



**EQUALITY  
RIGHTS  
ALLIANCE**

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

**21 September 2023**

## KEY OVERARCHING ACTIONS AND PRINCIPLES

1. Identify and eliminate structural gender biases within disaster response policy, plans and systems to avoid replicating current gender barriers in crisis response and management.
2. See responders and those they assist as having agency.
3. Adopt community development principles in crisis response.

## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

*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, including plans concerning response capabilities.

*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 disability and gender and impact assessment (GIA) tools when developing local resilience and response plans.
3. Increase capacity by actively supporting women into management and decision-making roles in the emergency services sector and in federal, state and local planning processes, including establishing and resourcing pipelines for women leaders in these areas. Start by:
  - a) Quantifying the leadership gender gap within Commonwealth agencies with disaster response and planning responsibilities and actively recruit and support female leadership in those agencies; and
  - b) Building an intersectional and gender-diverse civilian response capacity for disaster assistance with equal levels of participation in leadership and decision-making roles by women.

## A NOTE ON SCOPE AND TERMINOLOGY

We acknowledge that the effects of climate change (particularly the effects of climate change-related disaster) can be significantly more complex for people who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including of all people marginalised by gender. 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. We encourage the Department to seek specific advice from organisations expert in the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people, migrants and refugees, young women and girls, older women and women located in rural, regional and remote areas.

Throughout this submission, when we use the term ‘woman’ we include trans women, but we note that our description of the needs of women can only be read as a partial articulation of the needs and strengths of trans women in the areas covered by this submission. We encourage the Department to seek more specific information from experts in the lives of trans women.

## INTRODUCTION

The Equality Rights Alliance (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. ERA is one of the six National Women’s Alliances funded to advise the Office for Women on gender policy in Australia. 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*, because we are concerned that climate policy at Federal level consistently lacks a gender analysis. A gender perspective in all climate policy is essential to producing effective responses and plans. 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. Ignoring gendered impacts in the development of policies and plans will result in policy which fails to address the needs of those most in need. At first glance, a review of high-level capabilities might not seem like the obvious place for a gender analysis. However, this submission identifies a number of areas where a gendered analysis will be critical to success.

Because Australia still faces significant gender inequality, women are disproportionately affected by climate change-related events and disasters. Women are structurally disadvantaged in our economy. They experience gendered wage gaps, work in underpaid, gender segregated industries, are less likely to move into management and leadership roles and are more likely to work part time, casually or to be under employed. They experience gender-based violence and are subject to social pressures stemming from rigid gender stereotypes, which can limit their opportunities and choices. 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.

Outside of the disaster context, as climate change affects food production, water availability and our built and social infrastructure, the 'leisure gap'<sup>1</sup> between men and women means that women may have less capacity to adapt their behaviours to changing circumstances as climate change begins to affect our systems and behaviours.

On the positive side, women have larger and more varied social networks than men. 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.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this, the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework*, the *Australian Emergency Management Arrangements* and the *Australian Government Crisis Management Framework* are all completely silent on gender. Most of the policies and practices which underpin these key documents are also silent on gender and a worrying number rely on highly patriarchal assumptions about resource allocation, recovery priorities and decision-making structures. It is important to note that avoiding mention of gender is not the same thing as producing gender neutral policy. Existing gender inequalities, '*as well as ongoing norms and attitudes ...*, mean that even when a policy seems gender neutral it can still impact people differently, or disproportionately, based on their gender. This means policies can have unintended consequences, exacerbate or perpetuate existing inequality or fail to achieve their intended

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<sup>1</sup> Craig, Lyn & Brown, Judith. (2016). Feeling Rushed: Gendered Time Quality, Work Hours, Nonstandard Work Schedules, and Spousal Crossover: Feeling Rushed and Gendered Time Quality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 79. 10.1111/jomf.12320.

<sup>2</sup> Ganapati, N. Emel, and Kanako Iuchi. "In Good Company: Why Social Capital Matters for Women during Disaster Recovery [with Commentary]." *Public Administration Review* 72, no. 3 (2012): 419–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41506784>. For a specific case study, see: <https://www.caseforchange.com/case-studies/the-social-network-that-protects-women-during-natural-disasters>

*outcomes.*<sup>3</sup> Being silent on gender is no longer an option if we hope to produce effective and comprehensive policy and plans.

Some of the current 'genderless' approach could be ascribed to a lack of female leadership in the response sector. Women are seriously underrepresented in emergency management across the country - women still fill only 26.5% of emergency management roles in Australia.<sup>4</sup> 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 Analysis<sup>5</sup> (GIA) 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.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES THAT SHOULD UNDERLINE REFORM IN THIS AREA**

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

The question of available resources and capabilities for responding to crisis events cannot be answered without first accurately identifying the scope of the problems posed by climate change. Any attempt to produce 'gender neutral' approach to resources and capabilities risks failing to properly appreciate the scope of the problem and may also fail to identify opportunities to leverage women's strengths, both in policy management and in communities.

From the outset it is important to acknowledge that the climate crisis and disaster management are not gender neutral, with women and girls experiencing the greatest impacts, amplifying existing gender inequalities and posing unique threats to livelihoods, health, and safety.

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<sup>3</sup> 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>

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

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to Gender Impact Analysis 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>

The International Labour Organisation has identified the differential effects of severe weather events and other disasters on women globally.<sup>6</sup> 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. In Australia, high levels of casualised and insecure paid work performed by women has 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 local 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.

The third factor identified by the ILO is a deterioration in women's working conditions in both the household and in paid workplaces, for example through lack of child-care and increased work and family conflicts. 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 floods and their aftermath.

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<sup>6</sup> 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](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---ifp_crisis/documents/publication/wcms_116391.pdf)

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

- 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; and
- c. the ways in which addressing the needs of women in climate change policy increases the pool of local response resources by reducing barriers to women's involvement in response and recovery efforts.

**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.<sup>7</sup> This makes women a critical resource in crisis situations, able to mobilise social networks to

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<sup>7</sup> 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>

disseminate and gather information, provide emotional and practical support to a larger number of people and identify areas of need. We endorse 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 as partners in response and recovery work, not as victims receiving ‘help’ and handouts. 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
- Contextualised actions<sup>8</sup>

No single institution has the ability to build resilience in preparation for and in response to emergencies; plans must include all affected sectors, communities and institutions. Decisions need to be informed by data at the local level to identify locally relevant strategic directions. 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

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<sup>8</sup> These principles are recommended by multiple sources including the global [Women's Environment and Development Organization](#). See also *Natural Disasters and Resilience Framework for Support* by the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#).



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 use of GIA provides a solid basis for this work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commonwealth should:

- 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, including plans concerning response capabilities.**

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 be engaged to support the relevant departments to apply a GIA to their crisis response planning. The Department of Home Affairs should liaise with and work alongside those states who are already using GIA in policy development, such as Victoria,<sup>9</sup> and should support other states and territories to implement GIA as they develop their own plans.

- 2. 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 driven with local actors supported to apply GIA. Preparation for and mitigation of the

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<sup>9</sup> See for example: <https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/applying-gender-impact-assessment-mental-health-disaster-recovery-program>

impact of disasters is more cost effective in the long term if conducted 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 its use by local government.

- 3. Increase capacity by actively supporting women into management and decision-making roles in the emergency services sector and in federal, state and local planning processes, including establishing and resourcing pipelines for women leaders in these areas. Start by:**
  - a) quantifying the leadership gender gap within Commonwealth agencies with disaster response and planning responsibilities and actively recruit and support female leadership in those agencies; and**
  - b) building an intersectional and gender-diverse civilian response capacity for disaster assistance with equal levels of participation in leadership and decision-making roles by women.**

This three-fold recommendation is in keeping with the Government's broader strategic approach to 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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<sup>10</sup> World Economic Forum (multiple authors), 2021. "Why female leadership is crucial to tackle climate change and other crises."

because it diminishes international defence capabilities. Reliance on military support can also result in a greater tendency to adopt inflexible, hierarchical approaches to management of disaster responses and replicate negative gender norms prevalent in military institutions.

We also know that across Australia, [first responders](#) are overwhelmed. Emergency workers, who are primarily men, are already exhausted having responded to successive events, intense fires, floods and the COVID-19 outbreak in recent years. Weather events will hit communities all year round as the fire seasons overlap and storm and cyclone seasons extend.

ERA is concerned that the Government's budgeted plans for a new Disaster Relief Australia workforce focusses on engaging retired veterans, who will necessarily be majority men with experience in operating to hierarchical and inflexible management structures within a culture of problematic gender norms.<sup>11</sup> Australia should have a civilian disaster workforce that is broader and more inclusive of the communities they will support.

The Commonwealth should establish an inclusive civilian response force that compliments and eventually replaces the workforce of retired defense personnel. Without an inclusive disaster relief workforce, we risk replicating 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.

The needs of people with a disability are often neglected in disasters. They don't get the support they need because of a range of barriers: physical, institutional and attitudinal. Disability inclusion should not only be integral to disaster management but be part of the disaster relief workforce.<sup>12</sup>

ERA wants this alternative civilian group supported at federal level - to compliment state-based responders, to be trained in trauma-informed and non-discriminatory processes and to be supported by gender-aware plans and processes. 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.

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<sup>11</sup> Cate Carter *Being One of The Boys In The Military* The Interpreter 2020 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/being-one-boys-military>

<sup>12</sup> Australian Red Cross, [Disability Inclusion and Disaster Management Guide](#), November 2015.

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, both in Australia and internationally.