



## Women and Climate Change

Women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men, primarily as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by such change.<sup>1</sup>

### Climate change and its impacts on health and wellbeing

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>2</sup> A paper published in *The Lancet* has called on health professionals to act as advocates for action on climate change, and for a public health movement that frames the threat of climate change as a health issue.<sup>2</sup>

Victoria is warmer on average than it was a century ago, and extremes of temperature are becoming even more extreme.<sup>4</sup> We are facing altered weather patterns, including heat waves, droughts and lower rainfall, together with reduced snowfall, more severe and devastating bushfires, extreme storms, and increased risk of flooding.<sup>5</sup>

The known health and wellbeing impacts of climate change on communities are:

- increased family violence;
- illnesses and deaths associated with heat waves;
- injuries, post-traumatic stress disorders and deaths from extreme weather events such as 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 or remote areas;
- food insecurity – decreased access to affordable and nutritious food;
- increased socioeconomic disadvantage;
- displacement of populations.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup>

These health and wellbeing impacts are likely to more seriously affect those already experiencing disadvantage, including women and their children, Indigenous communities, aged people, and people living with disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions could improve Australians' health, save billions of dollars for health care budgets, and save thousands of lives each year.<sup>9</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>9</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>3</sup>

### Climate change is a gendered issue

Women are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to gender inequalities and rigid gender roles. Globally, extreme weather events kill more women than men. The more extreme the event, the bigger the gender gap. For example, 90 per cent of the 150,000 people killed by the 1991 Bangladesh cyclone were women.<sup>10</sup>

In the Australian context, a number of socio-economic factors exacerbate the impacts of climate change on women.

- The gender pay gap, and persisting gender roles such as women as primary carers, mean women are more likely to be economically and socially disadvantaged, particularly in their older years.<sup>11</sup>
- Women's lower socioeconomic status means increased vulnerability to the rising costs associated with climate change.<sup>12</sup>
- Women are more likely to live in rented or public accommodation,<sup>12</sup> which is less likely to be climate proofed.<sup>13</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>14</sup>
- Men's violence against women is known to increase after disasters such as bushfires, extreme weather events, and in heat waves.<sup>8,15,16,17</sup>

For more on gender inequities and health outcomes, see Women's Health East's [website](#) (fact sheets series).

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. 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.<sup>1</sup>

## 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>8,16</sup> A 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 explains that women experiencing violence were reluctant to report such violence due to concerns about repercussions from the community or the exacerbation of violence being used by their perpetrators.<sup>16</sup>

Internationally, the World Health Organization reports that women subjected to violence prior to a disaster are more likely to experience increased violence following it. This is because women can be separated from family, friends and other potential supports and protective systems.<sup>17</sup>

For more on violence against women, see Women's Health East's [website](#) (fact sheets series).

## Disaster preparation

Women generally have less access to resources for disaster preparation, mitigation and rehabilitation as a result of their social and economic inequalities. This means women have reduced resources to prepare for extreme environmental events or natural disasters.<sup>12</sup> Women are at far greater risk of experiencing family violence and controlling behaviour during disaster preparation too, including the assertion of male authority in households over emergency assistance, the control of assets, and decisions about evacuation and relocation.<sup>18</sup>

## Policy and decision making

Women are currently greatly underrepresented in environmental decision-making.<sup>19</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.

The Eastern Alliance for Greenhouse Action (EAGA) is a collaboration of local governments in Melbourne's east that are working together on regional programs aimed at mitigating and adapting to climate change.<sup>20</sup>

# References

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