

Natural disasters and women—we need to think about vulnerability differently

Karen Tully

National Rural Women's Coalition, ACT

Introduction

The National Rural Women's Coalition and economic Security4Women have facilitated two roundtables in 2014 with rural stakeholders (Lockyer Valley, Queensland) and policy makers (Parliament House, Canberra) to examine how a gendered approach could make a difference for women affected by natural disasters. This approach considered disaster preparation, emergency management, disaster relief and recovery.

As primary family carers and as community carers, women often play key unpaid roles in disasters – both before and after. Gender concerns are often overlooked in the 'tyranny of the urgent'. This paper, based on findings from the two roundtables examines the key issues and gender considerations in planning and for disasters and undertaking disaster recovery.

Key issues in planning and preparedness for disasters

Disasters come in many forms, and recent events, such as bushfires in the Southern states, floods in coastal and outback regions and cyclones in Northern Australia have shown us there is an urgent need to prepare for such disasters and other emergencies. Today, humankind has also created much vulnerability through our dependence on infrastructure, when the loss of electricity, food and water impacts negatively upon an individual's experience of disaster.

Engaging women in natural disaster planning and response

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 times 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 planning and proactive efforts should be made to ensure that women are included in planning – in both a volunteer and non-volunteer capacity.

The Victorian Gender and Disaster Taskforce is 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".

Vulnerable women, risk assessment and local disaster preparation

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 are viewed as those who are not fully involved and engaged in the community, and often are 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”.

Locally generated registers of vulnerable people should be developed as part of local disaster planning.

“You better get out – you’ve got five hours – the water is coming down. Without the area knowledge and lists, you do not know where to start”.

Local women’s service organisations should be strengthened and encouraged to be part of a local planning response to disaster. In particular, women’s services who are connected to and or working with vulnerable women and their families should receive additional resourcing to ensure they can be engaged in disaster planning and recovery. These groups should provide input into locally developed registers of vulnerable people that are developed by local government and emergency services.

By undertaking a preparedness process, people can focus on understanding how a disaster might impact upon them, their family and community. Vulnerable women have specific needs and vulnerabilities during and after a disaster and it is important that they are engaged in disaster preparedness at a community and individual level. As part of this process, women need to be engaged by having input into their local Disaster Management Plans.

Communication

Disaster preparation and emergency messages need to be standardized across government agencies and non-government organisations and promoted in a variety of traditional and non-traditional media to a variety of audiences. Communication needs to be ongoing; not a ‘one off’ initiative; it also needs to be gender sensitive. If people are educated and reminded of the risks of disaster and the preparedness requirements repeatedly, they should be in a position to interpret the information being shared and respond when the need arises.

“We always have a man and a woman knock on the doors when we are telling people to evacuate – the woman does the talking and the man is the bouncer. People were told to get out and they didn’t and then they end up in evacuation centres with nothing, when they could have grabbed a plastic bag with their toothbrush and undies in it. They need to know if they are warned, we are not telling you for a joke, it is for a reason and you need to get out”.

The accuracy and timeliness of communication prior to, during and after a disaster was considered to be an essential high priority for all involved.

“We need to get the community to go to the point of truth e.g. council website and get that information out there”.

The spread of correct information was seen as being crucial if women are to capably make decisions and manage in times of disaster.

“Facebook is a great tool as long as the messages are right.

“In disasters, sometimes people set up their own pages to try and get their own information out and it works for a certain period of time, but then they get tired and need a rest and others take over and put their own spin on things or share wrong information and it turns into a whine session and people get completely lost with what is happening.

“We need to get people to go to the organisation that have the right information – like the police and council have really good Facebook pages – this information is spot on”.

Prior to a disaster, residents, including women should be informed as to the correct sources of information and how they can be accessed in times of disaster, especially when usual communication channels may be disrupted.

“We need to educate our people. If the power goes down and you can’t get Facebook, they need to know there are other places to get information e.g. radio or talk to a neighbour or find a noticeboard”.

This familiarization should happen at both the whole of community and individual resident/household level, and in particular, new arrivals to the community should be specifically targeted.

Increasing female engagement as emergency service responders

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. 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.

Measures that could improve gender responsive preparation

- Disaster Management Plans need to be developed at a local level with local knowledge, including women, informing the plan. 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.
- Women’s services that are connected to or working with vulnerable women and their families should receive additional resourcing to ensure they can be engaged in Disaster Management Planning, so that gender-responsive approaches are planned which take into account the specific needs of all women.
- Locally generated registers of vulnerable people, including those with disabilities; women and children living with or at risk of violence; the elderly and less mobile; geographically and socially isolated; non-English speaking people and other similarly disadvantaged people should be developed as part of disaster planning by local government and emergency services, in collaboration with women’s services.
- Disaster preparation and emergency messaging needs to be standardized across government agencies and non-government organisations that would also be responsible for the promotion of traditional and non-traditional media sources which will be employed before, during and after a disaster.
- 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.
- 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.

Key issues in planning and undertaking disaster recovery

During the recovery phase, attempts are made to restore the functioning of individuals and the local community to a sense of normalcy. However, it must be stressed that this will be a ‘new normal’.

“People need to realise that they will never get back to the point they were before they were impacted. The impact – it changes you. And that is what people need to realise and be aware

of. You never go back to where you were before. And that creates another chapter – the new normal”.

Engaging communities in rebuilding

Separating the recovery of people from the recovery or rebuilding of infrastructure was seen as important. Short term recovery involves delivering swift, effective and immediate services and relief to an area to combat the disaster, to make an area safe and to assist those affected by it. During this stage, there needs to be a greater focus on rebuilding communities, as well as rebuilding houses and other infrastructure.

Divided opinions were expressed in regard to post disaster clean-up assistance. Volunteers who come in and assist with the clean-up are welcomed and appreciated, however it was noted that there is a fine line between helping people and making them a victim; or helping them to empower themselves.

Local knowledge was also viewed as being the best source of determining who does need help and who needs ‘tough love’. A system that relies on individuals and families having to ‘meet criteria’ was not seen as the best model for recovery assistance. However, a combination of criteria with a locally managed system of referrals is desirable. Women’s services and organisations were viewed as having an important role to play in connecting with those who are in need of referrals.

“Women need to be engaged in disaster recovery – if we are true to what we are intending to do – then we need to act and engage with those who we need to engage with and develop strategies to support each other and work together”.

The contribution by women to natural disaster recovery

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.

Low income households

Of particular concern was the plight of families who lived in affordable housing, which was often rental accommodation. It was observed that many lower income households were often in low rent housing located in bushfire or flood prone areas. Post disaster, many single parent (usually a single mother) households were disadvantaged when different levels of assistance were received by homeowners and the tenants of landlords with insurance.

“It wasn’t their place, so they had no right to assistance”.

There was also a perspective that many low rent dwellings are not restored or rebuilt after natural disasters.

“The flood took out a lot of the low rental houses and then there was a shortage of rental houses and the rent went up and there was nowhere for them (low income households) to go and live and then they had to leave and the kids had to go to a new school and they had no possessions. It was hard”.

Post disaster poverty creep

Creeping poverty was viewed as an unwelcome post-disaster characteristic. Women and their families impacted by natural disasters are struggling on every level – they have little emotional resilience and often can be in vulnerable financial situations, as a result of loss of jobs, small business losses and impacts of the natural disaster on their housing or business and the work required to bring buildings back to a reasonable state.

A community that was prosperous prior to a disaster is often populated with a shrinking number of financially secure families post disaster. Increasing poverty levels are often accompanied by declining mental health. In particular, drought was singled out as a disaster that is often overlooked while it co-occurs with both bushfire and floods. Drought is not recognised for natural disaster funding, due to the non-rapid nature of the onset of the disaster.

“This region is affected by drought and drought tends to get left out and not focused on as much as floods and bushfires. When these natural disasters happen, the media is there, people see it and it has entertainment value on TV. Droughts just creep up. Even when it does rain, it does not rain money and the recovery period from a drought is very long”.

Often the creeping poverty is accompanied by a gradual or sudden breakdown in social connections because people isolate themselves; they stop talking or attending social events. Local organisation and service groups should be engaged and funded to host social events where like-minded people can gather and talk. Connections need to be maintained or recreated.

Employment rights

During and after a natural disaster, some employees (and particularly women) are not aware of their entitlements in regard to returning to work / being absent from work due to impacts of natural disasters and employers may not be aware of their obligations to employees.

Additionally, some women quit their jobs post-disaster to focus on home and family priorities. There was a strong view that women are often the ones who do not have the skills to negotiate altered employment circumstance post disaster, and they also may carry a strong maternal urge to focus on household and family recovery, thus making decisions to leave paid employment.

“It is interesting the compromises that women make and the time it takes them to recover”.

Dialogue that makes employees and employers aware of their rights in times of natural disasters should be promoted.

“We need to keep them in jobs as jobs are getting harder and harder to get in these economic times, so the attachment needs to be maintained during that period of recovery when things are slowly getting back to normal”.

Women and small business

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.

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”.

Another concern was women who run small home-based businesses e.g. cake icing, sewing etc. These businesses add to the family income but in times of natural disaster, women often cease their small business in order to focus upon family. This is exacerbated by the fact that the natural disaster criteria for small business assistance often does not recognise these micro businesses. Before long, another family feels the impact of natural disaster induced poverty.

“If we had had a better financial recovery, we would have said ‘this happened’ and just moved on. This situation (insurance/financial assistance) did not allow us to move on”.

Impacts on women’s services

“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.

Measures that could improve gender responsive disaster recovery

- 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.
- Extend the time period for 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.
- Develop a locally managed referral system for people with personal and building recovery needs. Women’s services should be a key component of the information collection process which informs the referral process.
- Investigate recovery support options which do not disadvantage/which target people living in rental accommodation, especially low cost rental.
- Educate employers and employees about the obligations that employers have when their employees are affected by natural disasters.
- It is vital that women are kept in work and that their unpaid care responsibilities are recognised by employers and the Fair Work Act. This education could be in the form of a checklist that could be

used by employers and employees when negotiating different work arrangements in the aftermath of a disaster.

- 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.

Conclusion

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.

There is a business case for and a substantial return on investment for engaging with women and the broader community, pre and post disaster. Most of the responsibility for disaster preparation and response lies with state and territory government and voluntary organisations. Gender needs to be on the agenda.

Presenter

Karen Tully resides on the banks of the Warrego River at Charleville, Queensland in South West Queensland and has experienced two major floods, which have severely impacted her home and business and have given her a personal insight into natural disasters. When not cleaning flood mud, she is the Program Manager for the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC), which provides a collaborative national voice for women living in rural, regional and remote Australia. Karen has a professional background in rural education, having worked in various positions at Schools of Distance Education. More recently, she has shared her passion for rural Australia through her leadership roles on a number of Boards (South-West Rural Financial Counselling Service, South-West Natural Resource Management; Red Ridge Foundation; Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women) as well as working in the rural advocacy and leadership arena for a variety of clients connected to her consulting business, Mulga Solutions. Karen has a Master of Education; Diploma of Financial Markets; Certificate IV in Business Governance and Training and Assessment and has completed the AICD Company Directors Course. Karen Tully is a proud and passionate rural woman who is energised by the big picture and future of rural and remote Australia, and who is inspired by visions of what could be.