



# Women's Health East

## Women and Climate Change

Climate change is “a statistically significant variation in either the mean state of the climate or in its variability, persisting for an extended period (typically decades or longer)”.<sup>1</sup>

Climate change is an urgent and real threat to our health and wellbeing and is one of the greatest economic, social and environmental challenges that exist today.<sup>1</sup> A 2009 Lancet report called on health professionals to act as advocates for action on climate change – and called for a public health movement that “frames the threat of climate change for humankind as a health issue”.<sup>2</sup>

### Environmental Impacts

Victoria is already warmer on average than it was a century ago, and extremes of temperature are becoming even more extreme.<sup>3</sup>

We are facing altered weather patterns, including heat waves, droughts and lower rainfall, together with reduced snowfall, more severe and devastating bushfires, and increased risk of flooding.<sup>4</sup>

### Health and Wellbeing Impacts in Australia

- Illnesses and deaths associated with heat waves
- Injuries, post-traumatic stress disorders, increased family violence and deaths from extreme weather events such as severe flooding, bushfires and storms
- Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, as a result of social, economic and demographic dislocations and also due to a lack of certainty about the future
- Increased incidence of food borne infectious diseases e.g. Salmonella
- Increased incidence of vector borne diseases e.g. Dengue Fever and Ross River Virus
- Worsening respiratory and heart disease
- Fresh water shortages in some rural/remote areas
- Food insecurity - decreased access to affordable and nutritious food
- Increasing socioeconomic disadvantage
- Displacement of populations<sup>5,6,47,4</sup>

Climate change is caused by significantly increased greenhouse gases in our atmosphere predominantly due to the burning of fossil fuels and land clearing, and to a lesser extent agricultural practices.<sup>1</sup>

Climate change impacts are likely to more seriously affect those people who are already facing disadvantage, including women and children, Indigenous people, aged people and people living with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

### Health Benefits of climate action

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions could improve Australians' health and could save billions of dollars for health care budgets and save thousands of lives each year.<sup>1</sup>

The move to lower carbon emissions presents us with unprecedented opportunities to address inequalities, and to improve public health and result in **less obesity, diabetes, cancers, respiratory disease, heart disease, and other chronic conditions.**<sup>8</sup>

\*For more information, please see our *Women and Financial Security* Fact Sheet

## Climate Change is a Gendered Issue

Globally, women are potentially more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This is largely due to gender inequalities and traditional gender roles.

In Australia there are a number of factors that exacerbate the impacts of climate change on women:

- The gender pay gap and gendered roles such as being the primary carer mean that women more likely to be socially disadvantaged, particularly in their older years<sup>8</sup>
- Women's lower socioeconomic status means increased vulnerability to the rising costs associated with climate change<sup>9</sup>
- Women are more likely to live in rented or public accommodation,<sup>9</sup> which is less likely to be climate proofed.<sup>10</sup>
- Women have a longer life expectancy, and are more likely to be living with disabilities and chronic illness,<sup>11</sup> rendering them vulnerable to heat related illness and death during heatwaves.<sup>12</sup>
- Men's violence against women is known to increase after disasters such as bushfires, extreme weather events, and in heat waves.<sup>13,7</sup>

### Women's Energy Use

Women's patterns of energy use and fossil fuel consumption are different to men's. Women are more likely to live alone or be rearing children alone, and to be responsible for others (family, kin, and neighbours) as paid and unpaid caregivers.<sup>1</sup> They are more likely to make short trips by vehicle, depend on public transportation and travel with dependents. Women face additional challenges in meeting the rising energy, transport and food costs associated with climate change.

## Violence Against Women

Increased severity of extreme weather patterns such as heat waves and natural disasters such as bushfires, correlate with an increase in the perpetration of intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women.<sup>7,14</sup>

'The Way He Tells It', a research report into violence against women in the wake of the Black Saturday Bushfires in Victoria in 2009, documents women's experiences of violence in the period following the fires. The report also explains that women's traditional reluctance to report violence against them due was exacerbated in the aftermath of Black Saturday due to concerns about repercussions from either the community or violent partner.<sup>15</sup>

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that women who were subjected to violence prior to the disaster are more likely to experience increased violence after it. This is exacerbated because women may be separated from family, friends and other potential support and protective systems.<sup>16\*</sup>

## Disaster Preparation

Women generally have less access to resources for disaster preparation, mitigation and rehabilitation, as a result of the aforementioned economic and social inequality. As such they have reduced resources for preparedness for extreme environmental events or natural disasters.<sup>10</sup>

Women are at far greater risk of experiencing family violence and controlling behaviour, including male authority in the household regarding use of emergency assistance, and control of assets and key decisions about evacuation and relocation.<sup>17</sup>

## Responding to Climate Change

Women are currently greatly underrepresented in environmental decision-making.<sup>18</sup> In the development of responses it is vital that climate change is viewed as a gendered issue, and that women are involved as decision makers. *Climate change policies need to consider, address and decrease gender inequities.*

**\*For more information, please see our *Violence against Women Fact Sheet***

# References

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