

DOES VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN INCREASE IN DISASTERS ?

Domestic violence is a social fact contributing to the vulnerability of women to disaster. Women in violent relationships are a vulnerable population less visibly at risk than poor women, refugees, single mothers, widows, senior or disabled women. Indeed, violence against women in intimate relations crosses these and other social lines, impacting an estimated one in four women in the US and Canada and as many as 60 percent in parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia.ⁱ

Violence against women is unlikely not to be present after as well as before disaster, but does it increase? Barriers to reporting increase in the event of widespread damage, but some indicators suggest that it does, *though the data are very limited:*

- Sexual and domestic violence are often identified as issues for women refugees in temporary camps.ⁱⁱ
- Some field reports of social impacts include abuse, as in this account of an Australian flood: “Human relations were laid bare and the strengths and weaknesses in relationships came more sharply into focus. Thus, socially isolated women became more isolated, domestic violence increased, and the core of relationships with family, friends and spouses were exposed.”ⁱⁱⁱ Increased violence was also noted in field reports from the Philippines after the Mt. Pinatubo eruption.^{iv}
- The national Canadian press reported domestic violence increasing during the massive 1998 ice storm in Quebec and Ontario. A Montreal Urban Community Police Chief reported that one in four calls he had received the past week came from women about abuse. Crisis calls were not up at the local shelter but the hot line had been closed by the storm for two days.^v
- The director of a Santa Cruz battered women’s shelter reported requests for temporary restraining orders rose 50% after the Loma Prieta quake. Observing that housing shortages were restricting women’s ability to leave violent relationships, she urged that “when the community considers replacement housing issues, battered women should not be overlooked.”^{vi} Five months after the earthquake, a United Way survey of over 300 service providers ranked “protective services for women, children, and elderly” sixth among 41 community services most unavailable to residents.^{vii} Reported sexual assault also rose by 300%.^{viii}
- A quarter (25%) of all community leaders responding to an open-ended question about the effects of the Exxon Valdez oil spill on family problems cited “increase in domestic violence” first, in contrast to increased child neglect (4%) and elder abuse (4%). Asked if spouse abuse increased after the spill, 64% agreed; they also reported increased child physical abuse (39%), child sexual abuse (31%), elder abuse (11%), and rape (21%).^{ix}
- Following the Missouri floods of 1993, the average state turn-away rate at shelters rose 111% over the preceding year. An existing federal grant was modified to increase funding to 35 flood-affected programs in an innovative disaster recovery grant targeting both substance abuse and domestic violence. The final report notes that these programs eventually sheltered 400% more flood-impacted women and children than anticipated.^x
- After Hurricane Andrew in Miami, spousal abuse calls to the local community helpline increased by 50%^{xi} and over one-third of 1400 surveyed residents reported that someone in their home had lost verbal or physical control in the two months since the hurricane.^{xii}
- A survey of US and Canadian domestic violence programs reported increased service demand as long as six months to a year later in the 13 most severely impacted programs. In Grand Forks, ND, requests for temporary protection orders rose by 18% over the preceding year and counseling with on-going clients rose 59% (July 1996-July 1997).^{xiii}
- Police reports of domestic violence in the 7 months after Mt. St. Helens erupted increased by 46% over the same period the year earlier.^{xiv}

- After Hurricane Mitch, 27% of female survivors (and 21% of male survivors) in Nicaragua told surveyers that woman battering had “increased in the wake of the hurricane in the families of the community.” Among community leaders (68% of whom were men), 30% interviewed reported increased battery as did 42% of the mayors (46 men and 2 women) who were interviewed.^{xv}
- Conflicting data are reported by journalists contacting selected shelters about the possible impacts of September 11, 2001. In some communities very far from Ground Zero physically, shelters reported receiving increased calls for help, while in other cases shelters reported reduced case loads as families reunited. National Public Radio reported that increased calls for help were made to the Loveland, Colorado crisis center in the weeks immediately following.^{xvi}
- Both domestic violence and sexual assault were widely reported to increase in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Examples from Sri Lanka cited by researchers include women battered because they resist their husbands’ sale of their jewelry or disputed their use of tsunami relief funds and mothers blamed by fathers for the deaths of their children. One NGO reported a three-fold increase in cases brought to them following the tsunami.^{xvii}
- Four New Orleans shelters and 2 nonresidential programs were closed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and advocates reporting “women are being battered by their partners in the emergency shelters.” In the first four months after the US Gulf Coast hurricanes, 38 rape cases were reported to women’s services that initiated documentation projects to capture sexual assaults of disaster-displaced women.^{xviii}
- Hurricane Katrina displaced thousands of poor and African American women into temporary camps where one survey found that rape rates *since displacement* were triple the national expected rape rate.^{xix}
- The Women’s Refuge responding to women affected by a 2005 flood in Whakatan, New Zealand reported a tripling of its workload immediately after the flood; Victim Support, a national advocacy group working closely with law enforcement, reported a doubling of front-line officers called out on domestic violence cases in the months following.^{xx}
- In the immediate aftermath of a major 2006 New Zealand snowstorm, requests for help from domestic violence advocates dropped. When communications were restored, the number of new clients nearly doubled compared with the monthly average in the two prior years. Most callers (57%) had never before reached out to a refuge.^{xxi}
- In an all-female sample from Sichuan, China, researchers compared pre- and post- violence reports after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. They found especially high increases in psychological aggression, rising from 10.5% to 19.3%. Reports of physical violence also increased to 6.6% from pre-quake levels of 5%.^{xxii}
- In a UNIFEM-led effort to monitor sexual assault after Haiti’s quake, outreach workers tracked 230 cases of rapes in 15 camps, or 15.3 incidents per camp. As some camps range up to 20,000, this suggests very large numbers of rapes, which confirms accounts from survivors and women’s advocates in the field. The ages of those raped in this sample range from 10 to 60, the majority of them teenagers.^{xxiii} A major Haitian women’s health organization reported 718 cases of gender-based violence against women and girls reported to its clinics between January-June, 2010, among these 114 rapes and 540 reports of abuse.^{xxiv}
- Following the BP oil spill on the Florida coast, Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana recorded 32 domestic violence reports in the first quarter of 2010 and twice that (68) in the second quarter after the spill.^{xxv}

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ⁱ United Nations Social Statistics and Indicators. *The World’s Women: 1995 Trends*. New York: United Nations.

ⁱⁱ League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 1991. *Working With Women in Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation Programmes*. Field Studies Paper #2. Geneva Switzerland

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- v *Globe and Mail* January 14, 1998: A6.
- vi United Way of Santa Cruz County 1990. *A Post-Earthquake Community Needs Assessment for Santa Cruz County*. Aptos, California: United Way of Santa Cruz County: 201. See also Wilson, Jennifer, Brenda Phillips and David Neal. 1998. "Domestic Violence After Disaster," in Enarson and Morrow, op.cit.
- vii Ibid, 25.
- viii Commission for the Prevention of Violence Against Women. 1989. *Violence Against Women in the Aftermath of the October 17, 1989 Earthquake: A Report to the Mayor and City Council of the City of Santa Cruz*. Santa Cruz CA.
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