



**Submission of the Equality Rights Alliance to the
Department of Home Affairs in response to the *Alternative
Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response* discussion
paper**

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What longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?

1. Work with the Office for Women in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to build internal capability to perform gender impact analysis on all policies and plans relating to climate change-related disasters.

How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?

2. Support and resource local communities and local government to apply a disability lens and gender impact assessment tools when developing local resilience and response plans.
3. Actively support women into management and decision-making roles in the emergency services sector and in municipal and local planning processes, including establishing and resourcing pipelines for women leaders in these areas.
 - i. **Quantifying the leadership gap within Commonwealth agencies with disaster response and planning responsibilities and actively recruit and support female leadership in those agencies.**
 - ii. **Building an intersectional and gender-diverse civilian response capacity for disaster assistance.**

A note on terminology

Throughout this submission ERA uses the terms ‘women’ and ‘men’. We acknowledge that the effects of climate change and particularly the effects of climate change-related disaster can be significantly more complex for people who experience multiple, diverse, and intersecting forms of discrimination, including of people of all marginalised genders and people in same. Where ERA recommends the use of Gender Impact Analysis (GIA), we suggest that the tools used should incorporate a non-binary approach to gender and a robust intersectional lens.

INTRODUCTION

The Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) is one of the six National Women’s Alliances funded to advise the Office for Women on gender policy in Australia. ERA is Australia’s largest network of organisations advocating for gender equality, women’s economic security, women’s leadership and recognition of women’s diversity. We are advised by 67 national-level or expert NGOs with a focus on the impact of policy or service delivery on women. ERA welcomes this opportunity to comment on the discussion paper [Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response](#). The impacts of climate change perpetuate and magnify structural inequalities in our social, economic and political systems, particularly for those individuals experiencing multiple forms of intersecting forms of discrimination.

Because Australia still faces significant gender inequality, women are disproportionately affected by climate change-related events and disasters. Women take a larger share of the work of caring for children, people with disability and aging relatives. This work continues under more difficult circumstances in times of climate-related disaster. Gender-based violence increases in frequency and prevalence in disaster contexts (with traditional gender roles reappearing in the aftermath of a natural disaster or crisis).¹

Potential and commencing impacts in and outside of the disaster context - related to climate on food production, water availability, the built and social infrastructure and the ‘leisure gap’² between men and women - means that women may have less capacity to adapt their behaviours to changing circumstances as climate change bites.

On the positive side, women have larger and more varied social networks with more friends and more social support than men. This makes women a critical resource in crisis situations,

¹ Hoffman S M (2019) The Regeneration of Traditional Gender Patterns in the Wake of Disaster, in Oliver-Smith A (Ed) & Hoffman S (Ed), *The Angry Earth* Routledge.

Parkinson, Debra Frances (2017). “Women’s experience of violence in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires.” Monash University. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.4225/03/58b61debeaaa9>

² Craig, Lyn & Brown, Judith. (2016). Feeling Rushed: Gendered Time Quality, Work Hours, Nonstandard Work Schedules, and Spousal Crossover, *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 79. 10.1111/jomf.12320.

able to mobilise social networks to disseminate and gather information, provide emotional and practical support to a larger number of people and identify areas of need.

Despite this, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, the Australian Emergency Management Arrangements and the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework are all completely gender blind. Most of the policies and practices which underpin these key documents are also gender blind and a worrying number rely on highly patriarchal assumptions about resource allocation, recovery priorities and decision-making structures.

Some of this gender-blind approach could be ascribed to a lack of female leadership in the response sector.³ Women are seriously underrepresented in emergency management across the country - women still fill only 26.5 per cent of emergency management roles in Australia.⁴ It is therefore largely men who decide how a community mitigates, responds to or recovers from disaster.

The Commonwealth urgently needs to apply Gender Impact Analysis⁵ to its consideration of all aspects of climate change resilience and response. We also need better data about the impacts of climate change on people of all genders. Finally, we need women to be included in all places decisions are made about climate change, in both government and communities.

KEY ACTIONS AND PRINCIPLES THAT SHOULD UNDERLINE REFORM IN THIS AREA

1. Identify and remove structural biases to enhance gender equality in crisis response and management.

The International Labour Organisation has identified the differential effects of severe weather events and other disasters on women globally.⁶ Their analysis identified key gendered elements which are highly relevant to the Australian context.

The first factor is an increase in women's economic insecurity as productive assets are destroyed, small businesses are closed and women lose jobs and paid work time.⁷ In Australia, high levels of casualised and insecure paid work performed by women has

³ See GADAUS report into fire and emergency leadership roles:

https://ffm.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/21277/Full-report-Vol-2-Final.pdf

⁴ See media report: <https://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace/it-s-not-barbie-land-the-women-fighting-fires-and-the-patriarchy-20230912-p5e436.html>

⁵ For an introduction to Gender Impact Analysis (GIA) in the federal context, see Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet *Including Gender: An APS Guide to Gender Analysis and Gender Impact Assessment* 2003 available at <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/including-gender-aps-guide-gender-analysis-and-gender-impact-assessment>

⁶ Enarson, Elaine *Gender and Natural Disasters* Working Paper of the Infocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction ILO 2000 p. viii https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---ifp_crisis/documents/publication/wcms_116391.pdf

increased the likelihood that their income is reduced or cut off in the event of a crisis. Women, who are more likely than men to have their unpaid work increase during a crisis, may have to declare themselves unavailable for work, as family and community needs take priority over the women's long-term economic security and recovery.

The second effect is a dramatic increase in women's workloads as women engage in new forms of "disaster work," including emergency response and political organising while simultaneously taking on expanded responsibilities as caregivers while childcare centres and aged care facilities are affected or closed. Women are more likely to volunteer for central roles holding communities together, sacrificing their paid jobs to care for others (And while the pandemic and climate-related disasters have significant differences, it's worth noting the parallels here regarding women taking on the primary burden of increased care for children who could not attend school or childcare during lockdown).⁸

The third factor identified by the ILO describes a deterioration in women's working conditions in both the household and in paid workplace, for example through lack of childcare and increased work and family conflicts and the final factor is that financial recovery is much slower for women, as they are less mobile than male workers, likely to return to paid work later due to increased unpaid care work, and often fail to receive equitable financial recovery assistance from the government and/or external donors.

Research in the wake of Queensland and Victorian floods a decade ago showed there was little attention paid to the need to support women at these times. Ironically, given the amount of unpaid recovery work performed by women, women were relegated to the role of 'victim' in public discourse, with no attention given to the role played by women as actors in their own lives and communities, or as decision-makers at each stage of the flood and its aftermath.

In light of these differential gendered effects, when developing structures and plans and deciding resource allocation, the Commonwealth must be aware of:

- a. the various ways in which adverse weather events affect women's work (both paid and unpaid) health and safety and what support services are required including specific and targeted, immediate and longer-term support to minimise the detrimental effects of the additional unpaid and voluntary work taken up by women in direct relation to the effects of disaster;
- b. the need to provision for the reopening / rebuilding of critical support structures for women providing care, such as childcare centres, aged care facilities and respite centres.

⁸ See the work of Gender and Disaster Australia: 'Long-term disaster resilience – identifying protective factors for men, women and volunteers,' 2017.

2. See first responders and those they assist as having agency in their work and lives

We are pleased to see an ongoing evolution in relation to emergency management that has seen the Commonwealth, especially since WW2, provide financial support to individuals and communities recovering from emergency events and playing more of a coordination role between States dealing with disaster relief on the frontline. It is likely climate change-related disasters will increasingly cross borders, making isolated State responses impractical and possibly even dangerous. Under these circumstances, the Commonwealth's coordination role can only become more important.

Despite this, there is a risk in complete centralisation of disaster responses. Disaster responses which meet the needs of women tend to have a strong local component which recognises and utilises local experience, knowledge and assets. This is particularly true of responses which mobilise women in local communities.

For example, women tend to have larger and more varied social networks with more friends and more social support than men.⁹ This makes women a critical resource in crisis situations, able to mobilise social networks to disseminate and gather information, provide emotional and practical support to a larger number of people and identify areas of need. We support approaches which support local communities to find and implement solutions which are inclusive of all people but which particularly recognise the needs and capacity of women and children. Local and state governments with community, social and physical infrastructure assets on the ground are best placed to provide primary coordination and resource management for locally-focussed response and recovery plans.

ERA urges the Commonwealth to see communities affected, not as victims receiving 'help' and handouts but as partners in response and recovery work. We particularly urge the meaningful inclusion of women in all areas of decision-making and leadership in community-based responses.

3. Adopt community development principles in crisis response

ERA recommends general principles of resilience to underpin any work in this area:

- Community
- Inclusivity
- Partnerships
- Participation
- Shared outcomes
- Action at local level

⁹ Antonucci, T.C., Akiyama, H. An examination of sex differences in social support among older men and women. *Sex Roles* 17, 737–749 (1987). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00287685>

- Contextualised actions¹⁰

No single institution has the ability to build resilience in the wake of emergencies; responses must include all affected sectors, communities and institutions. Decisions need to be informed by information at the local level to set good governance decisions. ERA believes future approaches should increasingly partner with and support local NGOs and charities working at local levels, especially those working with women and children.

The Commonwealth emergency management agencies and departments working in this area must be effectively connected with state and territory-based government departments, police and public health organisations for delivery of supports and other interventions, monitoring and efficacy, and be supported by inter-operable communication systems. Those agencies and departments should be governed by shared standards.

Any Commonwealth approach must be developed with a clear understanding of how existing gender inequalities are exacerbated during disasters. Without this, any plan to address issues of resilience will achieve only partial success.

Solutions need to be localised and gendered so that ‘building back’ and ‘resilience programs’ are not imposed from above. Investments need to be in both formal and informal social relations and social capital, as well as in infrastructure and governance.

The Department of Home Affairs is also encouraged to learn from the government’s own *Natural Disasters and Resilience Framework for Support* designed by the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commonwealth should:

- 2. Work with the Office for Women in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to build internal capability to perform gender impact analysis on all policies and plans relating to climate change-related disasters.**

The Commonwealth already has a high level and strategic document to support this work with the [National Gender and Emergency Management \(GEM\) Guidelines](#). The Office of Women should seize its role of working with relevant departments to support their crisis response so it has a strong gender lens.

¹⁰ These principles are recommended by multiple sources including the [Women's Environment and Development Organization](#).

3. Support and resource local communities and local government to apply disability and gender and impact assessment (GIA) tools when developing local resilience and response plans.

Resilience responses and preparedness must be locally led and locally driven with local actors supported to apply GIA. It costs governments much less money to prepare for and mitigate the impact of disasters in an inclusive way.

Disaster responses need to be **gender-sensitive and gender-positive**, that is, see and respond to the experiences of women, diverse gender and sexual identities who are being impacted and displaced. Gender and Disaster Australia's [Acting on Gendered Needs in Evacuation and Relief Centres Checklist](#) is another must-have resource First Responders and communities can use and the Commonwealth should promote on the ground.

In the face of a crisis, simple and most basic questions to help frame crisis responses should include:

- Are sanitary items (pads, tampons) included as normal items in the First Aid kit and available at the evacuation/relief centre?
- How can single women with dependent children be supported to better care for themselves so they are better able to be effective carers?

GIA tools also recognise that in any region or town there will be an LGBTQI community (and sometimes one that will not necessarily want to be identified as such) and one with its own needs.

Effective and resilience and response plans will also recognise there will always be communities with multidimensional disability. In the Australian context, therefore, ask:

- How is the NDIS engaging with the emergency response?

4. Actively support women into management and decision-making roles in the emergency services sector and in municipal and local planning processes, including establishing and resourcing pipelines for women leaders in these areas.

- i. **Quantifying the leadership gap within Commonwealth agencies with disaster response and planning responsibilities and actively recruit and support female leadership in those agencies.**
- ii. **Building an intersectional and gender-diverse civilian response capacity for disaster assistance.**

This recommendation is in keeping with the Government’s strategic work around gender equality and the tools developed by the Federal Office for Women and elsewhere including the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF).

It is evident that some women will be more vulnerable to climate change, but it is also important to note that women are key actors in implementing positive change. Experience shows that when equipped with the proper resources and leadership opportunities, women have the power to help their families and entire communities prepare for and recover from disasters and the negative impacts of climate change.¹¹

ERA understands that the ADF is being pulled in two ways; that the Commonwealth does not want the ADF to be a default emergency force because it diminishes international defence capabilities.¹² The evidence is, however that communities have welcomed and needed the ADF in the wake of disasters.¹³ It is the only organisation which currently has the funding to do the work required.

We also know that across Australia, emergency workers, who are majority men, are already exhausted having responded to successive events, intense fires, floods and the COVID disease outbreak in recent years. [First responders](#) are overwhelmed. Weather events will hit communities all year round as the fire seasons overlap.

There is a case then for the Commonwealth to continue to rely on the military to help communities clean up and get basic services back in the immediate aftermath, but to also build an inclusive civilian response force that compliments the new workforce of retired defense personnel.

ERA is concerned that the Government’s budgeted plans for a new Disaster Relief Australia workforce engages retired veterans who are majority men with a military mindset. Australia should have a disaster civilian workforce that is broader and more inclusive of the communities they will support.

There is a case for the Commonwealth to build an inclusive civilian response force that compliments the new workforce of retired defence personnel. Without an inclusive disaster relief workforce, there may be harms associated with rigid gendered expectations of men to protect and provide and women to sacrifice their own needs, paid work, and safety.

¹¹ World Economic Forum (multiple authors), 2021. “Why female leadership is crucial to tackle climate change and other crises.”

¹² There are too few state emergency service personnel and rural fire service volunteers, and Australia has a well-documented ageing workforce that makes responding to crises challenging, especially in rural and regional centres where communities are relatively small and often older compared with city centres.

¹³ Wahlquist, Carla. The Guardian, Australia, March 10, 2022. [‘The lessons haven’t been learned’: who should lead Australia’s disaster recovery response? | NSW and Queensland floods 2022 | The Guardian](#)

The needs of gender diverse people and people with a disability are often neglected in disasters. They don't get the support they need because of barriers: physical, institutional and attitudinal. Disability inclusion should not only be integral to disaster management but be part of the disaster relief workforce.¹⁴

ERA wants this alternative civilian group supported at federal level - to compliment state-based responders - to be trained in trauma-informed and non-discriminatory ways. Members should understand what is meant by sustainable human security - the value of supportive and inclusive approaches and relationships to reduce the problems of dislocation, exploitation and neglect that are often exacerbated with crises.

The new civil response force should have a gender parity target, draw from existing volunteer organisations with local knowledge and practice shifting attitudes on gender and source promising practice across emergency and rescue organisations and armed and peacekeeping forces that have championed change.¹⁵

ENDS

¹⁴ Australian Red Cross, Disability Inclusion and Disaster Management Guide, November 2015.

¹⁵ Fire and Rescue NSW has partnered with Women and Firefighting Australasia to encourage women into firefighting, with some success.