

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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# The hidden disaster: domestic violence in the aftermath of natural disaster

Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara (Women's Health Goulburn North East) report on the first Australian research to investigate post-disaster domestic violence.

## ABSTRACT

In countries similar to Australia, relationship violence increases in the wake of disasters. New Zealand police reported a 53 per cent rise in domestic violence after the Canterbury earthquake. In the US, studies documented a four-fold increase following two disasters and an astounding 98 per cent increase in physical victimisation of women after Hurricane Katrina, with authors concluding there was compelling evidence that intimate partner violence increased following large-scale disasters (Schumacher, et al., 2010). Yet there is a research gap on why this happens, and how increased violence may relate to disaster experiences. Women's Health Goulburn North East undertook the first Australian research into this phenomenon, previously overlooked in emergency planning and disaster reconstruction. Interviews with 30 women and 47 workers in Victoria after the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires provided evidence of increased domestic violence, even in the absence of sound quantitative data and in a context that silenced women. Community members, police, case managers, trauma psychologists and family violence workers empathised with traumatised and suffering men—men who may have been heroes in the fires—and encouraged women to wait it out. These responses compromise the principle that women and children always have the right to live free from violence. <sup>R</sup>

## Introduction

The possibility of increased domestic violence after natural disaster is largely unexamined in Australia despite Australians having a one-in-six estimated lifetime exposure to natural disaster (McFarlane, 2005). While debate continues as to whether disaster 'causes' domestic violence, there is much evidence of the link

between the two. Through examination of relationships in the aftermath of Black Saturday, this paper provides additional evidence of this link

## Overseas evidence of increased violence after disaster

Studies in developing countries and research conducted over the past decade in the United States and New Zealand confirm that domestic violence increased in those countries in the aftermath of earthquakes, hurricanes and floods. In the US, Enarson (2012), noted a 400 per cent increase in demand for women's shelters after the 1993 Missouri River Flood. After Hurricane Katrina, Anastario, *et al.*, (2009) found a four-fold increase in intimate partner violence. In the first population-based study after Katrina, Schumacher, *et al.*, (2010) reported an astounding 98 per cent increase in physical victimisation of women, concluding "the current study provides compelling evidence that risk of [intimate partner violence] is increased following large-scale disasters" (p601).

Closer to home, New Zealand police reported a 53 per cent increase in callouts to domestic violence incidents over the weekend of the Canterbury earthquake on 4 September 2010 (Houghton, 2010) and after the 2004 Whakatane flood, there was a tripling of workload for domestic violence agencies and a doubling of police callouts (Houghton, 2009).

## Australian evidence

As far back as 1992, there were indications that this phenomenon equally happens in Australia. Such reflections were captured in a 1992 symposium on *Women in Emergencies and Disasters* held in Queensland by the then Bureau of Emergency Services. This was followed in 1994 by a special edition of *The Macedon Digest* where three papers referred to increased domestic violence, one stating, "An increase in domestic violence is repeatedly found in post-disaster situations" (Honeycombe, 1994, p31). In a second article, a social worker wrote that after the 1990 Charleville 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, p11]*

A third paper citing proceedings from a workshop in Amsterdam in 1988 noted "women's health and security is not only directly affected by the direct impact of the disaster but also by vulnerability of unchecked male violence and aggression" (Van Lendewijk and Shordt, 1988 pp189-192, cited in Williams, 1994, p36) and followed this with a plea to provide domestic violence services after disasters in Queensland.

The intervening two decades in Australian emergency management practice and theory appear to shed no further light on either the link between domestic violence and disaster or practical arrangements and responses. The lack of knowledge was brought into sharp relief after the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, when no reliable statistics were available to document the effect of the disaster on domestic violence occurrences (Parkinson, *et al.*, 2011). Neither the existing family violence services, Victoria Police, nor the Victorian Bushfire Case Management System could provide conclusive data, confirming the suspicion that few researchers undertake examining gender-based violence in disasters because it is both methodologically and practically difficult to study (Enarson, 2012; Jenkins and Phillips, 2008; Rosborough, *et al.*, 2009).

## Domestic violence after Black Saturday

The magnitude of the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 was unprecedented since Australian settlement. It caused 173 deaths, injury to 414 people, the destruction of 2 030 houses and subsequent relocation of 7 000 people. The bushfires devastated whole communities, disrupted families and dismantled individual lives. Everything changed for 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 volunteer]

After Black Saturday, there were murmurs of increased domestic violence. It was discussed and reported by health and community workers, recovery authorities and community leaders. Newspaper articles, too, linked domestic violence directly to the bushfires, quoting credible and top-level sources including 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 (M. Johnston and Mickelborough, 2010).

This article reports on the first Australian research to investigate this issue beyond anecdote.

## A note on domestic violence theory

We take the position that domestic violence is gendered and asymmetrical (UN, 1993; VicHealth, 2011)—essentially that domestic violence is men's violence against women, where "women's violence does not equate to men's in terms of frequency, severity, consequences and the victim's sense of safety and well-being" and is often in self-defence or retaliation (Dobash and Dobash, 2004, p324).

The terminology of men's violence to women is manifold, including family violence, domestic violence, relationship violence, intimate partner violence, spousal abuse, wife beating and battery, amongst others. More theory-driven definitions include 'abusive household gender regime' (Morris, 2009), differentiation between 'conflict-driven' and 'control-initiated' (Ellis and Stuckless, 1996, cited in Wangmann, 2011), and Johnson's evolving concepts of patriarchal or intimate terrorism, common couple violence, mutual combat and (mostly for women) violent resistance (Debbonaire, 2008; Gondolf, 2007; Johnson, 1995; Kelly and Johnson, 2008).

Johnson's categories were explicitly conceptualised in an attempt to allow accurate measurement and effective intervention by recognising different dynamics. These were refined in 2008 to 'coercive controlling violence', 'violent resistance', 'situational couple violence', 'separational couple violence', 'separation-instigated violence' and 'mutual violent control' (Kelly and Johnson, 2008). Earlier work saw expanded categories of 'pathological violence' and 'anti-social violence' (Pence and Dasgupta, 2006) and motivations identified as 'within the perpetrator', 'within couple' interactions and in relation to 'potent stressors' (Johnston and Campbell, 1993).

The Duluth Model, too, has been highly influential over two decades, incorporating a 'power and control wheel' and hypothesising that domestic violence is a pattern of coercion, intimidation, isolation, exploitation of children and male privilege and emotionally and financially abusive behaviours (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, n.d. circa 1993).

A typology of domestic violence, it was thought, would allow more targeted interventions, yet each term and theory is laden with controversy (Wangmann, 2011). Theorists argue on grounds of confounding factors, gender symmetry, type of male perpetrators, the centrality of control, focus on physical violence, severity and impact, the role of men in prevention, and research methodology (Dutton and Corvo, 2007; Flood, 2006; Gondolf, 1988; Gondolf, 2007; Gottman, 2001; Jacobson, *et al.*, 1995; Johnson, 1995; Pease, 2008; Stark, 2006, 2010; Wangmann, 2011). On-the-ground practitioners, too, theorise on what is 'real' domestic violence. When presented with evidence from this research, local domestic violence professionals and men's health professionals questioned where it fitted on the continuum (Frye, *et al.*, 2006).

*“You have to ask, what is behind family violence? If it’s a traumatic state of mind, that would determine how it would be dealt with rather than labelling the behaviour as abusive ... You may find workers have changed their definition of family violence to accommodate the emotional and psychological conditions people are experiencing.”* (Counsellor)

As domestic violence practitioners, as trauma (or any other kind of) counsellors, as police, or as researchers, it is imperative to note there is no watering down of domestic violence after disaster, either because it was a one-off event or because the perpetrator had a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Yet this is exactly what practitioners in the field after disaster grapple with. Johnson wrote, “Yes, all family violence is abhorrent, but not all family violence is the same” (1995, p293) noting that family counsellors will be more effective if they “work with a set of interpretive frameworks rather than with a single-minded assumption that every case of violence fits the same pattern” (1995, p292).

Acceptance of the difficulties involved for women reporting violence against them by their partner (the man they love and who is supposed to love them) is imperative to recognising and supporting victims. Violence against women is an abuse of human rights (AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness, 2008; Bunch, 1990; Libal and Parekh, 2009; UN, 1993) and this includes in a post-disaster context where men may be suffering.

## Methodology

As the areas worst affected by Black Saturday fell within the shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi in Victoria, interviews were held with the 30 women and 47 workers in these shires. Women were recruited through advertisements in newspapers, flyers placed in key community areas and through word of mouth. Worker interviews were conducted both individually and in focus groups. There were 38 women and nine men from the health and community sector, churches, local and State government, the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, community recovery and case management. Levels of responsibility spanned statewide managers to volunteers. Interviews were digitally-recorded, transcribed, analysed inductively, using modified Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). NVivo V.9 and V.10 were used to assist qualitative analysis. Two researchers attended the interviews and focus groups. Ethics approval was granted from two human research ethics committees (HREC) being Monash University HREC and North East Health HREC.

This research examined the link between disaster and increased violence against women in the Australian context and documented women’s experiences to contribute to a new knowledge-base and inform post-disaster recovery.

The findings are unmistakable—domestic violence increased after this disaster. Most workers and all 30 women spoke of increased community or domestic violence.

*“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<sup>1</sup>)

*“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)

In all, 17 women spoke of being personally and badly affected. Nine of these 17 relationships experienced no violence before the fires and seven of these women spoke of settled and happy relationships prior to February 2009.

*“It’s like I’m seeing this side of him that I never knew existed ... it’s almost like a 360, this person you’ve gone from loving, you start thinking, ‘I don’t even know who you are mate.’”* (Gaye)

*“I really don’t know what’s going on with my husband except that the person I married has disappeared.”* (Michelle)

## Explanations for increased domestic violence after disasters

There were immense pressures on everyone who survived the fires as they tried to re-establish their lives. Homelessness, unemployment and increased alcohol and drug-use were noted by participants as characteristic of the recovery period. Disasters are traumatic experiences, challenging sense of self and the safety of our world. Grief and loss accompany intense disasters, necessarily co-existing with the financial and bureaucratic demands of the recovery and reconstruction phase. Increased contact between family members—often in cramped or shared accommodation—can increase tension.

The Black Saturday fires made it impossible for men to live up to society’s demands of their masculinity. Containing fireballs and controlling flames over 40 metres high was beyond human capacity. If men felt inadequate in these conditions, it underlines the flawed social construction of gender that expects men to have a particular set of characteristics simply because they are men. In everyday life, men embody different types of ‘masculinities’ and ‘practices’ (Pease and Pringle, 2001)—as in disaster. Despite the evidence, such loss of control threatened the male provider and protector role (Phillips, *et al.*, 2009).

1. False names used throughout paper.

*"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)

Some of the women had partners who were firefighters at the front line of an unprecedented disaster. Their training would not have been adequate preparation for what they faced, 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 firefighters; 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)

Enarson and Phillips (2008, p51) wrote that from Peru to Alaska, men cope using alcohol abuse and aggression. Austin (2008), 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).

This behaviour coincides with a community attitude that empathises and excuses. In a 2006 report on Australian attitudes to violence against women, a large proportion of the community believed that "domestic violence can be excused if it results from temporary anger or results in genuine regret" (Taylor and Mouzos, 2006).

*"It was that enmeshment in community of, 'They are the good guys who helped out with the fire' even though things might be happening [like family violence]."* (Social worker)

*"There was violence against [one woman] ... 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."* (Government worker)

Such violence may even be seen as legitimate, and excused because this is "the way men behave" (Atkinson, 2002, p4). Our empathy in normal circumstances is even deeper when we perceive that men are suffering. Tolerance of bad behaviour, through to violence, seemed to increase as men were said to be acting "out of character".

*"I think everyone put up with stuff they never normally would have put up with. I know a lot of the call outs to the local police in the first 12 months weren't reported ... Everyone was just looking after each other and they all knew it was the fire impact."* (Libby)

*"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)

## Silencing

In the immediate aftermath of disasters, 'community' as an entity is reified in the strong glare of media attention. The attention of the whole country is momentarily focussed on previously anonymous communities, and help pours in from government, churches and the health and community sectors. Although this community bonding is followed by cleavage (Borrell, 2011) media coverage is focused on resilience and the great national spirit and the generosity of others (Enarson, 2012).

There was enormous pressure from family members, friends, police and even health professionals to deny or forgive men's violence. Women spoke of seeking help from family, only to be ignored, accused of over-reacting, and blamed for not caring well enough for their men. They told of inadequate response from health professionals and inappropriate referrals. Some women were effectively stopped from seeking support by the person they confided in. Women reported an expectation from some professionals that women would be silent about it for the greater good. One health professional said:

*"So much has been justified as a result of the fires ... so much has been fobbed off. So many women have gone to police and been told by police, 'Things will settle down again'. The responsibility is back on the women."* (Case manager)

As in other disasters (Jenkins and Phillips, 2008), domestic violence after disaster was seen to have little to do with recovery and reconstruction. The focus on practical recovery, grief and loss, together with sympathy for traumatised, suffering and suicidal men prevented willingness to hear about domestic violence. Ultimately, some women gave up. One woman, after finishing the interview, said, "I'll get out of here in a box", revealing both her level of surrender and the danger she was in.

## Relevance of domestic violence to emergency planning and response

The risk posed by natural disaster is greater for women in situations of existing domestic violence. Disaster itself can trigger an increase in the severity of existing violence and violence that is new. In existing situations, women's preparation and evacuation strategies may be limited by concessions to controlling partners or, more directly, by lack of options, such as not having access to a vehicle.

## CHECKLISTS TO KEEP WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE AFTER NATURAL DISASTERS

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

**CHECKLIST FOR**

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

(Ambulance Victoria, Aust. Attorney General's Dept., Red Cross - RedPlan, Building Commission, SOM, OMA, Coroners Court, CFA, DEECD, DPE, DHS, DFR, DSE, DDI, Emergency Resilience, EnergySafe, DM, Life Saving Victoria, MHR, Volunteer Councils, DDC, DPC, ParksVic, St John's, Vic Roads, VicPol, SES, WorkSafe)

3 See full report, 'The Way We Talk It' at [www.health.vic.gov.au/emergencymanagement](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/emergencymanagement)

4 From Emergency Management Manual Volume Two, P 20110  
<http://www.vic.gov.au/government/emergencymanual>



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WOMEN AND DISASTER  
SNAPSHOT 4

- Educate disaster-prone communities about the probable health effects of disaster before a disaster occurs. Include the possible exacerbation of previous traumas
- Tailor Mental Health First-Aid courses to include disaster trauma and the probability of increased family violence, and provide them annually to communities in disaster-prone areas
- Develop strategies to prevent and respond to family violence in your community after a disaster
- Establish methods for compiling accurate statistics on family violence, e.g.
  - Prioritise the inclusion of a 'family violence' tick-box in data collection forms so it is not hidden beneath other presenting issues
  - Review Victoria Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence to ensure accurate recording of family violence after disasters
- In policies and in response measures such as case management, include women and children as 'vulnerable' groups
- Establish a National Preferred Provider Register to list disaster trauma practitioners who have a sound understanding of family violence

- Increase long-term funding for family violence services in communities affected by disaster
- Police to establish a new position of Disaster Liaison Officer with expertise in the dynamics of disaster and family violence and with a designated role in disaster recovery meetings
- Police to investigate ways to ensure the safety of women, children and communities, whilst being aware of the pressures on disaster survivors
- Establish National Disaster Guidelines that:
  - ensure accurate family violence statistics are recorded by all personnel responding to disaster e.g. health & community services and police
  - state the need for relationship and family counselling in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and on a long-term ongoing basis
- Recognise that the way men and women act is often the result of social conditioning and these gendered roles can leave women at a disadvantage both during and after disasters
- Before, during and after disasters, challenge expectations that men will behave in a defined 'masculine' way – encourage expression of emotion

The Women's Health Goulburn North East website has a series of publications about women and disaster titled Snapshot 1 – 4.

Where women and children have left violent men, their new visibility and potentially shared emergency accommodation may expose them to unavoidable contact with an abusive ex-partner. Sometimes, in disaster situations, women may have no choice but to rely on abusive partners to keep themselves and their children housed and relatively safe (Fothergill, 1999; Fothergill, 2008; Houghton, 2009; Jenkins and Phillips, 2008; Phillips, *et al.*, 2009). Lack of awareness of increased vulnerability to domestic violence after disaster by the community and emergency managers endangers women (Enarson, 1999; Fothergill, 2008; Phillips, *et al.*, 2009; Wilson, *et al.*, 1998). An Australian domestic violence crisis line worker is still haunted by the memory of a call she received from a woman the night before Black Saturday.

*"I received a call from a woman at around three in the morning. She told me the history of abuse from her partner – it is honestly, abuse that is much too gruesome and personal to repeat here ... Then she told me that people in her town were enacting their bushfire plans because it was a bushfire region. She said that her plan was always to leave early, but tonight, after abusing her, her partner took the keys to the car and said, "I hope there IS a bushfire tomorrow and I hope you die in it." And then he took the car and left. She had no other plan for getting away" (Cooper, 2012).*

### An important role for emergency management

Emergency management can play a part in preventing domestic violence after disaster by attending to it in planning, response and recovery stages. While the emergency stage after disasters necessarily attends to primary needs of food, water and shelter, the recovery and reconstruction stages include services for grief and loss. This happened after the 2009 bushfires, as counsellors and case-managers, 'thick on the ground' in many fire-affected communities, attended to individual psycho-social needs. However, this research highlights that domestic violence was not recognised as a legitimate issue in the post-disaster reconstruction period.

### What needs to be done?

Federal, State and local governments need to establish disaster guidelines that include attention to domestic violence as a priority in the aftermath of disasters. Response and prevention strategies must include the involvement of domestic violence services and women. Accurate domestic violence statistics must be recorded by all personnel responding to disaster, such as health and community services and police. Actions by governments would include training in domestic violence identification and referral for all human services

personnel involved in disaster response (such as that developed by WHGNE). In the aftermath of disasters, provision of mandatory family counselling could prevent family violence emerging at a later stage. This could most easily be arranged for emergency services workers. While this is clearly a controversial topic (Drury, *et al.*, 2012; Forbes, *et al.*, 2007; Forbes, *et al.*, 2010; Hobfoll, *et al.*, 2007), research participants pointed to the stigma and potential consequences involved in asking or volunteering for counselling offered by their emergency services employer. For example, they may fear having responsibilities removed from their role, or being passed over for promotion.

Additionally, in regard to police response, Victoria Police have a strong history over the past decade in turning around attitudes to domestic 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.

## Conclusion

These are unwelcome findings. We accept that violence against women increased after earthquakes in Haiti and cyclones in Bangladesh, but nobody wants to hear that men who embody the spirit of resilient and heroic Australia are violent towards their families. The aftermath of Black Saturday presents Australians with the opportunity to see how deeply embedded male privilege is, and how fragile are attempts to criminalise domestic violence. The magnitude of Black Saturday

and the depth of men's suffering obscured women's and children's rights to live free from violence, as family and community members, police and health professionals sometimes silenced women. It seemed that two decades of increased understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence by both police and the broader community was lost in this disaster's aftermath.

## Further reading

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

Resources on the websites include the Postcard and Snapshots, and recommendations for agencies involved in disaster prevention, response and recovery.

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# disaster is no excuse for family violence

You can help in just **4** steps:

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

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



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*Challenging inequality, embracing diversity.*

### Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria

24hr support, information or referral to safe accommodation (refuge)  
(03) 9322 3555 or 1800 015 188 (toll free for country users)  
[www.dvirc.org.au](http://www.dvirc.org.au)

### CASA – Centres Against Sexual Assault

1800 806 292 (all hours) or (03) 5722 2203 for STD area residents  
[www.casa.org.au](http://www.casa.org.au)

### Victoria Police 000

### Victims of Crime Support Line

Telephone information, support and referral for victims of crime  
8am–11pm, Monday to Friday 1800 819 817 (toll free)  
[www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime)

### Men's Referral Service (03) 9428 2899 or 1800 065 973 (toll free)

9am–9pm Monday to Friday  
[www.mrs.org.au](http://www.mrs.org.au)

(Adapted from 'Raped by a Partner')

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