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Women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die in a disaster. AAP Image/Darren Pateman

Domestic violence will spike in the bushfire aftermath, and governments can no longer ignore it

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Over the past two weeks, bushfires have raged across New South Wales and Queensland. While the narrative appears focused on potential causes and political point-scoring, what's lost in this discussion is the role of post-disaster recovery, and specifically how it relates to gender.

Disasters have gendered impacts. Generally, disasters disproportionately affect women and girls, with women and children 14 times more likely to die in a natural disaster on a global scale.

In the Australian bushfire context, research shows women are more likely than men to want to evacuate, and men are more likely than women to want to remain and “fight the fire”. This means men are three times more likely to die in bushfires compared with women.

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But the gendered impacts of bushfires also affect the aftermath. There's a growing awareness in Australia among researchers and those working in women's support services that natural disasters amplify conditions leading to incidents of domestic violence.

Yet climate, disaster and environmental law and policy is "gender blind" – they don't mention or recognise gender as an issue.

Gender violence after disasters

People struggle to cope long after a disaster has settled from significant levels of family disruption, including displacement, social isolation, psychological trauma and financial despair.

The current bushfires have destroyed many houses and led to widespread trauma, which means longer term repercussions, such as the financial ramifications of loss of property and halted economic activity, will build.

These impacts carry with them an emotional toll that can place pressure on household dynamics and bring families to breaking point. If history tells us anything, this will include an increase in gender-based violence.

Following Hurricane Katrina, a study found a 98% increase in violence against women as measured from before and after the disaster.

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A study conducted following the 2004 Whakatane flood in New Zealand found police callouts doubled and the workload for domestic violence agencies tripled in the aftermath of the flood.

Similarly, the Women's Health Goulburn North East organisation (a specialist women's health service) reported in the wake of the Black Saturday Bushfires in Victoria in 2009 an increase in the

incidence of domestic violence against women during post-disaster recovery.

What's more, women already living in an abuse relationship may experience greater severity post-disaster, because they may be separated from support systems like family and friends that offered some protection. These women may be forced to rely on the perpetrator for survival, or access to services.

Addressing gender in climate law

Climate law remains largely gender blind in Australia. In 2017, following years of lobbying, women's groups were successful in getting the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to adopt "gender action plans".

These plans promote two key concepts: gender balance and gender responsive policy.

Gender balance is defined as being achieved when there are approximately equal numbers of men and women participating in international environmental negotiations.

Gender responsive policy requires governments to identify, understand and implement initiatives aimed at addressing gender gaps in the environmental sector.

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The creation of these UN gender action plans means governments, including the Australian government, should start identifying and responding to the gendered impacts of climate change. But the Australian government has yet to bring these recommendations to its climate policies.

Australia doesn't adopt UN recommendations

The key organising international text on disaster management is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, a 15-year non-binding UN agreement, which requires countries to apply a gender sensitive approach in preparing and responding to disasters.

But Australian disaster policies don't do this. For example, Queensland's State Disaster Management Plan is effective in terms of physically responding to a disaster, but the policy remains gender blind. It does not adequately consider the effects of sudden or slow onset disasters at the household level.

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Not only does the Australian government need to adopt a gender sensitive approach in disaster policy and planning, but also it should better fund groups at the front line responding to gendered violence following a disaster.

This includes groups providing legal support like Womens Legal Services and Legal Aid and should extend to groups providing accomodation, counselling and other support for women impacted by gender violence.

The National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line – 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) – is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for any Australian who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault.

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