

Through Women's Eyes: disaster resilience in the Alpine Shire

On 7 February 2009, a fire began in the Beechworth-Mudgegonga area in north-east Victoria. It burned fiercely until weather conditions moderated and was not contained until 16 February. Two people died, 18 houses were damaged or destroyed, and sheds, farming equipment and stock were destroyed. The fire burnt 33 577 hectares, including about 23 000 hectares of state park¹.

The *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*² states that the disaster resilience of people and households is significantly increased by active planning and preparation for protecting life and property, based on an awareness of the threats relevant to their locality. It also recognises that disasters and risks do not impact everyone in the same way.

The *Through Women's Eyes: Disaster Resilience* project, undertaken in the Alpine Shire at the start of 2012, aimed to increase community knowledge and skills by focusing on the development of disaster resilience through the eyes of women.

The project involved 31 women aged 16 to 80+ years of age from across the Alpine Shire which is about 300 kilometres north east of Melbourne, on the edge of the Alpine National Park. The women met in small groups during January to May 2012 in the towns of Kancoona, Mt Beauty, Myrtleford and Rosewhite.

The project was facilitated by the Women's Health Goulburn North East³ and the Alpine Shire and supported by the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal.

Disasters do not impact everyone in the same way

International and Australian research confirms that gender differences are highly relevant before, during and after disasters.

During the sessions, the women's stories showed how disaster events drew people back into traditional 'gender roles'. Men were more likely to be involved in the emergency response at the firefront and 'outside', while women were more likely to be responsible for household preparation and safety 'inside' as well as providing crucial support to firefighters. During the recovery from the bushfires women were more likely to be the people who arranged help for the family or the ones who knew of others needing extra help. Men were more likely to help rebuild physical things and speak up at official meetings.

Working together

The women involved in the project emphasised that working together was often the key to being resilient. This meant working together defending their family and property, or finding answers to the many and varied problems people had to resolve, or making contributions to the way that emergency services and recovery support providers needed to operate.

This echoes the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* which states that a disaster resilient community is one that works together to understand and manage the risks that it confronts.

The project confirmed that women's disaster resilience strengths include:

- being great organisers and caretakers (e.g. being involved in recovery hubs and relief centres)
- making life as normal as possible (using the 'keep calm and carry on' approach)
- being good networkers (e.g. establishing telephone and UHF 'trees' to spread information)
- putting the kids and family first, and
- using existing women's groups and creating new ones when needed (e.g. Country Women's Association and Stitch 'n Bitch).

Project findings and community report back session

The disaster resilience experiences and ideas women talked about and recommended throughout the project were captured on six posters and presented at the community report back session. These posters are available online at www.whealth.com.au.

"He just dealt with it differently"

There were concerns expressed about men being at higher risk as frontline defenders, feeling they didn't have permission to show 'weaknesses' or vulnerabilities or show emotion.

"OK so I'm normal, so I'm allowed to feel like this"

Outside advice from trusted professionals helped women understand what they and their families were experiencing.

Further information

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1. 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2010). *The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission – Final Report Volume 1-The Beechworth Mudgegonga Fire, Parliament of Victoria*, p 210.
2. Council of Australian Governments (2011). *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, AGPS, Canberra. At www.em.gov.au.
3. Women's Health Goulburn North East website www.whealth.com.au.