The way he tells it

Relationships after Black Saturday

Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations

'The Blackened Trees are Greening' painting by Ona Henderson & S.Tunn © (03) 9712 0393

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[1] 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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[1] 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)[2]*

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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[2] 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). Chatzifotiou (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).

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**
	33 people 9 focus groups	**16**	**49 (47 individuals — 2 repeat ivs)**
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 homeF

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 & Mickelburough, 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/ VBRRA/ 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/ VBRRA/ 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/ VBRRA/ 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/ VBRRA/ 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 VBRRA 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 is 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

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Women's Health Goulburn North East

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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 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

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.