



What we know about Disaster and Gender Equality

Gender inequality is known to worsen during any disaster, primarily because some people, in times of distress and confusion, may default to stereotypical gender roles. Men to the protective, controlling decision makers and women to being the nurturers and passive partners. Decisions and emergency relief and recovery planning can also reflect society's expectations of traditional male and female roles, often disadvantaging women and their voices in the process.

Extensive international and national research tells us that during times of crisis and disaster, incidences of domestic and family violence increase. Women are more likely to experience violence from men they know, often in the home, and women who may never have experienced abuse, now find their situation becoming unsafe and sometimes violent.

Victorian research into experiences of family violence following the Black Saturday bushfires, found that family violence increased as a result of adherence to strict gender norms which reduced women's autonomy, expecting them to be passive in the face of abuse and putting them and their children at greater risk.

Research also found that women's experiences of violence tended to be dismissed or excused more often during times of disaster or emergency with statements such as "He is just stressed."¹ Most concerning were the many women who believed that their abuse was only incidental and unimportant in comparison to the catastrophes experienced by the broader community. They therefore remained silent.

What is happening to Women during COVID-19?

Because of their overrepresentation in the most impacted workforces, women will experience more severe disadvantage, and potentially more exposure to COVID-19.

- Women may face heightened risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to their disproportional over representation among healthcare and social service personnel.
- Women are overrepresented in industries reliant on casual workers, where there is no access to paid sick leave.
- Women will bear the impact of closing universities and schools because women are the majority of workers in these settings.
- Unpaid caring labour will fall more heavily on women, because of the existing structure of the workforce.
- Many women have become de facto home schoolers, managing remote classes and emailed assignments along with their own professional responsibilities.
- Women are more likely to be the lower earners, meaning their jobs are considered a lower priority when disruptions such as the COVID-19 come along.
- Consistent anecdotal information indicates that parents, especially single mothers who work on the front line, are faced with inflexible choices between their children's health and working to survive financially.

¹ <https://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/>



What we know can happen during social isolation and quarantining

While isolation and social distancing are crucially important for controlling the spread of COVID-19, they can also exacerbate family violence. Lock-down and quarantine requirements can force women to remain isolated in homes with their abusers. Where there may have been very little family violence, there may now be an increase as opportunities for a victim to leave or flee the home are significantly reduced.

- Google searches for **domestic violence** support have reportedly increased by 75% over the period of home quarantining and social isolation during COVID-19.²
- Some reports also indicate that an abuser may withhold necessary items such as food, sanitiser or medicine, may share misinformation about the pandemic to control or frighten, or may threaten or prevent access to children or other family members.
- Stress and alcohol consumption are also considered reinforcing factors for violence in the home, and the sustained periods of time that families are together due to quarantine may increase these. So too are financial insecurity, unemployment and housing insecurity likely to be increased during the imposed quarantine measures.
- Social distancing and self-isolation may be used as a tool of coercive and controlling behaviour by perpetrators and will shut down routes to safety and support.
- Self-isolation can amplify the abuser's ability to restrict women's freedoms and leave them at heightened risk.
- Women are also more likely to take on the burden of care at home, particularly if someone in their family is sick.
- Women with disabilities experiencing family violence are more important now than ever, as women will be in isolation with abusive family members and reliant on them for their care. If women with disabilities cannot access their usual services, the few protective factors against their perpetrator may disappear.³
- Women who have migrated to Australia may be without a wide network of support due to isolation. Many women rely on their partners to stay in the country, even if these visa sponsors are their abusers.
- Under quarantine requirements informal supports such as schools and community services are closed or have reduced access for women who may be seeking assistance for the first time.

If you or someone you know or love needs help, please call:

1800 RESPECT – 1800 737 732

Safe Steps 1800 015 188

Mensline 1300 789 978

² Although practitioners usually use the term **Family Violence**, instead of domestic violence, it is important to note that these searches are specifically for **Domestic violence**, which when Googled, links to less information and limited support services than if Family Violence was Googled.

³ <https://www.thelookout.org.au/family-violence-workers/covid-19-and-family-violence>