



Presentation to emergency services workers, government employees, health professionals and community members in Hume region

March 5 and 6, 2012, By Deb Parkinson and Claire Zara,

As many of you know, on Friday we are launching our report, *The Way He Tells It*, at the first Australian conference on family violence after a disaster. This specific focus on two key concerns – family violence and disaster - is bringing people from around the country and from overseas.

We are about to close registrations with 190 people attending so far. This issue is clearly relevant for many people at all levels of disaster planning, response, and recovery, and, for us, vindicates our perseverance in bringing it to attention.

We know that Australians have a 1 in 6 chance of experiencing a disaster, and we know that family violence increases after a disaster. It is our responsibility to ensure that the most vulnerable members of our communities are considered, and protected, during these times.

Today we will give you snapshots of people's real experiences through their own words to illustrate some key areas highlighted in our report.

All the names, have of course, been changed.

On Black Saturday Fran left her Marysville home as planned, taking her children, pets and a neighbour's child to safety. She cried as she kissed her husband goodbye; he, a fire-fighter, had responsibilities and a job to do.

She says that was the last time she saw her husband. No, he didn't die. He fought the fires and survived, but that survival, and the horrors he witnessed and the emotions he experienced, brought him home a changed man. After a terrifying day fearing the worst, Fran was reunited with her husband.

'Rick " she told us, 'Was deeply shaken by his experience, very shut down. He managed to give me a hug, but there was nothing behind it. That is pretty much the status quo since the fires.'

The status quo is now they are divorced, their family broken. The months after Black Saturday were a nightmare for Fran as she tried to re connect with her husband, who became more withdrawn, refused to speak and eventually become abusive, threatening, and attempting suicide.

We asked what help was available for him, and others, whose role it was to fight the fires, and were told that there were counselling opportunities *if needed*. In the predominately male dominated culture of the CFA and DSE, to ask for help is perceived as being less of a man. Needless to say, not many took the opportunity, especially in the early months. One worker described men's reactions to counselling:

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'

Counselling may have stemmed the flow of trauma, anger, grief and frustration for men, but it did not generally get a good uptake. Many workers lamented the difficulties in engaging men to discuss and debrief. The upshots of this refusal or inability to access help, in some cases, resulted in behaviour that brought further damage to women and families.

Michelle

Well, my husband said that the fire just didn't affect him. I don't think that's true 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' ... Any human being is going to be affected by that, and I think that he's just completely shut down.

Women and workers told us 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 and personal violence .

Jenny told us:

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.

And Di:

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.

The increase in alcohol and drug use and the impact of the fires exacerbated the behaviours of some men who had a previous history of violence, increasing it to dangerous levels.

We spoke with Sandra who contacted the police, fearing for her life, when her husband viciously attacked her after drinking excessively.

I called triple 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 mean they knew he'd gone to bed ... I was scared stiff.

Luckily, he did not link the call to his wife.

Some women, now three years on, still fear for their lives and the repercussions from partners, or indeed, the community, if they speak out about what they are going through and what it's been like living with an abusive partner since the fires.

Some women withdrew key sections of their interview in order to protect him and often, themselves. These were usually the more graphic and damning accounts of their partner's abusive behaviour. Workers, too, withdrew sections of their interviews that identified major systems lapses, lapses that may have left women even more vulnerable.

Ironically, we were told by family violence workers that women previously 'on their books' had asked to be taken off. They knew, instinctively, that there would be fallout from the aftermath of the bushfires, and that there would be women needing help with family violence.

That help did not always come. Sandra contacted DV services to find a sympathetic ear. She told of her husband's increasing violence and excessive drinking after the fires, and the fears for her safety.

It was a relief to speak so openly and to be heard. However, when the dv worker heard she had a bushfire case manager, she was 'handballed' over to her. Although a kind person, the case manager was inexperienced and not at all equipped to deal with family violence issues. And Sandra's issues were complex; a real fear of retribution; tied in financially with her husband's business; and no view of escape. After being passed to other case managers, equally kind, equally ill- equipped, Sandra gave up. Her final words to us were :“They'll take me out of here in a box”.

There is no doubt that women with children should be listed as vulnerable persons during a disaster, and even less doubt that women and children known to be experiencing family violence, noted as priorities. What we learnt confirms that the myth of women and children first in a disaster is indeed, just that – a myth.

Society expects men to protect their families. And women, in many cases, expect to be protected. 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.

Some women whose partners were part of the immediate fire response, never expected to be on their own that day; never expected that their partner, an 'expert' and trained in fire response, would not be there to protect them. These women had to make their own escapes, often with children, or fight the fires without the help of the men they relied upon. One woman said: 'He was my fire plan'.

The women told of their own and their partners' behaviours on 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 her older children unprotected in a life-threatening situation. They escaped in the open back of a ute through fire on both sides of the road and falling embers.

Sally told us:

I'm looking at this man and going, 'You shoved us in the back of the ute?' ... 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'.

In the cultural storytelling, men are cast as protector and hero, and women as 'damsels in distress' waiting to be rescued. 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.

Suzanne described her escape leading another car with a driver from overseas .

'I went to the CFA. It was chaos. Just chaos.

We got to the St Andrews turnoff. It was like an atomic bomb had gone off here. The sky was coming down on us and as far as you could see was orange and red and getting darker and it was getting lower and lower. I just wanted to try and get a tarred road that had wide access that we could travel quickly on. So we took Mt Slide Road.

I sort of knew what was happening, but in your mind you tell yourself not to think about that. We just sped to the Melba Highway. I had [my little ones with me] and a friend from [overseas] was in the car behind me [with the older kids]. I had to slow down on a bend so my girlfriend [who] had never driven on the left-hand side before - didn't lose it on this sweeping corner. I was trying to get to Yarra Glen to go back to Eltham, but we couldn't. I couldn't even get out onto the road; there were so many cars that were fleeing.

This woman just put her head out the window and said, 'Get out of here!'

We looked over and the fire was there. All of a sudden I had four lives that I was responsible for, and my own. I shook uncontrollably ... I drove with the masses – 140 kilometres per hour.

Fortunately, she and her children and friend survived.

The myth of women being protected by men in a disaster is further exposed in an account from Jan Cooper - a fv crisis worker working on the eve of Black Saturday She said this memory continues to haunt her:

I received a call from a woman at around 3 in the morning. She told me the history of abuse from her partner - it is honestly, abuse that is much too gruesome and personal to repeat here, but suffice it to say that things were really bad, had been bad for a long time, and were

getting worse. Then she told me that people in her town were enacting their bushfire plans because it was a bushfire region. She said that her plan was always to leave early, but tonight, after abusing her, her partner took the keys to the car and said, "I hope there IS a bushfire tomorrow and I hope you die in it." And then he took the car and left. She had no other plan for getting away. I suggested she seek help from neighbours, she said they were 2 kms away, it's the middle of the night, she doesn't want to tell them what's going on. I offered to help her get out and assist her to stay in emergency accom - she did not want this, she hated the idea of the 'stigma' around staying in a women's refuge. We explored if her mother would come and pick her up and bring her back to Melbourne. This woman wanted none of these things, she said she would just take her chances with the bushfire. And that's actually how the call ended.

This frightening account leads us to revisit why women don't report family violence; double or triple that for rural areas; multiply by 100 after disaster. The abusive partner may have been a hero, everyone is traumatised, and agencies and women can't help but feel compassion for what he has been through. What she has been through, and is going through, seems to fall through the cracks.

Women told us of friends and family ignoring their pleas for help and even suggesting the women were at fault for not caring enough.

Shelly:

When I spoke to friends about it [the severe physical violence against her], they would turn a blind eye to it and say, you'll sort it out.

A person's first port of call when threatened is often the police. After the bushfires, the police did not - or were not able to - respond to calls for help from women.

Gaye had suffered abuse by her partner after the fires. We asked her if they were helpful.

'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.'

Shelley had left an abusive relationship and rebuilt a life and a career in her home town. The fires destroyed her workplace and she lost life- long friends. Under the guise of 'helping her' here ex returned and so did his behaviour.

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. 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.

The bushfires created opportunities for opportunistic men to re enter and exploit the lives of now vulnerable women. A number were not living in the fire affected areas at the time, but returned to try to cash in on grants, insurance payouts and opportunities. This remains a serious concern.

On the home front, interview data suggested that the choices in re-establishing lives after Black Saturday were gendered. While both men and women had some choice in returning to work, there was no choice for women when it came to caring for their 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.

Holly

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'.

And Emma

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'

Women's return to work, especially considering the impact of the fires on the children, relied on stable and loving child care 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.

Annie held a senior health service position before the fires:

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.

Gendered responses to disaster have huge implications on communities; on our expectation of who is vulnerable and who is able to respond; what restrictions and assumptions are placed on men and women and who gets the say in how we plan for disaster and recovery.

Women's voices are often not heard; this may sound like a cliché but it remains true in the context of disasters where women are still the ones who keep silent to prevent further harm to others, where they are denied a say because they have no way of attending a meeting to have that say because they have full responsibility for children and have limited or no access to transport; where their daily existence becomes one of dependency as work opportunities disappear and they are once again relegated to home duties. And where they may be kept in check by an abusive partner and culture that would prefer to look away.

During last year's Queensland floods we were approached by Qld police having heard of our yet to be published research. They wanted us to tell them what we could about FV after disaster. They were gearing up for what we now know is inevitable and we were glad to be of help.

The observations of the 76 people we consulted led to a number of recommendations for policy and practice emerging from this research. they are broken into three and directed towards Disaster Prevention agencies; Disaster Response and Disaster Recovery services.

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

- Establish Disaster Guidelines at National, State and Local levels that prioritise FV and require accurate recording of statistics
- Establish and promote a National Preferred Provider Register of disaster trauma practitioners who have a sound understanding of FV.
- Train human services workers in post disaster areas in how to identify FV and refer appropriately, e.g. CRAF training

- Include the likelihood of increased FV in Disaster and Mental Health First Aid courses
- Provide compulsory debriefing to emergency services personnel in the immediate post disaster period
- Employ local men and women in paid reconstruction efforts and offer a supported return to work
- Challenge expectations that men will behave in a defined masculine way by encouraging the expression of emotion.
- Research effective ways to engage men in support strategies
- Include women in all areas of disaster response and planning, and critically,
- Address – not excuse – men’s violence and affirm women’s and children’s right to live free from violence after a disaster.

We hope our work in this area assists you in your planning for the future in our region.