

Macedon Ranges Prevention of Violence Against Women in Emergencies Action Plan 2019-20

Prevention of Violence Against Women in Emergencies Subcommittee
Approved by MEMPC July 2019

Background

Women and men experience disasters differently. Gender often shapes how people perceive what is risky, who makes decisions and how we get or seek help or support during or following an emergency eventⁱ. Australian specific research into the effect gender differences have on how individuals and communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster is sparse. However from what research exists, we know that ‘issues related to gender are known to compound the already damaging effects of disasters’ⁱⁱ:

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- 1. Violence against women has been found to increase at times of disaster.** This can include an increase in severity for women already experiencing violence or first-time occurrences, both for residents who have been affected by the emergency event and for volunteers and employees in the response agencies (or their families). Heightened stress through homelessness, depression, post-traumatic stress, financial problems or alcohol abuse have been cited by some researchers as possible “causes” for this increaseⁱⁱⁱ; however the national evidence-based prevention framework, *Change the Story*, demonstrates that violence against women stems from gender inequality^{iv}.
- 2. Gender inequality.** Men often have greater knowledge of formal emergency procedures than women, while women often face exclusions or have limited participation in many forums related to emergency planning and recovery. In general, emergency management services and Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPC) are very male-dominated, both in numbers and within their culture*. Given this, it is largely men who decide how a community mitigates, responds to and recovers from disaster. Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence in public life and relationships is one of the gendered drivers of violence against women identified in *Change the Story*.

* The Macedon Ranges MEMPC has worked hard to increase the number of women on the committee to increase the diversity of voices, perspectives and approaches to local emergency planning and recovery.
- 3. Rigid gender norms and stereotypes.** Natural disasters tend to be a time when men and women revert to very traditional gender roles within their family and their community. Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity is another gendered driver of violence against women identified in *Change the Story*. Examples of damaging gender norms include an expectation that so-called ‘real’ men avoid showing emotion under stress, or that women maintain family harmony at all costs, even if it means tolerating violence and abuse.
- 4. Making excuses for family violence after a disaster.** Family violence is tolerated by the community post-disaster as people, including support workers, often justify the behaviour as related to ‘stress’, ‘frustration’ or ‘trauma’. After a disaster, existing social expectations are suspended and all types of behaviour are excused while the community recovers^v.

Policy context

As well as the national evidence-based prevention framework, *Change the Story*, there have been a number of other significant developments in state and national policy which seek to address gender inequality and prevent violence against women:

- *National plan to reduce violence against women and their children 2010-2022*
- 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence
- *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*
- *Free from Violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women*

The *National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines*^{vi} developed by the Gender and Disaster POD (an initiative of WHGNE, WHIN and MUDRI) specifically address the intersection of gender and emergency management. This action plan has been assessed against these guidelines and we have determined that in order to meet these guidelines we would need to shift the focus of the work to gender equality and inclusion. This is the proposed future direction of the subcommittee (beyond 2019-20).

Overriding principles

- The Prevention of Violence Against Women in Emergencies Subcommittee of the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee (MEMPC) will oversee implementation of the Action Plan and report back to the MEMPC.
- The Subcommittee will maintain an Expert Panel of family violence and women's health specialists to review our work.
- The number and complexity of actions selected is realistic given the limited availability and capacity of partner agencies during the high fire danger period.
- The actions chosen involve multiple agencies working in partnership; with different agencies taking responsibility for leading actions.
- The Action Plan seeks to initiate change from the top down and bottom up; therefore actions selected target both senior leaders and operational representatives in the sector.
- The actions chosen are achievable, measurable and informed by new research findings, information and practices.

Our work so far

Macedon Ranges Shire Council led the development of the inaugural *Prevention of Violence Against Women in Emergencies Action Plan 2015-16* with support from fellow members of the Prevention of Violence Against Women in Emergencies Subcommittee of the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee.

The aim of the plan was to prevent violence before it occurs in the context of emergencies; while also addressing family violence before, during and following an emergency. Priority groups included residents directly or indirectly impacted by an emergency as well as volunteers and staff (or their partners) working in emergency response, relief and recovery.

An annual action plan is developed each year – these are available online at mrsc.vic.gov.au

Achievements since the first plan include:

- Establishing an Expert Panel of family violence and women's health specialists to review our work
- Developing a protocol with a script for agencies leading post-fire briefings, debriefings and community meetings to raise awareness
- Developing a post-disaster survey
- Producing material to raise awareness of the increased risk of family violence after disasters and to provide information on where people can find help and support
- Developing and running two rounds of the Women's Chainsaw Club program

Council received a Highly Commended award in the Government category of the 2017 Victorian Resilient Australia Awards for our 2016-17 Action Plan.

ⁱ MAV, Gender and emergency management fact sheet

ⁱⁱ Parkinson, D., Duncan, A., Joyce, K. (2017). National Gender and Emergency Management guidelines, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 32(1), 21-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Women's Health Goulburn North East, *Women and Disaster Snapshot 1: Women and Disaster*, www.genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Doc-028-Women-and-Disaster-Snapshot-1.pdf

^{iv} Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth (2015) *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, www.ourwatch.org.au/What-We-Do/National-Primary-Prevention-Framework

^v Women's Health Goulburn North East (2011) *The Way He Tells It: Relationships after Black Saturday*

^{vi} GAD Pod (WHGNE, WHIN & MUDRI), 2016, National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines, www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/national-gem-guidelines/

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Priority area	Action	Lead agency	Due date	Measure(M) / Notes(NB)
Establish an evidence base	1. Activate the <i>Experiences of People in Emergency Management</i> survey following an incident.	MRSC	Triggered by an incident	M: Survey data analysed and reported back to respondents and other key stakeholders NB: Revise survey questions as required
Build capacity / Strengthen partnerships	2. Develop and share tools to provide context for delivering the script	MRSC	June 2020	M: Tools developed and shared NB: Examples include pre-planner to help agencies identify who are the right people to deliver the message, an introductory paragraph (segue for meeting leader) and a brief presentation for more formal settings.
	3. Develop PVAW in Emergencies Communications Plan	MRSC*	Dec 2019	M: Plan developed and implemented NB: Include social media messaging about the increased vulnerability of women already experiencing violence for inclusion in warnings of high fire danger days and means of sharing as well as distribution plan for collateral following an emergency.
	4. Explore the intersection of disability, gender and emergencies and identify realistic actions	MRSC	June 2020	M: Literature review looking at the intersection of disability, gender and emergencies complete M: Meetings with key stakeholders M: Realistic actions identified for 2020/2021 Action Plan
Advocacy	5. Continue to advocate for the script and protocol to be used at regional and state levels.	MRSC*	June 2020	M: Script / protocol included in regional relief and recovery document M: Script / protocol used at an incident outside MR shire NB: Explore sharing key messages of script with agencies that might service fire affected communities (e.g. GPs, Neighbourhood Houses etc.)
	6. Share the work of this subcommittee with other councils and agencies, highlighting what can be done to prevent violence against women and advance gender equality in the context of emergencies	All	Ongoing	M: Number of presentations / range of audiences.
	7. Meet with The Orange Door in Loddon to discuss how they would support people experiencing violence before, during and after emergencies.	Cobaw*	June 2020	M: Outcomes of meeting shared with subcommittee

*with support from DHHS representative

Future direction:

Explore appetite of MEMPC to shift the focus of the subcommittee to advancing gender equality and inclusion in emergency management (with one of the benefits being prevention of violence against women)