

Female leadership key to community 'saving itself' in unprecedented trauma, says report

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As the two-year anniversary of the devastating Northern Rivers' flooding

looms, a [report](#) has shown the female-led response to the trauma prevailed where authorities failed.

With a goal of exploring the health and welfare impacts of trauma on populations, social work researchers from the University of Newcastle have revealed the community-based response was spontaneous yet hugely sophisticated in its mobilization. Unexpected findings show responsive leadership was predominantly undertaken by [women](#).

Comprising data from interviews with members of the Northern Rivers community nine to 12 months post-event, the new report collates the experiences of a community continuing to face the impact of the unprecedented disaster and presents recommendations for improved future preparedness.

Lead author and [social worker](#), Associate Professor Wendy Foote, said the findings were an important representation of a region still grieving.

"We know from the 2022 NSW Floods Inquiry that there was a gross failure of preparedness and negligence in the support offered to the Northern Rivers region," Associate Professor Foote said.

"As we approach two years since the devastating events, it's imperative we continue to advocate for better policies and procedures to prevent the same failures ever happening again.

"The huge gap left by the government's inability to respond to the event was instinctively filled by female community members who mobilized as the region rallied to 'save itself.'"

"This included key coordination on [social media](#) through Resilience Lismore; harnessing Indigenous approaches to trauma and healing via services such as the Healing Hub; and the provision of resources through

locations such as the Koori Mail hub—all led by women."

Proposing seven key recommendations for [policy makers](#), along with three recommendations for those working in support roles, the report emphasizes the safety needs of vulnerable populations.

An expert in responses to disasters and [climate change](#), co-author Professor Margaret Alston OAM said that historical understanding of trauma events was often gendered.

"Historically, women bear the burden of labor and the health impacts of disasters," Professor Alston said.

"That's not to diminish the efforts of men in these circumstances but can be due to the nurturing or support roles women often take on in response to trauma.

"In this case, the work-load imbalance, threats to self and property and trauma impacts were very gendered. Women undertook the bulk of unpaid work in the immediate response and stayed in support roles for extended periods following the initial emergency."

In recognition of the volunteer efforts, the researchers are calling for a disaster fund to acknowledge the huge personal and monetary losses of undertaking this type of work moving forward.

"Those in social work positions and support roles (whether formal or informal) are totally shattered by these experiences. Not only are they supporting others, but they are living the crisis, completely unsupported, themselves too," Associate Professor Foote explained.

"This is not an uncommon response to community-driven mobilization. Women often play a significant role in post-[trauma](#) healing, and we'd

like to see funding to [support](#) those efforts," added Professor Alston.

More information: Wendy Foote et al, Women's leadership and a community 'saving itself': learning from disasters, health and well-being impacts of the Northern Rivers flood 2022 , *University of Newcastle* (2023). [DOI: 10.25817/0ekg-2e83](https://doi.org/10.25817/0ekg-2e83)

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