MEN ON BLACK SATURDAY

Risks and opportunities for change

This research with men was motivated by the need to increase the safety of women and children after disasters and reduce men's harmful behaviours both to themselves and those around them. Funded by the National Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme in 2012, WHGNE and Monash University's Injury Research Institute undertook this qualitative research project with 32 men affected by Black Saturday.

'WE HAD NO IDEA WHAT WE'D BEEN THROUGH. WE WERE JUST ABSOLUTELY SHATTERED'

The 32 men in this research revealed they paid a high price on the *'filthy, extreme day'* that was Black Saturday, and in its long aftermath, characterised by *'a hell of a lot of anger'*.

Actively involved in emergency rescue of people, pets, and livestock, those on the front line were hard hit. The men interviewed described physical injuries sustained in the fires and their aftermath, the feeling of imminent death, exhaustion, trauma and the challenge they felt of managing their emotions, including at community meetings when demonstrations of dominance by other men were often manifest. Those unable or unwilling to conform to prevailing gender norms were often judged to fail as men.

'LIKE THE WOMEN WHO FELT COMPELLED TO SUCK IT UP AND ACT LIKE A WIFE AND MOTHER, MEN HAD TO SUCK IT UP AND ACT LIKE A MAN'

While the impact of disaster varies according to gender, the men's narratives, and those of the 29 women in our previous research,[i] revealed that in life and death situations, men and women alike were agents in their own survival and the survival of others. Both spoke of courage, persistence, and selflessness, along with uncertainty, regret and terror.

'I FEEL IT'S QUITE STUPID OF ME TO BE EMOTIONAL ... EVEN AFTER ALL THIS TIME WHEN I RECALL IT ... I FEEL IT'S A WEAKNESS ... I'M SURE THAT A WOMAN COULD GET AWAY WITH IT A LOT EASIER THAN A MAN'

Alcohol and illicit drug use, reckless driving and extreme sports temporarily relieved most men's suffering in a way that was acceptable to the prevailing masculine norm, and over-work was common.

Instances of bullying were recounted including aggressive interaction among men in community meetings that spilled into the streets. Indications of family violence in the community were observed by a third of the men, though personal experience was not reported.

I WAS ... THAT FAR FROM ASSAULTING SOMEBODY ONE NIGHT, I JUST WAS READY TO DRAG HIM ACROSS THE TABLE AT A MEETING IN PUBLIC AND BEAT THE CRAP OUT OF HIM.

Considerable material and counselling resources had been made available to the men, but the men found them wanting.

WHAT'S NEW OR FURTHER CONFIRMED IN THIS RESEARCH?

- [ ] Disaster impacts can be severe and long-lasting.
- [ ] Community aggression and male violence increase.
- [ ] Gender norms are more salient after disaster and can harm both men and women.
- [ ] Alcohol abuse, mental health issues, and even suicide arise in the aftermath.
- [ ] Employment issues post-disaster are often a major source of disruption.
- [ ] Men, in particular, may be penalised for seeking psychological help.
- [ ] Men do talk about their disaster experiences – just ask them.

WOMEN'S HEALTH
GOULBURN NORTH EAST

These **ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS** are drawn from a comprehensive list in the report. They are for National, State and Local Government, for organisations responding to disaster and emergency planning agencies, and for community members in fire-prone areas across Australia. *Four core areas for increased gender awareness are identified.*

1. Reduce gender stereotyping

2. Reduce vulnerability of emergency services workers and other first responders

3. Improve individual support for survivor physical, mental and emotional health

4. Offer equal opportunities and respect to all disaster survivors

☐ In disaster training and in best-practice social change campaigns, raise awareness that the way men and women act and interact reflects social conditioning and pressure to conform – with harmful results

☐ Strive to include equal numbers of women at all levels in emergency service organisations

☐ Educate men in peer support, allowing men to take the lead in helping other men through long-term recovery; promote these through social marketing using effective antiviolence campaign models

☐ Establish community-based action-oriented programs for men and women, for example around hazard mitigation, where trust is built in teams through undertaking physical labour and where social development opportunities may arise incidentally

☐ Establish a drop-in health service along the lines of past well-women's clinics, with specialists in men's, women's, and children's health and specific resources relevant to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery

☐ Identify and utilise the skills and assets of local men and women in the reconstruction phase, e.g. through preference to local subcontractors

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

'HAVING TO DRIVE THROUGH THE FIRE FRONT ... HE WAS SCREAMING AND YELLING AND CRYING'

'I WAS JUST TRYING TO CONVINCE THEM I WOULDN'T LET THEM DIE ... THERE'S NOBODY AROUND TO SAY IT TO ME, IS THERE?

'IT WAS POWER OVER RATHER THAN POWER WITH ...IT'S PROFOUNDLY DISEMPOWERING'

'IN ABOUT FOUR WEEKS THERE WERE FIVE PEOPLE COMMITTING SUICIDE'

'IT'S ONLY JUST BELOW THE SURFACE ... THERE MIGHT BE SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS, JUST SOME LITTLE THING AND I'LL JUST LOSE IT'

'THE EXPECTATION IS THAT MEN WILL BE TOUGH AND STOIC AND GET ON WITH IT'

Pursuing 'ideal' masculinity has negative effects on men's health, their perception of risk, and on their responses to disasters. The effects of this masculinity were clearly evident in the Black Saturday bushfires as well as in other disasters. In order to mitigate the effects on men, women and children in future disasters and everyday life, the construction of masculinity must be addressed.

Men, Masculinity, Disaster: A Literature Review (Online)

[i] See both The Way He Tells It (2012), and Beating the Flames (2011) www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice

WOMEN'S HEALTH
GOULBURN NORTH EAST