

The Impact on Women in Disaster Affected Areas in Australia

‘We Need To Think About Vulnerability Differently’

Summary of the 2014 Canberra Roundtable Discussion

Two National Women’s Alliances – economic Security for Women (eS4W) and the National Rural Women’s Coalition (NRWC) – hosted a policy roundtable at Australia’s Parliament House in Canberra on the 25th June, 2014.

The discussion was primarily based on two projects that focused on the economic impact on women in disaster affected areas in Australia.

1. NRWC launched a kit titled *“Weather the Storm”* which is an engagement program that can be used by community groups to support women to prepare for emergencies and disasters. It comes in a presentation folder and consists of three manuals. The kit is available to download for free from the NRWC website¹.
2. eS4W launched *“Women’s voices from the floodplains”*, a report by JERA International, that focused an economic gender lens on responses in disaster affected areas in Queensland and Victoria (2011 floods). The report is available to download from the eS4W website²

The aim of the roundtable was to ensure government and key stakeholders in emergency management and disaster relief:

1. Are aware of the gendered nature of the impacts on women of emergencies and disasters.
2. Hear from women affected by disasters about enhanced ways to prepare for and respond to disasters to address these gendered impacts.
3. Are aware of the significant contributions women already make to the preparation for and management of emergencies and more effectively take advantage of the resources women bring to these disaster situations.
4. Ensure women are equitably engaged in rebuilding and post disaster projects.

¹ <http://nrwc.com.au/Projects/WeatherTheStorm.aspx>

² <http://www.security4women.org.au/past-projects/2013-projects/voices-from-the-flood-plains>

This summary of the report highlights the key discussion items from the roundtable that address the mitigation of economic impact on women in approaches to disaster preparation, emergency management, disaster relief and recovery and how a gendered approach could make a difference. It is based on the assumption that the voices and strengths of women need to be reflected in policies and programs initiated and administered by the Australian Government and all Australian states and territories.

The full report can be viewed at www.security4women.org.au/disaster-roundtable-report or at www.nrwc.com.au/Projects/Roundtable.aspx.

Key points from the discussion

All people living in a community impacted by a natural disaster are affected in a myriad of ways, however it was openly acknowledged and recognised that many women experience the impacts differently because of the application of gender stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes and gender inequality, family and other unpaid care responsibilities, social isolation and economic constraints can result in many women being placed in positions of increased vulnerability during an emergency. Thus gender analysis needs to inform disaster preparation, management, response and recovery efforts at all levels, within government and non-government organisations, if this vulnerability is to be reduced.

Additionally, responses to disasters should recognize and address the economic impacts on women, which in turn would assist in reducing vulnerability for all people.

Conclusions

The inclusion of women in local disaster preparation and response planning is essential. There is a need to identify and harmonise best gender and disaster practice across levels of government. This can include individual women and or representatives of women's services and women's organisations, particularly women who have been trained in this area.

Emergency teams need to work towards equal gender ratios because women bring different qualities and resources. This requires community focus, change in language, the need to actively recruit women and the need to redesign protective clothing.

Resources are required to engage with women's organisations, to include them in planning and on-ground responses, to be part of the disaster team

We need to include women in developing response plans and these plans need to be implemented as part of the larger area response.

Local people, including women, need to be employed in the rebuilding process.

Family friendly workplaces are required in disaster responses.

There is a business case for and a substantial return on investment for engaging with women and the broader community, post disaster. Women contribute their time to maintain and rebuild families and communities. However, often this work reinforces traditional gender stereotypes with women doing the unpaid care work.

Most of the responsibility for disaster preparation and response lies with state and territory government and voluntary organisations. Gender is on the agenda in Victoria with the Gender and Disaster Taskforce, made up of emergency service organisations and the Victorian Emergency Management Conference has a gender stream and this proactive inclusion work is to be commended.

Measures that could improve gender responsiveness

eS4W and NRWC propose to advance the following recommendations to all levels of government.

1. Undertake research to analyse and collect evidence of the monetary value of the post-disaster work (unpaid and voluntary) which women do and the manner in which this work firstly contributes positively to community recovery and general resilience in the long term and secondly, its impact on their economic wellbeing.
2. Extend the time period of the provision of Health Care Card to people living in disaster affected areas and to those people who may have had to move as a result of the disaster.
3. Provide additional short term accommodation (e.g. self-contained mobile housing) for recovery support workers who are imported into communities during and after natural disasters, relieving pressure on local sources of accommodation that may already be used as emergency or crisis housing.
4. Include women's organisations and providers of women's services in disaster planning processes to avoid any negative impact of natural disaster response and recovery efforts on their capacity to meet the needs of women in the area.
5. Implement practical post-disaster (financial and non-financial) support that uses small, locally owned businesses so they can continue to be sustainable providers of goods and services to the community in which they operate.
6. Ensure the full engagement and equal participation of women (including vulnerable women), individually or through the involvement of women's organisations and services in planning for disaster response and recovery so that gender-responsive approaches are planned which take into account the specific needs of all women.
7. Ensure equal opportunities for the leadership and participation of women as emergency service responders which will lead to an improvement in the gender balance of disaster responders.
8. Address appropriate gender perspectives and responses in the emergency planning and implemented in times of responding to a natural disaster.
9. Develop local preventative disaster plans and responses by individual communities and then integrate these plans into a wider state response. A key consideration in this locally developed planning should be gender and a recognition of the circumstances and locations of vulnerable women and their need for additional protection, care and support in times of disaster.

10. Train disaster response personnel so they are able to undertake a safety/risk assessment when working with potentially vulnerable persons and situations. This includes understanding the indicators of family violence/violence against women and children and being able to recognise and identify the indicators whilst in the field.

Acknowledgements

Australian Women's Health Network; Australian Emergency Management Institute; Gender and Disaster Taskforce Victoria; Red Cross; University of Wollongong – Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC; Regional Australia Institute; Municipal Association of Victoria – Gender and Emergency Management Advisory Group; Justice Equality Rights International; Australian Women Against Violence Alliance;

Attorney Generals Department; Minister for Social Services; Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development; Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women; Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet; Office for Women;

National Women's Alliances

economic Security4Women (eS4W) and the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) are two of five alliances funded by the Australian Government through the Office for Women, located in the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The alliances work to ensure that the voices of as many women as possible are heard, especially those who may find it difficult to engage in advocacy and decision-making.

<http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/women/programs-services/equal-place-in-society/engaging-with-womens-organisations>

About economic Security for Women

economic Security4Women (eS4W) is an alliance of women's organisations united in the belief that economic wellbeing and financial security are essential for women and will enable women of all ages to have an equal place in society. eS4W engages with Australian women to identify the issues they face and establish those of primary importance and advocates for change to policies which continue to impact negatively on equality for women and their ongoing economic security.

More information about the work undertaken by eS4W can be found at www.securityforwomen.org.au.

About the National Rural Women's Coalition

The **National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC)** is a collaborative national voice for women living in rural, regional and remote Australia. The NRWC works to support and grow vibrant rural, regional and remote communities throughout Australia through working with powerful national rural women's organizations.

More information about the work of the National Rural Women's Coalition can be found at www.nrwc.com.au