

The Impact on Women in Disaster Affected Areas in Australia

'We Need To Think About Vulnerability Differently'



**A report on the 2014 Roundtable Discussion
Canberra**

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 which include:

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

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Executive Summary

After a disaster, women are going to be exhausted and we found that two years after, they were still exhausted and they had depleted their resources – financially, physically and emotionally”.

The report is designed to inform governments, policy makers and community members of the issues that are of the most concern and how a gendered approach could improve the economic impacts of natural disasters on women.

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.

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 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.

This 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.

Vignette

“The one thing that I have found really valuable for anyone who experiences trauma – they really have to tell their story twenty-five times before it starts to lose its effect. In terms of supporting women in natural disaster – allow people to tell their stories because that is where the power comes from and where the power sits. If you can verbalise it and talk about it, this allows you to build your resilience and we need to empower women to do this. Allow them to tell their story over and over again. You become a social leper because all you want to do is talk about your experience and you can’t stop talking about that experience until you have told it enough times for yourself. It is not so much telling but someone listening. We need someone to be a listening post. Just listen”.

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.

Measures That Could Improve Gender Responsiveness

eS4W and the National Rural Women's Coalition 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.

Introduction

In 2012 two National Women's Alliances (NWA's) received Special Project Funds from the Office for Women to develop projects that focused on the economic impact on women in disaster affected areas in Australia. One condition of the funding was for those alliances to discuss their respective projects, identify opportunities for cooperation and collaboration and information sharing.

In 2013:

1. The National Rural Women's Coalition launched a kit titled "*Weather the Storm*" which is an engagement program which 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 website.

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

2. economic Security4Women 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 website¹

In 2014, these alliances held one roundtable discussion at Australia's Parliament House in Canberra and plan another community discussion in one of the areas affected by disaster. The purpose of these discussions is to inform positions to be taken by the alliances in their engagement with government. These positions will be outlined in a report to government.

The alliances also invited the Australian Women's Health Network to attend and present on their recent position paper "*The Impact on Women's Health of Climatic and Economic Disaster*"². There is an existing awareness of the significant contributions that women already make to the preparation for and management of emergencies, however there remains more work to be done in effectively taking advantage of the resources which women bring to these disaster situations.

The aim of the first policy roundtable was to ensure government and key stakeholders:

- Are aware of the gendered nature of the impacts on women of emergencies and disasters.
- Hear from women affected by disasters about enhanced ways to prepare for and respond to disasters.
- Address these gendered impacts to ensure that women are equitably engaged in planning, rebuilding and post disaster projects.

¹ <http://www.security4women.org.au/past-projects/2013-projects/voices-from-the-flood-plains>

² <http://www.awhn.org.au/files.php?cat=1>

The aim of the second roundtable is to take the findings of the first to an affected community for discussion and review. The second roundtable will include local men as well as women and the agencies, who were involved in the disaster preparation and response.

Rationale

Women often shoulder a disproportionate burden of the effects of natural disasters. As the primary family carer and as community carers, women play key unpaid roles in community rebuilding.

Research by JERA (Justice Equality Rights Access) for eS4W in 2012, found that the needs of women are often overlooked in disaster affected areas. As a result, they have less opportunity than men to look for employment inside and outside the disaster affected areas. This disruption to their economic activity impacts on them as well as local industries and economies.

Post-disaster, women often continue to bear a heavy workload including clean-up work, subsistence activities and care especially for children and the elderly. Women are often at the forefront of organising comfort, shelter, fuel, nutrition and water, as well as mobilising the community to respond to disaster. In addition, there is evidence to suggest an increase in violence against women and children after such disasters. As a result, women are not only left with virtually no time for income-generating activities, they also run the risk of being exhausted and overworked and in some cases more vulnerable to abuse.

Despite this, gender concerns are often overlooked, ignored or dismissed as emergency responses take effect and the “tyranny of the urgent” (water in, water out, clean up, rebuilding of infrastructure, etc.) prevails. On the positive side, women’s disaster response efforts can provide them with new skills they can carry over into economic activity, giving them a unique opportunity to challenge and change their gendered status in society.

In contrast, when disasters hit overseas, international aid agencies often support development strategies that promote market-based opportunities for women, for example by strengthening women’s associations and advocating gender-sensitive business environment reform. There are also examples where women, despite gender-specific barriers, have established viable enterprises based on familial and community networks, e.g. in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, sometimes changing the gender relations in the family and community.

In Australia, however, these strategies are not employed and little is known about the specific economic impacts of disaster affected areas on women.

Vignette

“They say you can use your emergency funds. The electricity goes out and you cannot access an ATM and if you do not have cash you cannot buy food or anything that you may need. The supermarkets and shops lose their refrigeration and there is a sudden sharing of what is needed.....humanitarian forces come in to play at this point. There are shop keepers who do not get back what they have given away in stock. They are very generous. The underlying assumption is you can go out and buy goods, however the supermarket has no food and no refrigeration and no ATM’s. We need to start with practical things”.

The NRWC and eS4W want to explore how the strengths and vulnerabilities of women can be reflected and accommodated in relevant Emergency and Disaster policies and programs.

Outline of the Discussion

Senator Michaelia Cash, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women opened the roundtable and welcomed twenty-five attendees from a range of states and territories.

Karen Tully, Program Manager from the National Rural Women's Coalition shared the kit titled *"Weather the Storm"* which provides an engagement program that can be used by community groups to support women to prepare for emergencies and disasters. The kit comes in a presentation folder and consists of three manuals.

Carole Shaw and Judith Van Unen, Directors from JERA (Justice Equality Rights Access) International outlined research undertaken for eS4W which examined the economic impact of natural disasters on women, and that is contained in the research report titled *"Women's Voices From the Flood Plains – an economic gender lens on responses in disaster affected areas in Queensland and Victoria"*.

Kelly Bannister, Chief Executive Officer from the Australian Women's Health Network spoke about a position paper titled *"The Impact on Women's Health of Climatic and Economic Disaster"* which examined women's rights and women's health in the wake of a disaster, and the vulnerabilities which post-disaster chaos can present.

The roundtable discussion was facilitated by Sally Jope, Executive Officer of eS4W. Participants were invited to consider how the economic impact on women is accommodated in current approaches to disaster preparation, emergency management, disaster relief, financial assistance, recovery and mitigation policy and how a gendered approach could make a difference.

Vignette

"In our neighbourhood our house was not flooded however our neighbours were flooded and they did not have electricity to their houses. In our business we have big freezers where we store our produce and we could store their frozen stuff. Then our electricity failed and we thought, you can't have this, why have they cut it off? Down the street people were running around sightseeing in boats and standing up and going near power lines. Here we were – going to lose all of our products and all of the stored stuff out of everyone's freezers. They had no idea they could have left the power on at that pole and isolate the power down there. Just a little bit of communication goes a long way".

Roundtable Participants

The following organisations were represented at the roundtable.

Australian Women's Health Network

Australian Emergency Management Institute

Gender and Disaster Taskforce Victoria

Red Cross

University of Wollongong – Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

Attorney Generals Department

Minister for Social Services

Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women

Regional Australia Institute

Municipal Association of Victoria – Gender and Emergency Management Advisory Group

Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet

Justice Equality Rights International

Office for Women

Australian Women Against Violence Alliance

eS4W

National Rural Women's Coalition

Vignette

“We had generators because of our business and we loaned them out and we had gurneys that we lent to people to clean. We did not see one for about four days as it was down at the retirement village. There was nothing for us when it came back. We got our \$1000 only because I could not get to work one day. However, we ran our electricity extension leads over the neighbours fence and they get the relief money yet they have their jobs”.

Next steps

The next steps from the roundtable will be to report back to participants a summary of the discussion and to include them in an email list to facilitate on going contact and sharing of information. The NWAs aim to continue to work on this area of Gender and Disaster, towards a presentation at the proposed National Conference on Violence Against Women and Children to be held by the Alliances (led by AWAVA) in 2015/2016.

Vignette

"Our business has been ruined.

My husband is a fisherman and I have supported him since the 2011 flood. I have been providing the financial support for the fishing business.

Our rivers were totally stripped of nutrients – and apart from that, they were full of debris and boats and houses and you name it.

They got a bit of funding after 2011 and the fisherman themselves got in and cleaned up a couple of sections of that river that would provide the best chance for them to work.

Then we had another two floods and a tornado in 2013 and since then our river has changed so drastically.

We have a spot where we can work but we have all the recreational fishers competing in this tiny little strip that we have cleared.

My husband has not worked since then.

Fishing is different to farming where when there is a drought, you get drought relief. Fishing is no different. A drought on the land is a drought on the sea and we do not get this relief. If we were aquaculture and growing our product we would. It is a little loop hole – we are wild harvest".

Issues and Measures that could Improve Gender Responsiveness

The Contribution by Women to Natural Disaster Recovery

Issue

It was agreed that the voluntary support and contribution provided by women in times of natural disaster in Australia has not been well acknowledged. There is little understanding of the value of unpaid work and other input which women provide in times of natural disasters or of the impact of that on women's economic security.

Women contribute their time and financial capacity to maintain and rebuild families and communities.

"There is a really strong business case to be made for the high return on investment in engaging women with the general community immediately after a disaster".

It was observed that women contribute enormously to putting the fabric of communities back together and this assists an array of individuals and organisations with post-disaster recovery, and often prevents *"people just moving out and not going back"*. As post-disaster response work is often undertaken by women without fanfare, the traditional gender stereotypes of women doing the unpaid care and support work are reinforced and the impact unrecognised.

Recommendation

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*

Impacts on Women's Services

Issue

"Community services themselves are vulnerable in disasters".

It was noted that during and after natural disasters women's welfare and support organisations e.g. gender specific support and family violence services are often impacted in unintended ways.

In particular, crisis accommodation is scarce at the best of times, however during and after a disaster, emergency services personnel, disaster response support workers and rebuilding teams often take over existing crisis housing or quarantine the available general accommodation (e.g. motels, caravans, self-contained apartments) that might otherwise be utilized by women's welfare services who provide for survivors of gender-based violence.

"Tradespeople came in from out of town and gobbled up the accommodation that should have been available for those people that did not have any".

This places an additional burden (logistically and financially) on women's service providers.

It was also noted that often there is also an increased housing demand by women and children in the aftermath of a natural disaster (due to natural disaster impacts or an escalation of personal safety concerns triggered by stresses of the disaster), and that natural disaster recovery needs often take away much needed resources from the welfare providers for women's services. Such providers should be enabled to continue to provide ongoing care and support to women and their families.

Recommendations

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.*

Women and Small Business

Issue

The vast majority (96%) of Australian businesses in June 2012 were small businesses. (*Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, May 2013*). A significant number of these small businesses are owned and operated by women, and this is even more prevalent in rural communities. It is vital that post-disaster responses carefully consider the need for small businesses to continue to generate income, as this sector is where a great proportion of the employees and employers are to be found.

It is vital that any support offered should ensure that small businesses continue to operate, as much as is possible, their usual income-generating activities and thus provide continuous and ongoing employment opportunities.

It should also be acknowledged that it is often these small businesses that carry emergency credit or provide informal debt facilities for the wider community in times of disaster, and this money is often not recovered.

The provision of government sponsored vouchers (e.g. for food and household goods) that can be used at locally owned businesses (as well as large nationally owned corporations) should be investigated if the rebuilding process in communities is to be strong and sustainable.

“If we can find a way of really engaging everyone in economic activity from the get go, the quicker everything else will come together”.

Recommendation

5. *Implement practical post-disaster (financial and non-financial) support that values and supports small, locally owned businesses so they can continue to be sustainable providers of goods and services to the community in which they operate.*

Engaging Women in Natural Disaster Planning and Response

Issue

Women and women's organisations should participate fully in natural disaster planning, response and recovery in order to ensure gender perspectives and vulnerabilities are considered.

By recognizing this, disaster response and recovery time (both short and long term) are likely to be more efficient and lead to stronger and more resilient communities. Emergency planning involves assessing potential risks and consequences and it was perceived that often emergency management planning is undertaken in groups populated largely by males who may not be aware of the impact of gender in disasters.

“Emergencies are about risks and consequences and all the blokes sit around the table and do not understand the broader consequences of what we are talking about – we need people who know about family violence at some of these meetings and we should talk about these things so the consequences of some of these problems can be headed off before they occur”.

The resulting plans, activities and language are often not considerate of gender perspectives. There are few women actively involved in disaster recovery and proactive efforts should be made to ensure that women are involved in recovery planning – in both a volunteer and non-volunteer capacity.

The Victorian Gender and Disaster Taskforce was viewed as producing good practical outcomes in the community engagement area.

“It has set up a taskforce and they have got a series of objectives to work through including how various service organisations are structured and where women are positioned with the decision making in-house”.

It was noted that this gender positioning also extends to Victorian Emergency Management Conference having a gender stream.

“Let's put gender on the agenda at these sorts of conversations and forums and conferences”.

Recommendation

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.*

Increasing Female Engagement as Emergency Service Responders

Issue

Greater numbers of females need to be involved in emergency response and a 50:50 gender ratio was considered desirable for emergency service personnel, if appropriate gender-responsive approaches are to be implemented with vulnerable women. Enablers for encouraging greater female involvement could include having child-friendly emergency planning and disaster-response workplaces e.g. childcare provisions at planning and recovery meetings, child friendly incident response rooms etc.

The Victorian Disaster Resilience Taskforce was cited as proactively recognizing the importance of gender in decision making and ensuring that gender perspectives are mainstreamed into disaster response. Other practical considerations for ensuring female participation as emergency responders could include redesigning protective clothing so it is suitable for the female body shape whilst meeting occupational health and safety standards.

Recommendation

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 implement in times of responding to a natural disaster.*

Disaster Planning, Risk Assessment and Vulnerable Persons

Issue

Natural disasters produce hostile environments which increases the physical, social, mental, emotional and financial vulnerability of individuals. This greater vulnerability impacts upon resilience. The most vulnerable people were viewed as those who were not fully involved and engaged in the community, and often were perceived as being outside of the recognized systems.

“One of the places we went to was a rural community and there were a few internet brides that had come into the area that were not seen in the community often. When the flash flood went through, two of these women went missing and no one sort of knew where they were or what happened to them”.

Disaster planning should be undertaken which considers the vulnerability of all people, however planning should overtly consider and target vulnerable women e.g. women with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse women, women and children experiencing violence etc.

“A good place to start would be to connect with the services that are in the communities. The women’s refuges and health centres are going to know. That would be a really key connection to have because they know their communities and are going to be able to identify these women”.

Recommendations

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.*

Vignette

“I actually fought the fire and I was a fire controller and I did a lot of community recovery afterwards that I did not want to do, but that I had to do because of my leadership roles. This is my personal story.

I was a single parent with three beautiful children and they were all in primary school and of a young age. I was being pulled left, right and centre and I had to be there for the volunteers. I was on a reasonable income and I had a mortgage. I always had a bucket of money for emergencies however that got wiped out in the days after the fire. Because we did not get any support, I bought the food and cigarettes and dog food for the farmers (family) who could not leave their farm because of the fire.

It took me five years to realize what happened to me next. For the next five years, I could not manage my money and it was the most painful process I have ever been through. I had no resources left despite being well paid and earning two incomes. I could not live week to week and I was shopping on a day-to-day basis and I could not manage my money and that impacted me for five years.

It wasn't until I moved away and started to move out of the recovery phase and began to look to the future that it hit me like a lightning bolt. The experience had impacted my capacity of manage my money. I was not capable of looking to the future and plan and that affected my capacity as a women to provide for my children and my family and for my community. I could not look any further than three days in advance. I am glad to see that people are starting to look at the longer term, as the long term has major effects on women”.

Conclusions

The inclusion of women in local disaster preparation and response planning is essential. We need to identify and harmonise best gender and disaster practice across levels of government. This can include individual women, representatives of women's services and or of 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.



Acknowledgements

The National Rural Women's Coalition and eS4W wish to extend their deepest gratitude to those who contributed to the success of the 2014 Roundtable which examined the economic impact on women in disaster affected areas.

- **Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash** (Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women) for her enthusiastic support for this roundtable, in particular her sponsorship of the meeting room and her personal welcome to participants.



- The Office for Women located within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for their logistical support the 2014 Roundtable.
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- Red Cross.
- Australian Women's Health Network especially Women's Health in North & Women's Health - Goulburn North East and members of the Gender and Disaster Taskforce in Victoria.
- The Expert Informants, women who have experienced the impact of disasters, **Vivian Thomson** and **Anne Whalley**.
- Presenters who willingly shared their research and project work. **Kelly Bannister**, **Karen Tully**, **Judith van Unen** and **Carole Shaw** are to be commended for the open and engaging manner in which they shared insightful information.
- The team at the **Australian Parliament House** who provided outstanding meeting facilities and catering.
- **Sally Jope** and **Karen Tully** who provided their behind-the-scenes and not so behind-the-scenes planning and facilitation support to the roundtable.
- Each and every **roundtable attendee**, **some of** whom travelled from interstate to contribute to the roundtable.

Thank you for ensuring that light is shed on the economic impacts on women in disaster affected areas in Australia.