

Position Statement: **Rural, regional and remote women's role in climate change disaster response**

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Problem identification

Climate change is increasing the frequency, severity and duration of disasters across Australia, including bushfires, floods, droughts, heatwaves and storms. Rural, regional and remote communities experience these events more intensely due to location, geographical isolation, limited services, fragile infrastructure and economic reliance on climate-sensitive industries.

Women in rural, regional and remote areas bear a disproportionate burden during and after disasters. Yet are exposed to more risk from climate disasters due to a variety of factors, including being informal frontline responders often providing invisible labour. Older rural women experience clustered and cumulative disasters leading to compounding stress and trauma. Women are more vulnerable to economic and safety impacts, face barriers to access recovery support, and are underrepresented in disaster response decision making limiting gender responsive and community orientated solutions.

Despite these challenges, rural, regional and remote women are key drivers of adaptive capacity, often leading social cohesion initiatives, informal relief networks, environmental stewardship and community recovery projects. However, their expertise remains undervalued and underutilised across Australia's climate resilience architecture.

Definitions

For the purposes of this statement:

- rural, regional and remote will be collectively referred to as rural
- disasters refers to climate related disasters
- the experiences of rural women are central while recognising that people of diverse genders, including non-binary, transgender and gender-diverse people, may face similar or additional vulnerabilities during disasters.

Policy landscape

The third of Australia's population that lives rurally is more impacted by climate change disasters. These areas have greater physical exposure to climate hazards, such as drought, flooding, bushfires, heatwaves, storms and cyclones, which are intensified by climate change. Rural infrastructure is less robust and sparser than in cities, making it more vulnerable when disasters strike. For example, there is often a lack of redundancies in power, water, internet and transport networks, and road closures can cut off entire towns from supplies and emergency services.¹

The vulnerability of rural areas is increased due to their economic dependence on climate sensitive industries, such as agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, and mining. Geographic isolation and distance can increase longer emergency response times, evacuation delays, limited nearby alternative housing and slower infrastructure repair.² These economic factors, together with existing social vulnerabilities, mean rural populations face greater cumulative risk during and after disasters.³

Additionally, disasters place pressure on services that are already constrained by access and quality, including emergency services, domestic violence services, and health (including mental and specialist care).⁴ Emergency medicine, disaster and recovery services are part of this constrained system, and workers are often affected by the events they are responding to.⁵ Further, rural areas often rely on volunteers for disaster response, yet the increasing frequency of disasters is placing strain on this workforce.⁶

Women form a major proportion of this voluntary and often hidden workforce. Disasters tend to reinforce traditional gender norms, and these dynamics are often more acute in rural

¹ Infrastructure Australia. (2019). *Small towns, rural and remote areas: Audit fact sheet*. Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019.

² Schaffer, D., & Bennett, A. (2025). Beyond rural: A time-based measure for urban, rural, remote, and geographically isolated response. *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, 27, 100616.

³ Wang, S., Liu, H., Cai, W., Huang, X., & Sun, Q. C. (2025). Australian nationwide assessment of social vulnerability in two decades through its linkage to the built environment. *Habitat International*, 163, 103495.; Hughes, L., Rickards, L., Steffen, W., Stock, P., & Rice, M. (2016). *On the frontline: Climate change and rural communities*. Climate Council of Australia.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2025). *Rural and remote health*. AIHW, Australian Government. AIHW website. Accessed on 30 November 2025 at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health>

⁵ Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience. (2019). *Health and disaster management* (2nd ed.). Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection. Australian Government.; Brewer, C. A., Ranse, J., Hammad, K., & Hutton, A. (2022). Experiences of rural and remote nurses during and following disasters: A scoping review. *Rural and Remote Health*, 22(4), 7230.

⁶ Forner, V. W. (2023). Building resilience to climate change: The role of volunteers. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 38(4), 22–23.

settings where patriarchal social structures are more entrenched.⁷ For example, women are informal frontline responders, evacuating children and elders, coordinating supplies, food distribution, donations, caring for the vulnerable (including neighbours, elderly, injured and children), managing stock welfare, and running community response centres.⁸ They are also central to health and community organisations, including unpaid care work, that face increasing demands during periods of stress and disaster response. The impact of these responsibilities is immense. Women disaster response volunteers often experience burnout, trauma and mental health issues.⁹ Older rural women experience multiple and clustered disasters resulting in burnout and compounding trauma.

Further, disasters 'not only reflect preexisting gender inequalities, they also reinforce' and amplify them.¹⁰ During disasters women face heightened risk of death due to limited autonomy, increased violence, greater care burdens which hamper escape or evacuation, 'relatively lower capacity through fewer opportunities to learn survival skills, and greater financial hardship following disasters'.¹¹ For example, drought increases the level of domestic and family violence, and emergency evaluation centres can be unsafe for women, children and other vulnerable groups.¹² These mortality risks are compounded by housing instability, financial instability, food insecurity, disruption to essential health service, including reduced access to maternity, sexual and reproductive healthcare.¹³

Gender inequality is further intensified by the juggle of increased paid and unpaid labour undertaken by women in agricultural businesses and rural communities. As climate pressures increase, women experience increased demands to take on off farm employment to stabilise household income, while simultaneously assuming greater farm workloads as

⁷ Alston, M. (2023). *Rurality and gender and disaster: Literature review*. Prepared for Gender and Disaster Australia.

⁸ Bradshaw, S., & Fordham, M. (2013). *Women, girls and disasters – A review for DFID*. GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services (DFID).; Alston, M., Clarke, J. & Whittenbury, K. (2018). Contemporary Feminist Analysis of Australian Farm Women in the Context of Climate Changes. *Social Sciences*, 7(2), 16.; Foote, W., Alston, M., Betts, D., & McEwan, T. (2024). Women's leadership and a community 'saving itself': learning from disasters, health and well-being impacts of the Northern Rivers flood 2022 (Version 1). Open Research Newcastle.

⁹ Alston, M. (2023)

¹⁰ Eastin, J. (2018). Climate change and gender equality in developing states. *World Development*, 107, 289–305.

¹¹ Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience. (2019). *Health and disaster management* (AIDR Handbook).

¹² Whittenbury, K. L. (2013). Climate change, women's health, wellbeing and experiences of gender based violence in Australia. In M. Alston, & K. Whittenbury (Eds.), *Research, Action and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change* (pp. 207 - 221). Springer.; Bradshaw, S., & Fordham, M. (2013). *Women, girls and disasters – A review for DFID*. GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services (DFID).; Alston, M., Clarke, J. & Whittenbury, K. (2018). *Contemporary Feminist Analysis of Australian Farm Women in the Context of Climate Changes*. *Social Sciences*, 7(2), 16.

¹³ Alston, M. (2023)

hired labour is reduced.¹⁴ These shifts place significant strain on women contributing to heightened stress and reduced wellbeing. Post disaster research suggests 'women will have increased workloads' and carry the 'emotional burden of care for family'.¹⁵ During ongoing disasters, such as droughts, women '[ignore] their own health and wellbeing' to ensure the family has an income to survive.¹⁶

Women's contribution is often not included in formal disaster management structures despite being essential to community survival so it is unrecognised and unfunded. Women are underrepresented in leadership and decision-making for preparedness, response and recovery. They remain largely absent from disaster planning committees, local disaster recovery groups, volunteer brigades, and resilience funding decisions, limiting gender-responsive and community-specific solutions.¹⁷ Therefore, women face reduced access to information dissemination, resources and disaster training.¹⁸ Across jurisdictions, emergency management plans rarely include gender analysis or resourcing for women's leadership and labour. Volunteer emergency service models remain male dominated, with structural and cultural barriers limiting the participation and retention of women.¹⁹

Achieving gender equality in disaster responses is recognised as a core human right by the United Nations.²⁰ The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR 2015) recognises genders importance to disaster preparedness.²¹ Australia's Disaster Preparedness Framework also recognises the need for a 'gender and child-specific lens' when undertaking disaster evacuation and support.²²

Policy recommendations

This section details what policy changes are needed to improve rural women's outcomes from disasters, which will benefit people of all genders.

1. Recognise and resource women as critical responders

¹⁴ Alston M, Clarke J and Whittenbury K (2018) 'Limits to Adaptation: reducing irrigation water in the Murray-Darling Basin dairy communities', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 58:93–102.

¹⁵ Eastin, J. (2018).; Pearse, R., 2017. Gender and climate change. *WIREs Climate Change* 2017 (8), e451.

¹⁶ Alston, M. (2010). Gender and climate change in Australia. *Journal of Sociology*, 47(1), 53-70.

¹⁷ Alston, M. (2023)

¹⁸ Alston, M. (2023)

¹⁹ Parkinson, D. (2024). Sources of resistance and success: Gender justice in emergency management around the world. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 39(3), 96–101.

²⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). *Gender equality and women's rights*. United Nations website. Accessed on 19 January 2026 at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/topic/gender-equality-and-womens-rights>

²¹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (2022). *Gender-responsive disaster risk reduction* (Policy Brief No. 3). United Nations.

²² Department of Home Affairs. (2018). *Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

- Formally recognise unpaid and informal disaster response labour provided by women, including in national and state emergency frameworks, such as the Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework.
- Provide flexible funding to women and community organisations for preparedness, relief coordination and local recovery initiatives.
- Establish payment or stipend models for unpaid and under recognised, including care and coordination, roles performed by women during disasters.
- Leverage women's roles in household preparedness and decision-making, including promoting and supporting the development of household disaster response plans.
- Recognise women's contribution to the resilience of rural communities, which is identified as the key protective factor for disasters, and build this community structure into disaster planning.²³

2. Strengthen women's leadership and representation

- Actively promote and enhance women's participation in local disaster management committees, recovery boards, and emergency service leadership roles.
- Build women's capability to take on disaster response roles. For example, by providing access to leadership programs.
- Include gender awareness and appropriate response elements in all disaster training.
- Fund tailored recruitment, training and retention programs for women in emergency response roles, including equipment fit, childcare support and safe reporting pathways.
- Collect and report data on the role rural women play in disaster response. The extent of women's invisible and unrecognised contribution is not fully explicit, as there is limited national data on gendered disaster labour, informal care responsibilities, long-term wellbeing impacts, and representation in emergency leadership.

3. Build gender-responsive and place-based recovery systems

²³ Moreton, M. R. J. (2016). *A study of four natural disasters in Australia: How the human response to fire, flood and cyclone contributes to community resilience and recovery* (Doctoral thesis). Australian National University.

- Recognise, resource and scale community based solutions developed across all disaster phases, particularly those established by unpaid women, and integrate this work into formal preparedness, response and recovery planning and analysis.²⁴
- More gender impact assessments and distributional analysis applied to disaster funding and recovery programs to ensure equitable services for rural women.
- Ensure response and recovery services address heightened areas of risk for women, including family violence risk management, mental health support, perinatal care and reproductive health access. For example, establish a dedicated mental health program for women with cumulative exposure to disasters.
- Mainstream gender in local government and community organisations disaster preparedness plans and committees.²⁵ Mapped and/or addressed areas and people of potential vulnerability, including infrastructure weak points, potential shelters and staffing.

4. Improve infrastructure and service preparedness

- Improve connectivity for all in rural areas making it more resilient during disasters. Particularly, ensuring that warnings can be delivered early and often to ‘the elderly, women with young children, those living with a disability and others who need time to prepare’.²⁶
- Upgrade evacuation and relief centres to be safe, accessible and culturally appropriate for women, children and First Nations families.
- Expand rural telehealth and mobile health services during and after disasters, including mental health, reproductive care and chronic disease management.
- Implement structured training programs and resources across multiple platforms to build knowledge and understanding of emergency preparedness at both household and community levels. These programs should adopt a multi-faceted approach to disaster management and be designed with appropriate language, formats and delivery methods to reflect the diversity of community demographics.

²⁴ Alston, M. (2023).

²⁵ Alston, M. (2023).

²⁶ Alston, M. (2023).; Moreton, M. R. J. (2016).



Conclusion

Rural, regional and remote women are central to Australia's climate change disaster response system yet remain undervalued, under resourced and underrepresented. While this statement focuses on rural women, a gender-responsive approach recognises the diverse experiences of people of all genders and strengthens outcomes across whole communities. A gender responsive approach is essential to strengthen national resilience. For more effective disaster preparedness, safer response environments, and faster and fairer community recovery women's existing and future contributions need to be recognised and enhanced.