

# Environmental Disasters and the Escalation of Domestic Violence: Gendered Psychosocial Risk in Climate and Disaster Recovery

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## Executive Summary

Environmental disasters intensify existing gender inequalities within the home, increasing the risk of domestic and intimate partner violence (IPV) during displacement and recovery. Drawing on international evidence, including systematic reviews and post-disaster case studies, this policy brief outlines that infrastructure failure, economic precarity and psychosocial stress act as structural risk multipliers within already unequal gender systems. Disaster recovery frameworks frequently prioritise physical reconstruction while overlooking domestic safety. Integrating domestic violence prevention into disaster preparedness and recovery governance is therefore essential. Resilience must be measured beyond rebuilt infrastructure and by whether homes remain safe under environmental strain.

## Disaster, Displacement and Intimate Partner Violence

A growing body of international [research](#) indicates that environmental disasters, including floods, hurricanes, bushfires and heatwaves, are associated with increased risk of domestic violence and intimate partner violence (IPV). While disasters do not create abusive behaviour ex nihilo, they intensify existing patterns of control, economic stress and psychosocial strain within households.

The distribution of these risks reflects underlying social and spatial inequalities, as climate-related hazards often place rural and peri-urban communities at heightened risk, particularly where livelihoods are land-dependent and protection and support services are limited. Risks may be further compounded for those experiencing intersecting vulnerabilities, including insecure migration status linked to climate-related mobility, displacement, disability, and sexual orientation or gender identity in contexts where LGBTQ+ individuals face discrimination or limited legal protection.

Disaster displacements [disproportionately impact](#) women and girls in fragile contexts, where major environmental shocks force families into temporary shelters, overcrowded housing, or informal settlements that disrupt established domestic and social structures. In such contexts where protection systems are weak and social networks are disrupted, women and girls often face compounded vulnerabilities, including heightened exposure to exploitation, early marriage and barriers to accessing essential services.

Post-disaster [research](#) in the United States following Hurricane Katrina found increases in IPV in affected areas, particularly among displaced and housing-insecure populations. [Longitudinal studies](#) linked elevated IPV prevalence to prolonged economic disruption, unemployment and residential instability. The erosion of social support networks, overcrowded living conditions and barriers to legal and psychosocial services contributed to sustained vulnerability rather than short-term spikes alone. Comparable patterns have been observed in other disaster contexts, where environmental shocks interact with entrenched gender inequalities and economic precarity to heighten risks of gender-based violence during both immediate response and recovery phases.

A systematic review published in [BMJ Global Health](#) synthesising global evidence on natural disasters and violence against women found that the majority of included studies reported post-disaster increases in IPV and non-partner sexual violence. Although the authors noted that underreporting, inconsistent measurement tools and disrupted reporting systems complicate precise prevalence estimates, the direction of association is consistent across contexts: disasters operate as stress multipliers within pre-existing gender inequalities. In many disaster settings, service disruption and institutional breakdown likely suppress reporting, suggesting that observed increases may underestimate the scale of harm.

A more recent 2024 [systematic review](#) of quantitative studies examining natural disasters and intimate partner violence similarly concluded that most research identified a positive association between disaster exposure and increased IPV outcomes across disaster types and geographic contexts. Taken together, these reviews demonstrate a convergent pattern of evidence: disasters intensify existing risk factors within structurally unequal gender systems rather than acting as isolated or anomalous causes of violence.

Disasters do not generally introduce new gender inequalities; they render existing power imbalances more visible and more volatile under conditions of stress.

## Infrastructure Breakdown, Economic Stress and Household Power

The escalation of domestic violence following [environmental disaster](#) is closely tied to infrastructure failure and economic precarity. When housing is destroyed or damaged, families may relocate to temporary accommodation that reduces privacy and increases tension. When electricity, water and transport systems are disrupted, everyday routines are destabilised. The home, typically imagined as a space of safety, becomes a site of uncertainty and strain.

Economic stress is a particularly significant driver, as flood damage can eliminate livelihoods overnight, especially in agriculture, informal trade and small enterprise. Studies in post-flood and post-cyclone settings show that unemployment and income loss correlate with increased risk of IPV. Economic dependency may also trap women in abusive relationships, particularly where property ownership and insurance compensation are registered in male names.

Research examining [disaster contexts in Australia](#) following bushfires documented increased service demand for domestic violence support agencies in affected regions, suggesting a surge in help-seeking behaviour during recovery phases. Importantly, these increases were not confined to the immediate aftermath but persisted during reconstruction periods, when insurance disputes and rebuilding stress were ongoing.

Infrastructure design within evacuation centres and temporary shelters can also influence risk. Poor lighting, lack of private family spaces and inadequate security arrangements may expose women to heightened risk of harassment or assault. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee [guidelines](#) on gender-based violence in emergencies explicitly recognise the link between shelter design and protection outcomes. Thus, what appears at first glance as a “social issue” is in fact intertwined with infrastructure governance. Housing policy, relief distribution mechanisms, financial compensation frameworks and shelter design all shape post-disaster domestic safety.

## Psychosocial Stress, Masculinity and Recovery Governance

Environmental disasters generate profound psychosocial stress while anxiety regarding housing, debt, insurance claims and uncertain futures accumulates over time. The [World Health Organisation](#) indicates that post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression and substance misuse may increase after disasters, particularly among those directly affected by loss. In some contexts, substance misuse has been identified as a factor in the escalation of domestic violence during recovery.

The gendered dimension is critical, as loss of employment, housing damage and financial insecurity can destabilise traditional provider roles, particularly in patriarchal settings where masculinity is closely tied to economic provision and authority. When environmental shocks erode perceived status or control, this [identity threat](#) may increase the risk of coercive or violent behaviour as a means of reasserting dominance.

At the same time, women’s caregiving burdens typically [intensify](#) after disasters. Managing children’s distress, navigating bureaucratic processes and maintaining household continuity under constrained conditions increases emotional labour. Combined with reduced access to support networks due to displacement, this can diminish women’s ability to seek help and exacerbate psychological distress. These cumulative and intersecting pressures reveal that domestic safety cannot be treated as peripheral to disaster governance.

Domestic violence prevention should be systematically integrated into disaster preparedness, response and recovery governance. Post-disaster planning that excludes domestic violence considerations produces an incomplete model of resilience. Climate adaptation and recovery policies shape household power dynamics and safety outcomes. Where recovery coincides with increased domestic risk, resilience objectives have not been achieved. Resilience frameworks should therefore incorporate domestic safety as a core indicator alongside infrastructural restoration.

## Policy Recommendations

- Mandate domestic violence risk assessment within local and national disaster preparedness and recovery planning frameworks.
- Embed gender analysis within housing, compensation, insurance and reconstruction policies to mitigate post-disaster economic dependency risks.
- Require confidential and accessible reporting pathways within evacuation centres and temporary accommodation settings.
- Sustain and ring-fence funding for domestic violence and psychosocial support services throughout extended recovery periods.
- Integrate domestic safety indicators into resilience measurement and climate adaptation evaluation frameworks.

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