

Key Policy in discussion	Climate Change and Disaster Management
Portfolio and or agency	Gender and Disaster Australia
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Executive Summary

Climate change has a gender dimension. Our annual Gender Lens on the Budget analysis has exposed how flood, drought and fire have brought heightened health risks to women in particular, increased their exposure to violence and increased economic insecurity.

Women are more likely than men to suffer the adverse health consequences of extreme climate events, and women are disproportionately affected by climate change disasters. In Australia, disasters increase women's economic insecurity: women lose or forgo employment opportunities on taking up additional community and care responsibilities, as shown after the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, and the 2011 floods in Queensland and Victoria. The same pattern is already emerging as communities survey the aftermath of the 2022 floods.

Disasters also increase rates of gender-based violence, including from the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires, a pattern replicated after the 2020 fires. Failure to take action on climate change and emissions abatement can exacerbate gender inequality and reduce women's ability to adapt.

Key Questions of concern that need to be addressed

- 1. Will your government analyse federal funding in disasters over the past term of the federal government, compensate women for what is owed as a result of unfair and unequal distribution of disaster funding, and establish a system to ensure gender parity in disaster funding in the future.**
 - 2. Will your government provide urgent and immediate emergency response in disaster to reconnect essential services of power, internet, water and clean-up, prioritising lone women and single parents**
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The National Foundation for Australian Women is dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of Australian women, including intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, legal, industrial and domestic spheres, and ensuring that the aims and ideals of the women's movement and its collective wisdom are handed on to new generations of women. NFAW is a feminist organisation, independent of party politics and working in partnership with other women's organisations.

Authorised by the National Foundation for Australian Women, Canberra: President Ms Jane Madden.

- 3. Will your government reserve a proportion of disaster recovery funds to reinstate child-care and school infrastructure following disasters as a priority to allow women more equitable access to continuing or new employment**
- 4. Will your government provide funding to embed the Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines into key emergency service organisations to allow a focus on family violence in government post-disaster support, e.g. streamline access to \$5,000 family violence payment**
- 5. Will your government fund the inclusion of family violence and gender specialists in disaster planning, response, recovery and reconstruction**
- 6. Will your government establish a national initiative for First Nations' women and men to lead fire management.**

Details about this policy

Introduction

Overall, women have less wealth than men. This economic inequality means that women are disproportionately affected by the economic losses associated with climate change and accompanying extreme weather events. Disaster resilience is largely predicated on social and financial circumstances prior to disaster events. Historic and entrenched gender discrimination leaves women at an economic disadvantage and more susceptible to adversity. The gender pay gap is persistent, despite the attention paid to it in recent years (NFAW, 2021).

The unequal division of unpaid work between women and men means that women are more likely to engage in unpaid caring work – for children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019b), people with illness or disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019a), and the elderly – which reduces their ability to engage in paid work, contributing to women's poverty. This in turn makes women more vulnerable to the economic shocks created by climate change. Women's caring roles can also endanger them in disaster situations as they may be responsible for evacuating not only themselves but others.

The expectation that women are primary carers for children and elderly parents results in fewer hours of employment, career breaks for childbearing and raising, and lower retirement and superannuation balances. In 2018-2019, median superannuation balances for women at retirement were 23.4% lower than those for men (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2022b). Disasters, as we know so viscerally in Australia, are becoming more frequent and more damaging as climate change accelerates. The already lower superannuation balances for women will decrease further as childcare and education infrastructure is often destroyed in disasters, exponentially increasing the care burden on women.

Disasters compound existing vulnerabilities and specific cohorts of women face the greatest hardship, including single mothers, older women, rural women, culturally and linguistically diverse women, and First Nations women. In regional areas, a staggering 41% of women surveyed in a 2020 report asked for financial help from family or friends in the previous year (YWCA National Housing, 2020). An overwhelming 79.8% of one-parent families were headed by women in June 2021 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Half a million older Australian women are living in long-term income poverty and 34% of single women over 60 live in permanent income poverty (Li & Lee, 2020). Indeed, older women are one of the fastest-growing groups in the national homeless population (Li & Lee, 2020). The number of older women aged 55-74 seeking support from specialist homelessness services increased by 55% over the last decade, and most concerningly, the number of older women who were actually homeless increased by 31% from 2011 to 2016 (Li & Lee, 2020).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's employment suggest what will increasingly happen as climate change causes similar disasters. Consider that during the COVID-19 pandemic, women assumed extra burdens of unpaid caring responsibilities and gave up study to greater extent than men (Wood et al., 2021). Women lost more jobs than men in the early months (8% compared to 4% for men) and were more likely to leave the labour force (Wood et al., 2021). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, women have become more concentrated into casual work. In May-November 2020, 60% of new jobs created were casual, and women filled 62% of these casual roles (Pennington, 2021). Women were less likely to receive government support as JobKeeper excluded short-term casuals, and the worst affected industries are staffed mostly by casual and part-time women workers (Wood et al., 2021). Gender discrimination was an early feature of federal government recovery funding, which primarily supported the construction and energy sector. More funds went to this male-dominated sector than all other sectors combined, including hospitality, universities and tourism (Wood et al., 2021).

Women are less likely to afford housing that offers passive and active solar features, and is protected against the direct effects of climate change such as higher temperatures (e.g. with insulation, air conditioners) or damaged by flooding, cyclones, bushfires and other hazards. Mould from flooding, and asbestos after bushfires pose health risks, including to babies and children. Women's economic inequality means that they are more likely to live in volatile or high-risk areas where housing is cheaper to buy and to rent, such as bushfire or flood zones. In such areas, insurance is increasingly unaffordable so one disaster can financially destroy futures. After physical damage to housing through disaster events, women are less likely to have the financial resources to regain appropriate and safe housing, especially as rental options are reduced and the cost of renting soars. Women may also experience gender discrimination while seeking housing which may impact their ability to secure appropriate and safe housing (Li & Lee, 2020).

Problems with food supply are frequently part of disaster recovery. In the everyday, women are more likely than men to experience food insecurity, meaning that rising food prices caused by climate change will hit women (and their children) first and harder. A 2019 survey by Foodbank found that 27% of women in Australia compared to 18% of men experienced food insecurity in the year leading up to the survey. Women experiencing food insecurity were more likely than men to have raised children alone for an extended period of time or to have experienced domestic violence and (McCrindle, 2019).

A litany of triggers, though not causes, of domestic violence in disasters has been identified: unsafe or insecure housing; substance abuse; stress, trauma, grief and loss; relationship problems; unemployment and economic pressures; complex bureaucratic processes regarding grants and insurance; reduced informal and formal supports; restricted movement and transport; a changed community and a different life course (Austin, 2016; Campbell & Jones, 2016; Parkinson & Zara, 2013). Economic savings are possible through the immediate re-establishment of essential services following a disaster to prevent disaster impacts compounding to homelessness, unemployment, family breakdown and domestic violence. Long-term disaster resilience research confirms that survivors' resilience is premised on the speedy reconnection of power, water, internet and the essential large-scale clean-up (Parkinson et al., 2022). People cannot be resilient without this efficient service-provision from government.

Evidence abounds of men's increased use of violence against women and children in and after disasters in Australia as well as other countries (Parkinson, 2022). Disasters from bushfires to floods and COVID play out the same way. The Australian Institute of Criminology surveyed 15,000 women in May 2020 about the previous 3 months, and two-thirds of women who experienced intimate partner physical or sexual violence said it had started or escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boxall et al., 2020). Cultural acceptance of domestic violence (DV) condemns women. Australian ANROWS research shows attitudes that blame women and excuse men in violent situations. They write that, "too many Australians are willing to excuse violence as part of a 'normal' gender dynamic

in a relationship; and that 1 in 5 Australians believe DV is a normal reaction to stress". This is especially the case where insistence on 'heroic masculinity' silences women from speaking of the violence against them from fire-fighters, rescuers and 'good blokes' (Parkinson, 2019).

Qualitative research on farming families during droughts has found that women increased their paid work off farms and increased unpaid on-farm labour, volunteer work in the community, and spent significant energy monitoring their husbands' mental health. Women worked well past retirement age to the point of exhaustion (Alston, 2010). This research could indicate what will increasingly happen with climate change, particularly in rural areas.

The unprecedented nature of the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, with the enormous loss of life and massive financial cost was followed by the 2019-20 Black Summer fires, unprecedented in the world in terms of the scale of loss of environment (Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report, 2020). Former fire-chiefs explained that we no longer know how to control the climate-change induced catastrophic bushfires.¹ There are examples of effectively addressing this impasse by involving Indigenous women and men who understand care for country and cool burning. A significant, Australia-wide investment in funding First Nations women and men to lead this is essential. Victor Steffensen said, "It's a huge movement in terms of women's involvement. ... in the landscapes, where the ecosystems are more connected to women's roles, women can burn those ecosystems. When you burn Country, it's really gentle" (Steffensen & O'Malley, 2022, p. 41). The *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report* notes the importance of restoring the role of Indigenous women in land management (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

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¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/14/former-australian-fire-chiefs-say-coalition-doesnt-like-talking-about-climate-change>

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