fire, he’ll go back to normal’ but I think it’s his pattern of behaviour now, and that’s been exacerbated since the fires. I don’t think he’ll be as aggressive as he was right after the fires but I don’t think he’s going to change. The fire exacerbated his behaviour and gave him an excuse. And she also uses the fires to excuse him and minimise his behaviour. I think this attitude is consistent amongst people generally. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*The stoicism is] portrayed as heroism, in a way, it can be seen as that ... You are looking at cones of silence around domestic violence anyway. People want to maintain their respectability in the town, it’s there anyway. I can see that people may not want to report on people who were the heroes of the day, and they would be more forgiving, perhaps. (Canberra)*

*I think people were often too shell shocked to do anything. [In cases where there was family violence] the women would say, ‘He’s just fire-affected. It will stop. We’ll get the grant and he’ll be ok’. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*... this is the sort of ‘poor thing, he’s had a tough time and doesn’t have his job anymore and is having real difficulty coping’—I think that’s ... probably part of it. That wouldn’t surprise me at all. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

*Not saying anything about it is not the thing to do. But maybe people understood why it was happening and maybe that’s why they didn’t do anything. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

## Women’s sacrifice

Workers reported that even the worse affected people minimised their personal experiences of suffering. Their empathy and compassion resulted in not accessing services in the belief that others were more worthy, or had suffered more. Even the term, ‘fire-affected’ came to mean different things to different people — and to workers and agencies. People were categorised and often categorised themselves according to their understanding of this term.



*It's like 'people are far worse off than me, I've lost my two children and my house and whatever' and ... 'there must be other people who should be getting this instead of me'. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

*People will compare and say somebody else's experience is worse and that makes people feel better. Those people are very compassionate.... Whatever level they are at, they can usually find someone worse off than them. (Mental Health Practitioners – 2 people)*

*A lot of people felt guilty that they survived. Some knocked back the grant, saying, 'Save it for someone more deserving'. Some were severely disadvantaged but wouldn't take assistance and, really, are more traumatised. (Case Management – 6 people)*

*One or two will say, 'I won't come and see you when there are more needy people' (Community development, health or social worker)*

This was particularly so for women and mothers.

*Initially that was happening with women putting themselves last. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

*It seems like women have held families together and worried about everyone else and when they are getting to end of tether is when they seek help ... The mother has been advised ... to get counselling for herself but she says, 'No I have other things to worry about — my daughter ... rebuilding ... my husband ...' (Community development, health or social worker)*

*And women always put their own needs last so — 'I just don't have the time to look after myself any more'. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

*As a mother you think of yourself last. When they sit down at the end of the day, they're so exhausted, they'd be thinking, 'I can't be bothered thinking about me'. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery - 4 people)*

*The women have done what we expect. They get up, they help each other, they cook food, they look after the kids, they try and hold their husbands together, they do exactly everything in a disaster that they do every day in their lives. And they put aside a lot of their own traumas. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

When it comes to family violence, workers noted a strong tendency for women to underplay their own suffering, to the extent that family violence workers reported clients withdrawing from services they had previously accessed to allow for others who were 'worse off than them' to access services.

*Women who had been in domestic violence situations — clients of the DV service - were saying the violence is not important now, after the fires. I had a client in a really awful situation where there was lots of family violence and she's now busy doing a fundraiser at the local pub for bushfire survivors. I was astounded that they can push away things that were happening to them and do that for others. They had this attitude that 'Others are so much worse off than I am'. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*... They would say, 'I can't take this or that [service or money]. Others are worse off than me'. But they had lost everything. And they were still experiencing the family violence. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*It's almost like [the violence] is not that bad compared to the other things happening.  
(Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

These workers observed a tendency for women living with violence from their partners to deny their own needs after Black Saturday, thinking that others were more deserving of help. A clinical psychologist who participated in this research described women in this situation as 'secondary victims' of the disaster. They are effectively denying themselves services they need.

*Specifically in relation to disasters, Thomas Merton, had a theory of relative deprivation, where people benchmark the most severe deprivation [and measure everything against that]. It's a big problem within disaster areas when people are not wanting to assert their own needs because they don't feel as affected as other people. It could mean seriously increased risk for those people who give up their claim on services they might have had before the disaster. They are secondary victims because agencies can't support them anymore. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

## **Stereotyping of men and women**

*Everyone expects you to be a bloke. Maybe women are faced with the same expectations.  
(Community development, health or social worker)*

In the aftermath of the fires, people searching for security sometimes looked to the past, reverting to traditional male and female roles. This was observed after the 2003 bushfires in Canberra and in California after the wildfires of 1991.

*Men went into instrumental tasks rebuilding, finding the new place and women went into the domestic and supra domestic roles around the children. (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)*

*... progress in carving out new gender behavior suffered a fifty-year setback. In the shock of loss both men and women retreated into traditional cultural realms and personas ...The return of old behaviors and the loss of new was so swift, so engulfing, and so unconscious, few understood what occurred. Many unions, long and short, broke apart. (Hoffman, 1998, pp. 57-58)*

There are cultural expectations that men and women will behave in pre-determined ways. The most obvious delineation is that women nurture and men provide and protect. Some workers spoke in black and white terms, confirming that they had, indeed, observed women and men behaving in these stereotypical ways.

*Men and women interact differently. Women talk about stuff, men tend to not. I mean if we want to bring in the stereotypes, men have tended to want to get back to life as normal and the women get together and talk about things. (Community development, health or social worker — 2 people)*

*Men were, 'Let's get this over and done with it'. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*The stereotypical woman is holding the emotional situation together and the stereotypical men are physically very active. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

*I've watched some of the men take control of these things and they want to, in the main, rush out and get this fixed and get this done (Govt/ VBRR/Community Recovery)*

Two spoke of their academic learning of male and female reactions:

*All the reading and research that we ever did – it sounds trite — is that women relate to the tending and nurturing, the support, noticing people need nurturing or when they're emotionally distressed and respond by talking gently ... Blokes chuck themselves into hard physical yakka. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*By and large women often have a more realistic assessment of the situation. And men have a more ideological assessment. For example, 'I can fight this fire, I have a good fire plan and I've prepared for it'.*

For some, however, there were shades of grey with overlapping - and even reversal — of culturally expected roles.

*Men process things implicitly by being together with a bit of chat here and there. Women live in a verbal culture and an emotional culture. In that sense they are better equipped for recovery. Having said that, some couples work the other way round. Some women don't talk and the man's crying. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

The women in this research told us of their survival and escape from Black Saturday, as documented in 'Beating the Flames' (Parkinson & Zara, 2011). Cultural conditioning seemed less robust in this life-threatening situation, and the way individuals reacted depended more on their personal strengths and qualities.

*When husbands and partners were present, some women found great solace, inspiration and practical support. Others found them an additional burden. The women reflected on their own responses with some stating that at times they were unable to function effectively. These accounts reveal that men and women reacted to life and death situations as individuals, rather than along gendered lines. (p. 1)*

As, one of the mental health practitioners said, 'We need to remember there is a gender issue but it's not universal'.

Society's gendered expectations place the burden of responsibility to protect on men. In a disaster, the stakes are raised as man as 'protector' is no longer just a symbolic role. On Black Saturday, protecting families was life threatening and largely dependent on factors beyond the power of individuals. Naturally, not all men were able to do this.

*They ... felt an immense responsibility to protect — they're the men of the house — to protect their family. That's a massive responsibility ... The role that they took on that day, not willingly. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

*They ... feel like they should have been able to protect their family when they didn't. So it's all the normal behaviour but probably under the anvil, for want of a better description, of fires it gets exacerbated. (Govt/ VBRR/Community Recovery)*

*It became primal. For example, if a man could not save his own house. Lots of males have really struggled. It's that notion of men as provider and protector. 'I am supposed to provide for my family and I have to protect them and I haven't been able to do that. (Community Volunteers – 8 people)*

*[Partner is CFA volunteer] I think there's an element that he's let me down. He maintains if he'd been here the house would be here. (Community Volunteers — 8 people)*

One senior worker told of a woman who was alone to escape the fires with children and neighbours because her husband was on fire duty. The expectation of men to fulfil the culturally designed masculine role of protector is not just in men's heads. It is a real expectation, at least for some.

*She is very bitter because he wasn't there. He stayed at the CFA shed. She says, 'I want a man who'd protect me or die in the attempt.'* (Mental Health Practitioner)

## Responses to trauma

*Rather than show vulnerability or inadequacy, a bloke is happier to display anger ... to avoid talking about that sort of stuff. Anger is more acceptable than fear.* (Community development, health or social worker)

Two workers with expertise in gendered reactions to disaster and men's psycho-social recovery noted that men resorted to anger and overwork as channels for their distress. The workers spoke of men's avoidant activities. Unable to understand their emotional responses to the trauma of the disaster and the recovery period, men reclaimed their masculinity.

*Men buffer by being active or drinking or interacting with men who are also avoidant and they talk about other things. They focus on things like cars, machinery, computers.* (Mental Health Practitioner)

*One woman ... said to me, 'I'm worried about my husband. He works all the time and I can't get him to stop.'* (Mental Health Practitioner)

*About six months in, they [the women] alerted us to the fact that their partners were really stressed – they'd been working very hard, heads down as soon as they could to rebuild the house for the family. When the big tasks were over, the men started to fall apart.* (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)

*[Following a previous disaster] years later, men looked back and saw heroic physical activity was wasted because it was not properly thought out and planned. Sometimes women will assess the situation, and say, 'Do you really need to do that?' And he'll say, 'Of course I fucking need to do that you stupid ...', and you get conflict.* (Mental Health Practitioner)

*The blokes have said when they look back, they did some stupid things that were quite dangerous in retrospect and threw themselves into stuff to avoid the emotional fragility and to avoid dealing with the family. These are the guys one year later who are saying, 'I've been doing everything I normally do and nothing is working'.* (Community development, health or social worker)

It seemed that men often took up this strategy of working hard to regain their own sense of self and to control unwelcome traumatic responses to their experiences.

*Level 1 of Maslow's hierarchy is about needing shelter, food and to provide for the family. Guys get locked into that. Conflicts arise when guys thought they were doing best for the family, but the partner wanted him to relate to the kids, and talk about feelings and experiences. But a lot of guys just wouldn't.* (Community development, health or social worker)

Avoiding the emotional aspects of recovery led to trouble in the home and left some feeling unappreciated by their families.

*We ran a men's night at a pub with 40 guys and 30 of them would have ended up in tears. Talking at basic level about what had happened and they were doing what they thought their family needed and it wasn't being appreciated.' I've bust a gut what more can I do?' (Community development, health or social worker)*

*Men will be miserable but because they drink and if they don't kill themselves, you don't know ... Many men said they are exposed to complete lack of understanding in the workplace ... and then come home and have a new set of problems. Men are very lonely. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

*The men are exhausted, and have little or no time for the family when they get home. They can see so much work to do to get the place back to normal which adds to their exhaustion, or they can't get motivated at all. Consequently they hang around with mates a bit more and drink and smoke and there's less family time. They are overwhelmed with the tasks at hand and/or are avoiding family issues or contributing to family conflict. (Community development, health or social worker)*

When combined with an unappreciative workplace, there are physical and mental costs.

*Everybody experiences adrenaline - it gives you a sense of wanting physical activity, but after three months of this ... you maybe find you don't have the energy reserves to do what adrenaline is telling you to do. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*Interesting physical symptoms too, like stomach complaints, acid stomach, heart troubles, cramps ... heart beat was racing or irregular. They felt fatigued with no explanation. And loss of appetite. (Community development, health or social worker)*

Running on adrenalin to avoid the past and block out the future is not sustainable. There are emotional and psychological consequences of this hyper-masculinity as men overwork to try and reclaim their expected role as the 'protector'. The painful memories, tragic losses and unrelenting workload started to take their toll, not only on the men, but on their families too.

*There is a limit to how much the adrenalin can motivate you before you start to burn out physically. There's a part of me that suggests it's a way of avoiding the emotional stuff. Guys falling apart put in a lot of physical energy and then they run out of steam, the emotional stuff comes. They burst into tears for no reason and their partners get concerned because they are not sure what's happening. They [the women] saw their men as stoic and to see someone who has never broken down do this is confusing and distressing and the women wonder if they should be helping somehow. But the guy rebuffs that because her doesn't want to add to what she's already going through. They are each trying to accommodate each other. (Community development, health or social worker)*

An interesting dynamic that has been observed is that some men want their partners at home looking after them.

*It's like it's all about the men at the moment, 'Why aren't you here supporting me' and these women are willing to be out working, out in the community, helping the community. ... Women are wanting to stand up and take on these wonderful roles in leadership. (Community development, health or social worker)*

Workers told of many women seeking support early and getting together with other women to speak about their concerns. This sharing and nurturing appeared to help in the recovery process.

*I just purely think that males aren't emotive people and would just rather clam it up and live with it. Do I do that? Very much so ... I think women have the natural ability to be able to vent anger, frustration, views, and be able to nurture each other and I think blokes just don't do that. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*... and you watch the women do sensible things about how they work together, and they formed groups to support each other and found ways to do that, I think, far better than the men did. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

*We had special mental health counsellors from the beginning and the women would tend to say to their recovery workers, 'I think I need professional help with my feelings'. They would often be engaged with the counsellor quite early and they would bring children so we'd have children's counselling as well. Much earlier than men. (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)*

*What we've watched is the women group together... very early those women stood up and opened their homes into relief centres, did lots of stuff along those lines, and the women have been very strong through this whole process I have to say. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery)*

## **Vulnerable women**

From this research, it appears that women and children generally are vulnerable after disaster. Those identified as specific vulnerable groups include single women and the elderly. For them, the need to build re-establish homes on minimal incomes was a real and constant anxiety.

*We've got women who are single mothers who have gone—as if the burden wasn't big enough beforehand, 'Well now I have to rebuild a house, I have to rebuild a life, I have to ensure the safety of my children' ... I mean, it's too big. (Community development, health or social worker - 2 people)*

*There is a lot of depression, whether this is brought on by violence or not, I don't know. I see it with women on their own, single mothers with kids — they have trouble getting out of bed. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery — 4 people)*

*There's an ongoing concern for women in the 60+ age group who don't have the ability to work and build up an asset base, and can't afford to rebuild. Women who owned homes but because of new regulations, it's more expensive to build. A lot of women are very unsure of their future. They loved their community, but people have moved away. They not only don't have financial security, but they have to live in a different community. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*The social supports for women have been fairly decimated and they no longer have the informal support with childcare while they go to the doctor or shopping. There is only one Family Day Care worker and she [was personally affected by the disaster]. (Community development, health or social worker)*



## Interventions — providing a community with alternatives

### Organisational support for workers

It is critical that workers are supported in their vital work with disaster survivors. The informants to this research came from a range of organisations and the level of debriefing and support varied from weekly to never, or once straight after the disaster. The way organisations offered support mattered to whether the debriefing or counselling was taken up. As outlined in Vol. 1, the culture of male dominated organisations such as the CFA, DSE and police seemed to prevent broad uptake of services offered.

*There is peer support in the CFA and the police culture is such that people find it hard to use those services ... They are seen to be weak. One woman worked 17 hours in the ambulance room on the night. They had people on the phone who were literally dying while speaking to them. They had a debrief on the night but not since. (Mental Health Practitioners – 2 people)*

In contrast, other organisations provided compulsory weekly debriefing as well as time off to recover.

*All staff had compulsory debriefings at 5pm every day ... and there was a team debriefing with an external psychologist every week for four weeks. (Community development, health or social workers – 3 people)*

*I feel privileged to work in an organisation which, from day one, has been open about wanting to support staff. They said I could be released for three weeks to do what I thought was needed. I know the research re. recovery talks about workplaces being the most significant thing in recovery. It's been Berry Street that's been important to me. (Case Management – 6 people)*

One worker commented that a psychological understanding of trauma before entering disaster recovery work would be valuable. Throughout our interviews, many workers and women referred to the immense contribution of Rob Gordon in providing just this, but there is clearly a limit to the reach of one person. As consultant psychologist to the Victorian Government since the Queen Street shootings two decades ago, and more recently working on the Victorian Emergency Recovery Plan, he brought sound psychological principles to the recovery. His initial involvement was in planning psychosocial services but quickly moved to educating case managers, agency managers and workers and community groups.

*I've been doing community information sessions two or three times a week for most of the year. The sessions cover the psychology of trauma, stress and disaster and what happens at various stages and how they can help themselves and others ... Everyone felt out of their depth ... Many people have found what I offered them was a perspective over many disasters and I had much feedback saying, 'Exactly what you said would happen, happened'. (Rob Gordon)*

One worker lamented the lack of early support, and another spoke of limiting the time working in disaster recovery.

*If it's a disaster even a fraction of the February one, don't put someone there on their own ... I didn't feel supported. I feel supported now ... but they didn't have resources initially. (Govt/ VBRRR/Community Recovery)*



*DHS has debriefers and counselling but there is a need to look after yourself, take that time out so it doesn't become a burden to do this type of work. And do it for a little while. You couldn't constantly work in this environment. (Govt/ VBRRA/Community Recovery — 4 people)*

## **Strategies to help men**

*That's been one thing that's been really heavy on my heart. How can we help these guys, before the fires you couldn't get them to go to a doctor, but their mental health is ... more important, because it's affecting their children and partners, their whole family, really, and in ways, the whole community. (Community development, health or social worker)*

Disaster of such magnitude requires a variety of responses. There was never going to be one method to help people cope with what had been and what the future might hold. For some, counselling was helpful, but for many, especially men who may have been avoidant or perceived seeking mental health assistance, as a weakness, it was not for them.

In recognition of this, a range of options was put in place for men. There were informal debriefing opportunities at men's nights, barbecues, men's sheds, football club presentations and other events. Men's groups, golf days and fishing trips were offered as well.

*About three months down the track, at that stage we were doing blokes' nights. I went to a bloke's night at a pub, and guys were coming out of the woodwork and talking about feelings in ways that were new to them. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*Jason McCartney and his psychologist talked at Kinglake football club and that was significant for men. (Mental Health Practitioners — 2 people)*

*Another man sidled up to me. They will talk if it is a non confrontational environment where they can just have a chat. If I had offered to see him in my rooms, he wouldn't have come. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

*We've looked at things in a different way for the men in terms of psychosocial recovery. There's been lots of men's groups and specific things for men, going out fishing cos they might talk to a mate and they'll have facilitators there and people who are trained in recognising stress and supporting people. (Case management — 2 people)*

*What has been clear is the need for networking, outreach and informal work. The findings are that services used are flexible, community based providing outreach and liaising with other services. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

As with options for women, not all men wanted to take up these opportunities, or were able to, because of timing or location.

*In the Rob Gordon session, of the 25 people there, 21 were women. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*It's extremely hard, you can't make a fish jump on the end of that hook no matter what sort of bait you use. I don't know how you get mental awareness out for blokes ... Then we heard about Benn River for the blokes, fishing. And what did I hear after that? Everyone got drunk; there were a few fights. And as I said to VBRRA, how do you think you're going to go and get all these blokes, full of testosterone, they don't even know each other, put whatever you want in their hands, give them a few beers—I'm telling you, you're going to have fights. And that's what happened. (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

It is generally understood that men are reluctant to seek help for physical or mental health issues. Because our society values masculinity that is strong and self-sufficient, men tend to see help-seeking behaviour as a weakness.

*Amongst the men there was a feeling of stigma in asking for help. People might think they were mentally ill or weak for asking for help. (Consultant in Canberra and Victoria bushfires)*

*It's really hard to engage the men (Community development, health or social worker)*

*Blokes won't do it. At all. At all. It's very, very hard to go and sit with a bloke where you can see he's really in trouble and say, 'Mate, what's wrong?' (Govt/ VBRRA/ Community Recovery)*

This is especially so for traditional counselling settings or group work which involves sitting and talking.

*I saw advertised a month ago there was something about 'Are you angry all the time? Come and join a men's self help group'. They would have all just looked at it and gone, 'Oh, fuck off, I'm not interested in that'. (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

Workers with expertise in men's recovery suggested engaging more men as counsellors and increasing community awareness about potential psycho social health effects of a disaster through mainstream media. Early in the recovery, psychological help was available through the ATAPS (Access to Allied Psychological Services) scheme, and this was followed, about two years after the disaster, by funding for alternative therapies. Both schemes have been valued highly by community members.

*If you're the person who wants to go and sit with a psychiatrist or psychologist then we're going to help you do that. If you're finding that [alternative therapies are] going to work for you, rather than giving you a voucher to go and see a counsellor, we'll give you a voucher to do the program. If you want to do Bowen Therapy ... Chinese medicine, that's what got me through ... I did the whole debriefing and talking and thought this is a friggin' waste of my time because I thought, how do I explain? (Community development, health or social worker – 2 people)*

Given the enormous barriers to men asking for support, it is critical that services are accessible and flexible.

*One guy was ... in the CFA 30 years and walked into [our] office and said could he see a bloke to talk to. The reception said, 'He's full up', and the guy burst into tears and walked onto street. I was able to contact him by phone and he said, 'Mate I don't do that kind of thing. I've seen heaps of fires and this has never happen before'. I visited him at his place. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*What has been clear is the need for networking, outreach, and informal work. The findings are that services used are informal, flexible, community based, providing outreach and liaising with other services. The mental health worker goes out with other workers. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

Counselling was not the answer for this worker, either, who advocated supported for people to be able to access whichever type of therapy or activity to help them. Since conducting these interviews, the government has provided a voucher system that enables people to choose from a range of therapies to assist in their recovery.

*A lot of men are bottling it up ... [W]omen ...don't see it as a sign of weakness, as men do, that they are not travelling well. But I've seen big strong men who've said, they have to admit, 'I'm not having a good day'. They are now realising it's not a weakness. They have had Rob Gordon stuff, counselling services but until it clicks in themselves that they have a problem ...They have to see it. They have to say, 'I do have a problem from the fires, it has impacted my life' and then you take the necessary steps to move on. (Govt/ VBRR/ Community Recovery)*

## **Strategies to help women**

There was little spoken of in relation to help for women. This may be because workers felt women were accessing the kinds of services offered, particularly generalist counselling. Women's groups were organised early, often from within the community, capitalising on the tendency for women wanting to get together, talk and take a break from their new reality. One Community House offered a range of options from art to belly dancing to all day morning teas — all aimed at encouraging women to drop in.

*There was a simple little thing where a group of women got together and within a couple of days, they had 50 women come to an evening there at the cafe. The women got pamper packs and they laughed till they cried. (Community development, health or social worker — 3 people)*

*We quickly established all day morning teas, so we could get people to come in and have a forum, just to come in and have a cuppa and a chat and then we could work out what services were needed. (Community development, health or social worker)*

Workers saw the value in women's groups, even noting that the research focus group itself was therapeutic, allowing women to get together and reflect on the fires and the time since.

*This is therapeutic. It's great. There are certain things that have sprung up [to help people] but lots of people don't engage. There haven't been the variety of things for people to engage in. The things they're providing are not going to suit everyone's needs. Having said that, it's a mammoth task to address what everyone needs. (Community Volunteers — 8 people)*

*Support groups - and not support groups saying they are for women in domestic violence because you won't get people to go along. It should be as part of the recovery planning. (Govt/ VBRR/Community Recovery)*

More formally, women participated in Women Gathering groups, run by WHGNE with funding from the Office of Women's Policy and attended the Bush to Beach events — a highlight for many women.

*The feedback we have had from the men is that, 'This has been such an amazing experience for my partner to feel valued, for her to take a bit of time to look after herself, the kids are happier, we're happier, she's happier, she's come home a better woman. She goes to those Firefoxes events whatever they are and she feels validated and connected'. (Community development, health or social worker — 2 people)*

*The women have absolutely adored it because they can get away and talk about their real feelings. (Case management — 2 people)*

Sometimes the women's groups focussed on their role as mothers.

*More recently we started a women's support group ... Women didn't have the strategies to explain to kids, 'Yes, it's getting hot again', and just giving them strategies on how to cope with that grief and trauma, and how to explain it to the kids ... and if you're crying all the time your kids will be very confused, and not knowing quite how to cope. And just giving mums strategies on how to deal with the nightmares, and the bed-wetting, all the things that we were noticing ... (Community development, health or social worker)*

### **Strategies to help families**

The workers' thoughts on the need for families to recover together were echoed by the women's comments (Vol. 3). Rather than only having separate men's and women's groups, a holistic approach that included children was recommended by many as a necessary adjunct.

*It's about families connecting with each other. What seems to be missing was the whole family to be able to go, and just grieve together and recover together. That's where the need is I think, and that's where the holes seem to be in the programs, the grants and opportunities ... We had an Echuca weekend and that was one of the huge highlights of the year. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*The Echuca-Moama Tourism Board allowed 60 families to ... go away together and you see ... people talking to people, families talking to families, and I think that's when you have the opportunity to bring it out because even if the bloke doesn't want to talk about it, the wives will be talking about it and the blokes will get into a conversation, and I think that's the drawcard. That was a huge success. I thought that was the most amazing thing to see families actually enjoying their company after the fire. (Govt/ VBRR/ Community Recovery)*

When visitors from similar towns in the United States spoke of their own community's journey to recovery, it resonated with local workers.

*What they noticed was that people wanted to be together, to recover together, to grieve together, to learn together and grow. That's what we are noticing, people are really wanting to do that. (Community development, health or social worker)*

### **Post-traumatic growth**

This research has focussed on areas that can be improved through policy and planning. It is worth noting, however, that workers spoke about positive elements of the disaster's aftermath. For some estranged couples, the fires had the effect of bringing them back together again.

*We've seen families get back together that were broken before. (Govt/ VBRR/ Community Recovery)*

And for many women the aftermath of the fire brought about opportunities to connect with their community and to determine their own set of values and priorities. While this caused conflict in some relationships, it forged closer ties with community.

*We have so many women just really standing up and saying, 'I'm feeling better these days, I've had some counselling, and I'm ready to take on a role in community leadership' ... they're running courses, they're working with kids, they're volunteering to help me with all sorts of different services ... Something happened after the fires, I think they are feeling*

*quite empowered... I noticed just as strongly the women who are doing that without the support of their partners ... She's wanting to grab life with both hands and run, but she's got this partner who is saying, 'What are you doing? Why isn't my dinner on the table? Why aren't you here for me? Where are my clean clothes?' She wants more in life than that ... They want to be strong and independent and great role models for their kids about what women can achieve, and how they want to live their lives. (Community development, health or social worker)*

*What we are seeing now is women who had previous mental health issues because of DV and the impact that domestic violence from their own parents and partners had on them, and talking about growth and how, in a way, they have reconnected to the strength and self esteem and become more assertive. It has been a catalyst for some women. (Mental Health Practitioner)*

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