

# **Australian research on domestic violence after natural disaster:**

## **Influencing emergency management policy & practice**

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### **Theme 4: Informing government policy to improve the health of Australian women**



# 'The way he tells it ...'

Relationships after Black Saturday





**DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROJECT**

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Duluth, Minnesota 55802  
218-722-2781  
[www.duluth-model.org](http://www.duluth-model.org)

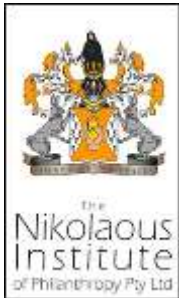
Welcome to

# Identifying the Hidden Disaster

The First Australian Conference

on

Natural Disasters and Family Violence



Friday, 9 March 2012  
Melbourne





# family violence after natural disaster





*"She dances on the wind" by Ona Henderson (03) 9712 0393*

# disaster is no excuse for family violence

You can help in just 4 steps:

1. ASK: Are you safe at home?
2. NAME IT: What you've just described to me is violence and it's a crime.
3. RESPOND: Give contact details of the local Domestic Violence Service, CASA and Victoria Police
4. FOLLOW UP: 'Last time you spoke about your safety. I'd like to know how you are now.'

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

Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria (24 hour support, information or referral to safe accommodation (refuge) 9322 3555 or 1800 015 188 (Toll free for country users) [www.dvirc.org.au](http://www.dvirc.org.au)

CASA – Centres Against Sexual Assault 1800 806 292 (all hours) or (03) 5722 2203 for (02) STD area residents. [www.casa.org.au](http://www.casa.org.au)

Victoria Police 000  
Victims of Crime Support Line (Telephone information, support and referral for victims of crime 8am-11pm Mon-Fri) 1800 819 817 (Toll free) [www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime)

Mens Referral Service – 9428 2899 or 1800 065 973 (Toll free) 9am – 9pm Mon-Fri [www.ntv.net.au/ntv\\_two.htm](http://www.ntv.net.au/ntv_two.htm)

*(Adapted from 'Raped by a Partner')*

# WOMEN AND DISASTER

1 Anastasio, M., Shehab, N. & Lawry, L. (March, 2009). "Increased Gender-based Violence Among Women Internally Displaced in Mississippi Two Years Post-Hurricane Katrina." *Disaster Med Public Health Preparedness* 3(1): 18-26.

2 Enanson, E., & Phillips, B. D. (2008). Invitation to a new feminist disaster sociology: Integrating feminist theory and methods. In B. D. Phillips & B. H. Morrow (Eds.), *Women and Disasters: From Theory to Practice* (pp. 41-74). USA: International Research Committee on Disasters.

3 Austin, D. W. (31.7.2008). *Hyper-Masculinity and Disaster: Gender Role Construction in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina*. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting. Retrieved from [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p241530\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p241530_index.html)

4 VicHealth. (2009). *National Survey on Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women 2009 Changing cultures, changing attitudes—preventing violence against women: A summary of findings*. Carlton: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

Relationship violence, child abuse and divorce have increased in the wake of overseas disasters. In the US, a 2009 study<sup>1</sup> showed a four-fold increase in intimate partner violence following Hurricane Katrina. The increase was driven by first-time occurrences of violence amongst displaced people.

**N**EW ZEALAND POLICE REPORTED A 53% INCREASE in call-outs to domestic violence incidents over the weekend of the Canterbury earthquake on 4th September 2010.

In Australia, there is no published research on relationship violence and disaster, yet Australians have a 1 in 6 estimated lifetime exposure to natural disaster.

It is hard to acknowledge relationship violence when a man may have acted heroically or is traumatised and is now struggling, perhaps with unemployment or suicidal thoughts.

## 'OTHER PEOPLE'S NEEDS ARE GREATER THAN MINE'

Relationship violence is a taboo subject. It's always been hard for women to report, but this is taken to a new level after a disaster. We have heard that women are sacrificing their own needs 'for the greater good'. 'Other people's needs are greater than mine.' And of course, after a disaster, support services are stretched.

In this context, relationship violence, may be unrecognised and unrecorded during and in the aftermath of disaster.

Yet, some women have experienced violent behaviour from their partners post disasters, and recovery workers need to be alert to the possibility of abuse, isolation and exclusion of women.

Abuse may be psychological, financial, physical or sexual, and may include property damage and stalking. Where researchers have noted

the link between disaster and increased violence against women, they attribute possible causes to heightened stress through homelessness, depression, PTSD, financial problems and alcohol abuse.

A leading US disaster researcher, Elaine Enanson, wrote that from Peru to Alaska, men cope through alcohol abuse and aggression.<sup>2</sup> Another, Duke Austin, wrote of a kind of 'hypermasculinity' that emerges from the stress and loss that can lead to increased levels of violence.<sup>3</sup>

**C**OMMUNITY ATTITUDES CONTINUE to excuse this violence. A 2006 VicHealth survey found that a large proportion of Australians believed 'relationship violence can be excused if it results from temporary anger or results in genuine regret'.<sup>4</sup> Such violence may even be seen as legitimate, and excused because this is 'the way men behave'. After a disaster, all kinds of behaviour is excused as existing social structures and norms are put on hold while a community recovers.

Alongside this, demands on women - caring for children and the elderly, looking out for community members, volunteering and increased workloads - can be excessive and increase the stress on individuals, families and communities. Lack of services and difficulty in accessing services because of childcare and transport restraints can further endanger and isolate women.

Single women, lesbians, widows, single mothers and divorced women can be overlooked in the recovery process and become further isolated from mainstream services and support, including financial aid.



WOMEN'S HEALTH  
GOULBURN NORTH EAST



# CHECKLISTS TO KEEP WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE AFTER NATURAL DISASTERS

Women's experiences during the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires were researched by Women's Health Goulburn North East (late 2009 to 2011).<sup>1</sup> This research provided new insights about how to keep women and children safer during disasters.

## CHECKLIST FOR ...

### DISASTER PREVENTION AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ELIMINATION OR REDUCTION OF THE INCIDENCE OR SEVERITY OF EMERGENCIES AND THE MITIGATION OF THEIR EFFECTS

(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)<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> From Emergency Management Manual Victoria: Part 7 (2010)

<http://www.oesc.vic.gov.au/emergencymannual>



WOMEN'S HEALTH  
GOULBURN NORTH EAST

- Educate disaster-prone communities about the probable health effects of disaster before a disaster occurs. Include the possible exacerbation of previous traumas

- Tailor Mental Health First-Aid courses to include disaster trauma and the probability of increased family violence, and provide them annually to communities in disaster-prone areas

- Develop strategies to prevent and respond to family violence in your community after a disaster

- Establish methods for compiling accurate statistics on family violence, e.g.

- Prioritise the inclusion of a 'family violence' tick-box in data collection forms so it is not hidden beneath other presenting issues
- Review Victoria Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence to ensure accurate recording of family violence after disasters

- In policies and in response measures such as case management, include women and children as 'vulnerable' groups

- Establish a National Preferred Provider Register to list disaster trauma practitioners who have a sound understanding of family violence

- Increase long-term funding for family violence services in communities affected by disaster

- Police to establish a new position of Disaster Liaison Officer with expertise in the dynamics of disaster and family violence and with a designated role in disaster recovery meetings

- Police to investigate ways to ensure the safety of women, children and communities, whilst being aware of the protection on disaster survivors

- Establish National Disaster Guidelines that:

- ensure accurate family violence statistics are recorded by all personnel responding to disaster e.g. health & community services and police
- state the need for relationship and family counselling at the immediate aftermath of a disaster and on a long-term ongoing basis

- 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

- Before, during and after disasters, challenge expectations that men will behave in a defined 'masculine' way – encourage expression of emotion

Asst. Commissioner Tim Cartwright, Victoria Police



[www.whin.org.au/environmental-justice](http://www.whin.org.au/environmental-justice)

# Environmental Justice & Women

In this website, Women's Health In the North and Women's Health Goulburn North East:

**pose** questions and challenges

**invite** your comment, your art, your poetry

**proclaim** women's experiences

**expound** our research and our stance

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

