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About the 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.dpmc.gov.au/office-women/wlds-and-grants/national-womens-alliances>



About economic Security4Women

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 of 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.

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Rural Women's Coalition and economic Security4Women hosted a community roundtable in Marburg in South East Queensland¹ on the 23rd October 2014. Participants discussed the economic impact on women and how it could be accommodated in approaches to natural and environmental disaster preparation, emergency management, disaster relief, recovery and mitigation policy and financial assistance.

Whilst the main focus was on women, based on the agreed understanding that the impact on women is different, the discussion covered approaches that would impact on the community as a whole.

This 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 using the voices and strengths of women needs to be considered in order to improve on the economic impacts of natural disasters on women.

Key points raised during the discussion:

1. It can take 4-5 years for individuals and communities to recover from a major disaster.
2. Emergency and disaster response is a male dominated field. However,
 - The impact on women of disasters is different and this difference is reflected in the compromises women have to make and the time taken to recover financially.
 - The major different impact on women is related to the increased unpaid caring responsibilities.
 - The impact on women with family and business responsibilities is different, more serious than on women when they are single, younger, with fewer responsibilities.
 - Women escaping or living with violence need to be identified as vulnerable
 - Rural networks and forums are required to encourage women's participation in preparation, planning and risk management of disasters.
3. Insurance
 - Small businesses are still in financial limbo four years after the 2011 floods, due to issues with insurance; as a result, some people are drawing on superannuation, sometimes resulting in delayed retirement.
 - There appeared to be no immediate benefit to having insurance and it is often a cause of ongoing stress
 - Concern was raised about post disaster funding and grants to individuals.

¹ This location, in the Lockyer Valley, was chosen due to its experience of the 2011 floods and proximity to the places JERA visited for the original research commissioned by eS4W.

4. Crisis can be considered as opportunity.
5. Community
 - Individuals and communities need to take more responsibility for their selves.
 - There needs to be more focus on rebuilding communities, as well as rebuilding buildings.
 - The political environment contributes to pressure to respond to disasters, not mitigate impacts.
- 6 Impact on low-income households.
 - Lower income households are often pushed into bushfire and flood prone areas.
 - In the Lockyer Valley, the low rent housing is often in flood prone areas and at a higher risk of flooding; this housing is less likely to be insured or replaced; resulting in upward pressure on rents.

The discussion centered on:

- How to communicate with people to enable them to manage their selves, their property and their community, in a disaster.
- How to involve local organisations in disaster preparation and response, especially women's services.
- The need to educate employers and employees about legal obligations covering workers affected by disasters.
- The economic impact on small businesses, especially those run by women, from their homes.
- Creeping poverty.

Findings

Measures That Could Improve Gender Responsiveness.

- Develop Disaster Management Plans at a local level with local knowledge informing the plan.
- Develop locally generated registers of vulnerable people, as part of disaster planning by local government and emergency services, in collaboration with women's services, schools and community based organisations. Vulnerable people to include those with disabilities; women and children living with violence; the elderly; geographically isolated; non-English speaking people and any disadvantaged people,
- Women's services that are connected to or working with vulnerable women and families should receive additional resourcing to ensure they can be engaged in Disaster Management Plans and Responses.
- Standardise disaster preparation and emergency messaging across government agencies and non-government organisations and promote the

traditional and non-traditional media sources that will be employed before, during and after a 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 that informs the referral process.
- Investigate recovery support options which do not disadvantage/which target people living in rental accommodation, especially low cost rental.
- Fund local response recovery models for the long term, post disaster, with regular reviews until 10 years.
- Educate employers and employees about the obligations that employers have when their employees are affected by natural disasters.
- Recognise in the Fair Work Act the additional unpaid care responsibilities that fall on women during and after disasters that impede their ability to return to work.
- Develop a checklist that could be used by employers and employees when negotiating different work arrangements in the aftermath of a disaster.

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, eS4W & NRWC held two roundtable discussions on the impact of disaster on women in general, and on their economic well-being.

The first was at Australia's Parliament House in Canberra and the second was a community roundtable in Marburg, Queensland. 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 aim of the second roundtable was to take the findings of the first to an affected community for discussion and review.

eS4W and NRWC hosted the community roundtable on the 23rd October, 2014 at Marburg, Queensland. This location enabled service providers, emergency personnel and women from the local area who had experienced predominantly flooding disasters in recent years to come along and share their experiences and stories.

The aim of the community roundtable was to ensure that service providers and individuals, particularly women, were given a chance to outline their experiences and suggest improvements to emergency management and disaster relief arrangements. In particular, the conversation focused upon the gendered nature of the impacts on women of emergencies and disasters, and gave women and service providers an opportunity to suggest enhanced ways that women and families can prepare for and respond to disasters in order to address these gendered impacts. The discussion was also focused on the role of women providing support to families and communities in rebuilding post disaster.

The second roundtable included local men as well as women and the agencies that are involved in disaster preparation and response. This is a report of that event.

Background

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.

As a result, in 2013:

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>

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 here:

<http://www.security4women.org.au/issuesandprojects/current-projects/economic-impact-on-women-in-disaster-affected-areas-in-australia>

Rationale for the Community Roundtable

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 more often than not, 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.

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

KEY THEMES FROM THE DISCUSSION

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.

Local Disaster Preparation

By undertaking a preparedness process, people can focus on understanding how a disaster might impact upon them, their family and community.

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.

While planning often commences with central bureaucracy and support agencies, this early stage disaster planning needs to connect with local knowledge, and local government is seen as the key agent linking local people and the more centralized bureaucracies.

Disaster Management Plans need to be developed at a local level with local knowledge informing the plan.

Also underlying this need for local involvement in disaster planning and preparation, is the concern to avoid doing too much FOR people, to avoid any reduction in their responsibility for self and family.

“The more structure you create – which I have seen working in local government over the years; the more potential you have for having lots of chaos when people go missing and the community is not strong because you have ‘other people’ taking care of it. The more you appear to be doing, the more you can create problems for others”.

Local people need to step up and take responsibility for their own disaster plans that can be informed by local, state and national responses.

Vulnerable Groups

Locally generated registers of vulnerable people, including those with disabilities; women and children, elderly, geographically and socially isolated; non-English speaking people and other similarly disadvantaged 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 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.

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 women knock on the doors when we are telling people to evacuate – the women 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 individuals 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 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 neighbor 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.

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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Disaster Recovery

A New Normal

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 was viewed as being 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".

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 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”.

Longer Term Recovery

Longer-term recovery (which can take up to 10 years) requires access to a range of public and private resources to enable recovery and to address the serious or permanent impacts of the disaster.

“The building recovery is done but the people recovery is not”.

The recovery period is one of significant long-term strain while a proper level of functioning returns.

“There was funding put into every council for community recovery and this was for follow-up work. A number of worthwhile services were put in, however the funding is only there for a limited time e.g. two years and after two years, the thinking is that you will be recovered, however we know it can take 4, 10 or 15 years”.

High praise was given for a local response recovery model where in the first instance, local agencies were strengthened with additional resourcing when the State Emergency Services withdrew and then continued to be funded in the long-term, post disaster.

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”.

Mental Health

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 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 people 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 in Business

Another concern was women who run small businesses – which are often 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”.

Measures That Could Improve Gender Responsiveness

- 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.
- Local response recovery models should be funded for the long term, post disaster.
- 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.

NEXT STEPS

“I’d like to be able to get my superannuation back and have a holiday. Having that taken away.....(morosely shakes head)”.

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 National Women’s Alliances also aim to continue to work on this area of Gender and Disaster as and when opportunities to share the roundtable findings are presented. This includes a presentation at the proposed National Conference on the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children to be led by Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) in 2016.

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 Marburg Community Roundtable which examined the economic impact on women in disaster affected areas.

- The **Office for Women** located within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for their logistical support the 2014 Roundtable.
- The team at the **Woodlands of Marburg** 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** who contributed to the roundtable.

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

APPENDIX: ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES

Annabelle Johnstone - Queensland Department of Communities

Wendy Allen – WA Initiatives - Consultant to small business / agriculture and Past President, Zonta Toowoomba

Brenda Berry – Marburg State School Parent’s and Citizens Association, Marburg Resident’s Association.

Tracey Browne – Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

Kerriann Dear – Queensland Working Women’s Service Inc

John Harrison – Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

Sally Jope – economic Security4Women

Helen McCraw –Lockyer Valley Regional Council

Kathy McLean – Lockyer Valley Regional Councillor and small business owner

Kellianne Dunne – Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

Rhonda Noyes – Lockyer Valley Regional Council

Dale Preston – Australian Red Cross

Janet Roberts – Small business owner of ACE Computer World, Ipswich

Karen Tully – National Rural Women’s Coalition

The community roundtable was held at Woodlands of Marburg at 174 Seminary Road, Marburg, Queensland.