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## Disasters, housing and rural women: myriads of issues, myriads of measures

### **Alwyn Friedersdorff**

National Rural Women's Coalition

The NRWC is comprised of member organisations who inform our work: Women in Local Government tell us about gender inequalities in Councils across the country but they also predominantly represent rural and remote issues, because, of the 563 Councils, 418 are rural or remote; CWAA is the largest and most listened to voice for the country women of Australia; Women in Agriculture are currently suffering huge impacts from drought, floods, fire and marketing; Women in the Seafood Network tell us of the serious nature of mental health within their embattled industry; despite being a sister alliance to the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Women's Association we also have a First Nations delegate on our Board to ensure that that lens is ever present; and since our inception we have been informed by a representative of the National Rural Health Alliance—not specifically a female focused group, but so important because of knowledge of health issues on the ground and into the very remotest of areas.

Using this expertise, we run programs to enrich the lives of rural women and to address issues that affect them. Four of my fellow Board members are currently in NY at the UN speaking out on those issues that rural women face ... which is why you have me!

### **The affected**

Australia is in distress! And with climate change impact becoming more evident, that is promising to be a norm ...

How do we deal with it?

And who are the most affected?

Data tells us that there are nearly 3 million people (13.3% of our population) now living below the internationally accepted poverty line. This makes it difficult to recover from disasters which affect infrastructure, jobs and housing.

We also know that poverty is strongly inter-related with domestic violence, so we can safely say that women and children are the most affected.

We also know that the highest offence rates are in rural areas, and that these tend to be disadvantaged areas. Women are isolated by distance, by access to transport, by having somewhere to go.

Key findings from our fishing industries state that rates of 'high' and 'very high' levels of 'psychological distress' was *almost double* that of the general population and that livelihood insecurity causes stress that leads to family violence, depression to suicide, actual and potential.

The stoicism of rural women has also been cited as a barrier that affects them. Rather than do an 80 km round trip to the doctor because of cost, time or work load, she may say to herself, 'This'll get better in the next couple of days' ... little knowing that her cancer might have been caught earlier and cured ...

Mission Australia recently surveyed more than 10,000 young people who rated mental health as the most important issue.

At the UN we do the global thinking, but we also need to be reminded that Australia has, so far this year, 35 reported marriages of girls aged 10 to 12 to 15. Our early marriage figures total around 85 per year. And we say nothing! But this is a human rights issue, an abuse issue and a sexual health issue!

Yes, Australia was in distress before our current set of disasters occurred!

We know that that family violence increases dramatically when disasters happen, but during that disaster period, there is a blip in the recording of it. Why?...

Who wants to report, when you are trying to hold everything together?!

This is when we need to have our specialist services adequately funded. Community services themselves become vulnerable in disasters when recovery needs, so often take away the vital resources from the welfare providers.

## The access

So, what is it that we lose access to?

*Water:* The response to the Murray-Darling River Basin disaster was too slow! I think of that Walgett woman on a pension who said she spends \$70 a week for drinking water. The local Dr reported, 'A lot of people have been buying fizzy drinks because of the water. They also found that buying hot drinks was cheaper.' The consequences of that is high blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes which are common health issues particularly amongst the Aboriginal people.

Those who avoided salty drinking water by drinking alternatives such as soft drinks were solving one problem and creating another.

However, without the word disaster mentioned, many rural and remote Australians still lack access to clean water and effective sanitation.

*Education:* Out there on the land, you can be rich, but you cannot aspire to a University education because of poor internet connections and its limitations.

*Transport:* We heard a recent report that we are losing many young people on our country roads as they travel in older model cars for long distances trying to get home for a family event. Parents are looking at an app designed to keep their kids alert while driving those long distances. It is the small and simple things!

### *Housing:* Data from our recent Roundtable

- Women over 55 are the fastest growing group of people experiencing homelessness
- 10% of women and 5% of men experiencing homelessness have jobs
- 20% of those experiencing homelessness receive a disability pension
- 1 in 8 people experiencing homelessness is under the age of 10
- LGBTIQ people experience homelessness earlier, more frequently and for longer periods than non-LGBTIQ people
- People sleeping rough on the street represent only 5% of people experiencing homelessness and the vast majority of homelessness is hidden from view
- The decline in Public housing stock
- Long waiting lists—200,000 **households** currently on the public housing waiting lists
- Housing is no longer affordable that is, below 35% of income
- Rental systems often unfair and short term
- AirBnB stealing rental housing supply

Who are the homeless?

Women were asked what they most want when they think of their specific needs ... And these are their responses.

Councils were asked, 'Does your Council have a Policy to support homeless people?'

### **It's hard to provide to provide services to RRR areas**

BUT

- Could local Councils do more?
- What could State governments do?
- How could a Policy response be built across all tiers of government? (incl. education—housing-ageing)
- What role might communities play?
- What is a role for philanthropic groups?
- How do we build a more systematic evidence base to inform change?

## Addressing the gendered impacts

Each of these issues that I have spoken of today are so interrelated/ interdependent one on the other that the task on the ground is enormous.

BUT women can:

- *Publish and celebrate milestones* to tell others what has been achieved, foster momentum.
- *Celebrate*, what you love about our community, host events and provide gathering places for important social interaction. Have a laugh and share a joke as we give support
- *Practice cross-regional planning*, work with other communities nearby, build effective working relationships, share ideas and learn from each other.

*Felicity Reynolds, Mercy Foundation* 'There is no single factor, not one personal decision and not one government policy setting that has created the homelessness of any one woman. Years of systemic inaction and poor policy has resulted in many women over 55 now facing poverty and homelessness.'

Above all we must *lobby for National Strategies* that increase affordable housing supply, better regulate the private rental market and provide support services; and that seriously address climate change so that our future health and well-being is assured.

## Presenter

**Alwyn Friedersdorff** has been a Director of the National Rural Women's Coalition for the last six years as a representative of the Member Organisation, Australian Local Government Women's Association. She has been an elected member since 2002. She has a sound understanding of the needs of rural, remote and regional women across Australia, and her role as President of NRWC has been to provide strong supportive leadership enabling a clear and energising pathway towards the empowerment of RRR women. As a strong advocate for women, Alwyn is always willing to act as a mentor because she enjoys watching the growth and development of another person with the end result becoming an amazing sharing process. Alwyn says she prefers to look to others for their knowledge and experience so that effective team work becomes a priority to produce a better delivery of goals and objectives. The NRHA has been a founding member of the NRWC but we have never shared in project delivery. This conference opens the door to better outcomes in working together!