

# “Women’s voices from the floodplains” Background paper

*An economic gender lens on responses in disaster affected areas in Queensland and Victoria*

The needs of women are often overlooked in disaster affected areas. Women often shoulder a disproportionate burden of the effects of disasters, playing a key community rebuilding role as the primary family and community carers. As a result, they have less opportunities than men to look for employment outside the disaster affected areas. This disruption to their economic activity impacts local industries and economies.

Post-disaster, women often bear a heavy workload including clean-up work, subsistence activities and nursing the sick. They are often at the forefront of organising comfort, shelter, fuel, nutrition and water, especially for children and the elderly, as well as mobilising the community to respond to disaster. As a result, they are not only left with virtually no time for income-generating activities, they also run the risk of being exhausted and overworked.

Despite this, gender concerns are often 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<sup>1</sup>.

On the positive side, women’s disaster response efforts can provide them with new skills they can carry over into the job market, giving them a unique opportunity to challenge and change their gendered status in society.

When disasters hit overseas, international actors 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.

## **Background to report**

‘Women’s voices from the floodplains’, a report by JERA International, was commissioned by Economic Security4Women to explore the economic issues and challenges facing women impacted by the floods in Queensland and Victoria in early 2011. It was funded by the Office for Women through the Gender Equality for Women Program.

The aim of the report is to develop some initial thinking and discussion on how the economic empowerment of Australian women can be better supported in disaster affected areas and how their work can be recognised and built upon.

It identifies a range of approaches to address the economic empowerment needs of women in flood affected areas. The approaches were developed out of conversations (focus groups, individual interviews) with a small sample of 336 women and 15 men about the critical economic challenges that women had experienced and overcome following the flood events, and how future responses to floods could better serve the complex economic needs of women in disaster-affected areas. The sample largely represented women living in rural flood zones from different sectors, age groups and socio economic backgrounds, and included businesswomen, self-employed, unpaid workers, and members of low socio-economic communities.

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<sup>1</sup> All references in the full report available at <http://www.security4women.org.au/projects/voices-from-the-flood-plains>

The study has a focus on peri-urban<sup>2</sup> and rural areas of the Lockyer Valley and the Somerset Region in Queensland and the Ballarat to Kerang region in Victoria, where recovery was slower than in urban areas such as Brisbane.

### **Economic context<sup>3</sup>**

Women in rural areas are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to be self-employed than women in major urban centres, despite restricted opportunities due to smaller and less diverse local economies.

While approximately 30 per cent of women are employed in agriculture (in full and part time positions), the proportion of farm families deriving a share of their income from off-farm wages and salaries has been increasing (from 30 to 45 per cent). The increasing importance of off-farm employment reflects, in part, the increased participation of women in the workforce.

Women living on farms are increasingly likely to identify as a joint farm manager or as having an occupational life separate from the farm business, rather than the once traditional role of 'farmers wife'.

Many women work off the farm to support family living standards. They are less likely than their urban sisters to have higher educational qualifications, and are more likely to work part-time in towns in retail, or in managerial or professional occupations in the education (34 per cent) and health and community services industries (22 per cent). Two thirds work in an urban centre with a population of more than 20 000.

### **Key findings**

- 1.1 Women's re-entry into the workforce is often suspended for a time for family recovery and rebuilding economic activity; the support structures introduced were not geared to the specific needs of women.
- 1.2 Recognising the invaluable role of women in disaster management and community rebuilding is vital.
- 1.3 There is little acknowledgement of the extra responsibilities that women take on in the recovery process or relief strategies and their impact on the women, their families and communities, and on the disaster response itself.
- 1.4 There are long term health implications for women and communities living with extended stress and the resource poor situations associated with disasters.
- 1.5 There can be 'creeping poverty' in rural communities as result of disasters and this can impact heavily on women.
- 1.6 There is a perceived increase in levels of intimate partner violence and marriage break down that need to be explored further.
- 1.7 Disasters pose the following key challenges to women's engagement in economic activity:
  - Displacement of women from communities and support networks
  - Social isolation, trauma and conflict in family relations
  - Ongoing stress and time depletion caused by lack of insurance payouts or action
  - Inconsistent support for women taking time off work to deal with disaster
  - Specific challenges for women in business and the economy
  - Long term increase in unpaid work, including extra caring duties – enhancing gender stereotypes.
- 1.8 During disasters, residents, especially women and children, are active participants in their own lives and communities, making decisions at each stage of a disaster and its aftermath. Some women have found strength in their community as a result of their disaster experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> immediately adjoining an urban area; between the suburbs and the countryside.

<sup>3</sup> This section inserted by economic Security4Women in addition to the work of Jera International

- 1.9 To address the key challenges identified, women employed a range of strategies, including:
- Increase in debt – especially where women had undertaken to repay their children’s loans due to their loss of jobs after disasters.
  - Trading or bartering of goods and services – this was a key form of initial survival and was continuing in the rural communities during the study.
  - Pooling of resources – e.g. communities pooling available food and having a bake off or barbeque; women in small businesses coming together to run night markets or share complementary goods such as shoes, dresses, makeup and beauty treatments.
  - Increasing cash transfer activities – roadside markets, cash for service charges.
  - Leveraging from neighbours or family groups – in one example, the mother of a large family had relatives staying with her for several months. The financial burden was enormous, and she worked 50 hours a week to support the extended family.
  - Attempting to sell investment properties in flood affected areas.
  - Obtaining services and goods from relief agencies and government offices.
  - Seeking work out of area.
  - Leaving well-paid jobs to move closer to home / family.
- 1.10 There are challenges in flood relief services and strategies including:
- A lack of gender analysis and sex and gender disaggregated data
  - Existing support services are not geared to the diversity of women or their needs
  - A lack of contextualised and localised strategies in rural and peri urban areas that incorporate cultural expectations
  - Confusion about assistance available to small businesses including farms.
  - The need to strengthen local economies and support local jobs growth.

## **Suggestions from the report**

The range of issues faced by women and men seeking to rebuild livelihoods and lives following the floods are considered in this report, and responses are suggested in relation to the key findings. A full list of these can be found in Section 6 of the report.

- 2.1 Disaster strategies and services need to recognise that the impact of disaster on women is significantly different to the impact on men.
- Effective gender analysis should occur in during a crisis through field workers asking whether and how the situation affects women and men differently.
  - Field workers (from all sectors – government, private and NGO) need to address and determine how their programmes will address both the immediate practical and the longer-term strategic needs of both women and men.
- 2.2 Sex and gender disaggregated statistics need to be gathered and shared across all agencies. It is essential that field workers communicate and share information with each other about gender differences, to ensure that programmes are well designed and well-coordinated.
- 2.3 Disaster strategies and services need to recognise that the impact of disaster on women in rural areas is contextually and culturally different to the impact in urban areas, and that this may require specific, localised, long term support services, finance and interventions that will support women and communities to recover fully.
- 2.4 A reassessment of disaster responses directly related to the rebuilding of small businesses and the impact on the economic fabric of communities is required, particularly in Queensland. Strategies need to be developed to assist women, in particular, to rebuild their small businesses.
- 2.5 There is a need for education and raising the awareness of employers and employees of the provisions in Fair Work Act when an employee is unable to attend work due to an emergency or natural disaster.

- 2.6 Support strategies need to recognise that additional voluntary and caring work adds to the personal and financial cost of caring on women and the impact this has on their relationship with economic empowerment.
  - Specific targeted, long-term support is needed to minimise the detrimental effects of this additional unpaid and voluntary work by women in direct relation to the effects of the disaster and their family's recovery.
- 2.7 Further research is needed in disaster-affected communities into the reported issue of 'creeping poverty'. Rural communities should be primarily considered in the first phase of this research.
- 2.8 Extra measures are needed to address the long-term health implications of affected communities. In particular, Health Care Card eligibility should be extended for a four year period to allow recovery to occur.
- 2.9 Resources should be allocated to investigate and act upon the perceived increase in levels of intimate partner violence and marriage break down.
- 2.10 While it is recognised that women often develop new skills that they can carry over into the job market as a result of their disaster response efforts, further research would be useful in describing the full Australian context of vocational education and training and workforce participation available. This may provide women with a unique opportunity to challenge and change their gendered status in the workforce and ensure their new skills are recognised.

## **Outcomes**

- 3.1 Strategic partnerships were formed with key stakeholders to assist in reaching out to communities in relevant affected areas.
- 3.2 A stakeholder working group was developed to guide and support the access of researchers into existing support groups and with key individuals.
- 3.3 Researchers worked with the stakeholder working group members and local councils, chambers of commerce and local organisations.
- 3.4 Piggy-backing and working with already formed local support groups allowed the researchers to develop relationships with the communities. Following an initial visit to Queensland, researchers were invited to return after the one-year anniversary of the floods to follow up specifically with women in small business.
- 3.5 A range of gendered approaches that may better address the economic empowerment needs of women in flood affected areas were identified.

## **Next steps**

The strategic partnerships – with organisations and individuals – developed during the project will be revisited to share the findings of the study and explore actions to take.

The findings will be taken to the Australian, State and Territory Governments.