Gender, Inequality and Bushfire: Putting Australia in international context

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Abstract

The study of gender and associated questions about inequality and the social construction of masculinity and femininity are important elements of social science research. While gender has often been a focus in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, the social construction of gender is now analysed in areas ranging from criminology to international political economy. The importance of gender is also recognised in the trend towards “gender mainstreaming” evident in many national and international policy discourses. Disaster studies, however, adopted the use of gendered analysis quite late, and it was not until the 1990s that a body of literature started to emerge. Since then, there has been a steady increase in international research dealing with the relationship between gender and disaster. Australian research on bushfire has yet to make use of the insights from this work. In this paper, I offer some reasons as to why a gendered analysis of bushfire preparedness, response and recovery is important. I also highlight some of the shortcomings associated with the few attempts that do exist to understand bushfire through a gendered lens.

Key words: Gender, Masculinity, Bushfire, Wildfire, Disaster.

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For decades now, gender has been a focus in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, with the social construction of gender now analysed in areas ranging from criminology to international political economy. The importance of gender is also recognised in the trend towards “gender mainstreaming” evident in many national and international policy discourses (Walby, 2005). Disaster studies adopted the use of gendered analysis quite late, however, and it was not until the late 1990s that the influential collection *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster* (Enarson & Morrow, 1998) was published. Since then, there has been a steady increase in international literature dealing with the relationship between gender and disaster but there is still only a limited amount of work that mentions gender in the context of bushfire in Australia (Beaston & McLennan, 2005; Beaston et al., 2008; Cox, 1998; DeLaine et al., 2008; Eriksen et al., 2010; Maleta, 2009; Poiner, 1990). For the most part, gender remains a peripheral rather than central theme in bushfire research. This paper draws on research into gender and disaster, as well as literature dealing with masculinity, to propose some ways in which insights from these areas may be used to better understand bushfire preparedness, communication, response and recovery. The idea is to move beyond simply looking at “women and bushfire” and to incorporate an analysis of constructions of masculinity as well.

There is now substantial evidence to suggest that, globally, women are at greater risk from the effects of disaster than men. The groundbreaking collection *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster* (Enarson & Morrow, 1998) outlined gendered dimensions to the following nine stages of disaster:

1. Exposure to risk
2. Perception of risk
3. Preparedness behaviour
4. Warning communication and response
5. Physical impacts
6. Psychological impacts
7. Emergency response
8. Recovery
9. Reconstruction
What emerges from this work on gender and disaster is that women are more vulnerable to the effects of disaster than men. It is important to note that these gendered differences do not emanate from some innate or biological difference between men and women. Rather, they are the result of socio-political factors, including gender inequality. Marginalised groups are more likely to suffer from the effects of disaster, so women may be disadvantaged because of their social position.

For example, women are less likely than their male counterparts to have been taught how to swim. They are also more likely to wear restrictive or inappropriate clothing as a result of gendered expectations of dress (Enarson & Chakrabarti, 2009; Enarson & Morrow, 1998). It is, therefore, not surprising that women are over-represented in deaths from drowning during floods and tsunamis. Indeed, following the Asian tsunami in 2004, women made up as much as 80 per cent of the dead in certain parts of Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka (Ariyabandu, 2009, p.11).

In some instances, regardless of type of natural hazard, women are hampered in their attempts to flee because they are more likely to experience restrictions on their outdoor or public movements (Ariyabandu, 2009; Chakrabarti & Walia, 2009). Women are also more likely to take on care-giving responsibilities for children, the elderly and the infirm, and it has been theorised that these responsibilities often impede a woman’s ability to escape imminent danger (Enarson & Morrow, 1998). Internationally, in terms of preparation and communication, women are less likely to be literate and therefore the odds of women being able to read and understand preparedness information are diminished (Enarson & Morrow, 1998).

While factors such as literacy and restrictions on public movement are less likely to impact upon women in secular, industrialised states, there are still important gendered differences relating to social and economic inequality. In Japan, for example, single mothers are substantially over-represented in injury and death-toll statistics from earthquakes (Masai, 2009). There are several aspects which help explain why this is the case. First of all, there are significantly more single mothers than single fathers with care-giving responsibilities, so the risk for women is increased. Second, single parents generally are more vulnerable in disasters as there is often only one adult in the household. Third, single mothers tend to have a lower than average income, and in
the case of Japan (and numerous other places), single mothers are also socially stigmatised. They therefore tend to live in substandard housing, in poorer parts of cities, and this housing is ultimately more likely to collapse on them during an earthquake (Masai, 2009).

The most obvious way in which the gendered nature of disaster response tends to be recognised, is the heavily male-dominated nature of formal emergency services organisations. While women’s actions are an important part of responses to disaster events – the international evidence suggests women’s contributions are crucial to disaster mitigation and recovery – women tend to be largely excluded from official emergency response agencies (Ariyabandu, 2009; Fothergill, 1998; Mishra, 2009; Robertson, 1998). The reasoning follows, that if women are not part of these organisations, they do not have the same access to the education and information these organisations possess and are therefore more likely to be disadvantaged when disaster strikes.

There has been some attempt to make room for “women’s voices” and consider women’s experiences of bushfire in Australia (e.g. Cox, 1998) but there has been almost no attempt to understand how this relates more broadly to the social construction of gender and the institutionalised inequality between men and women. In a rare exception to this rule, Eriksen and colleagues (2010) recently produced the first peer-reviewed article dealing with bushfire and gender in Australia from a social constructionist perspective. Advancing such a perspective in bushfire research, however, can prove a challenge.

There is some recognition in Australia of the male-dominated nature of the emergency services. Emergency management has been described by Robertson (1998: 201), for example, as being: “[b]y tradition if not by right, a male prerogative in Australia.” Recent research into fire services has shown that women make up less than a quarter of all rural fire volunteers in Australia and many are placed in non-operational or supportive / administrative roles (Beaston & McLennan, 2005). Even into the early 2000s, some rural fire brigades did not admit female members (Tyler & Fairbrother, forthcoming).
To try and rectify this substantial gender imbalance there have been intermittent attempts to recruit more women into rural volunteer fire-fighting (Beaston et al, 2008) and a few isolated bushfire safety programs exist which specifically target women (e.g. see: DeLaine et al., 2008). There are, however, problems with both of these approaches. Firstly, attempts to recruit women into the fire services, even if extremely successful, will not necessarily transform the masculinised construction of firefighting. That is, emergency and disaster management organisations are often highlighted as having heavily masculine and often military-based histories (Fordham & Ketteridge, 1998; Robertson, 1998). Fire-fighting is therefore associated with traditionally masculine attributes, and if women become part of these organisations they are largely expected to conform to masculine norms rather than transforming them (Maleta, 2009). Thus, despite more inclusive recruitment, fire-fighting remains culturally masculinised.

Of equal note is the institutional perception of women’s responses to bushfire. This issue is well illustrated by the “Fiery Women” program in South Australia. The program, which consists of four workshops, ostensibly aims to teach women about bushfire preparedness (DeLaine et al., 2008). While the first workshop covers the issue of deciding whether to “stay or go” when bushfire threatens, the second workshop on “preparing your property” is quite clearly about how to prepare the property \textit{if} you want to stay during the fire, with topics including: “creating a defendable space” and “water supplies”. These workshops were deemed a success by researchers from the Bushfire Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) and the South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS) because while only “39.39% of the participants reported a ‘stay and defend’ bushfire strategy before the workshops…this increased to 84.84% at the conclusion of workshops” (DeLaine et al., 2008: 9). This quite clearly shows how, particularly prior to the Black Saturday fires in Victoria in 2009, many agencies equated appropriate bushfire education with the decision to “stay and defend” a house during a fire.

The analysis of the “Fiery Women” program (DeLaine et al., 2008) inadvertently shows, at least in part, how this misperception took hold. The researchers claim that intervention is necessary to target women because they are likely to have a lack of knowledge around bushfire. Given the exclusion of women from the fire-fighting
services, this may be plausible, but the researchers rely primarily on a study by Beringer (2000: 12), who makes unsupported claims about women’s lack of bushfire safety knowledge. He states, for example, that:

“When asked whether they would evacuate if another fire were to threaten, 23% [of residents surveyed] said they would evacuate their home. Of those respondents who would evacuate, 67% were female and 33% were male. The responses from females indicates that they may have a poor understanding of bushfire behaviour as well as the role of the CFA [Country Fire Authority] and hence may perceive the bushfire to be a greater threat which would lead to a greater likelihood of evacuation.”

No evidence is presented in support of this statement. Beringer’s assumption is that a preference for evacuation indicates a lack of knowledge about bushfire safety.

Such assumptions tend to underpin much of the agency-dominated discussion around bushfire in Australia but the international conversation is markedly different. International studies on gender and disaster evacuation preference show that women are more likely than men to favour evacuation (Enarson & Chakrabarti, 2009; Enarson & Morrow, 1998). In some places, this is actually seen as virtue. Enarson (2009), for example, shows that women’s more common preference for evacuation is seen by many emergency agencies overseas as a valuable asset in promoting risk aversion. There is an understanding that a preference for evacuation is less likely to stem from ignorance and more likely to stem from gendered norms of responsibility.

This understanding is supported by studies on risk perception which show that the most privileged groups – in particular, wealthy, white men – are much more likely to have low risk perception (Finucane et al., 2000). While the poor, minority groups, and women are more likely to have high risk perception. Finucane and others (2000) suggest this stems, not from a lack of education, but rather from inequality, different environmental factors, and life experience. Those who are most privileged tend to experience the least to fear in their everyday lives and, as a consequence, may under-rate risks associated with events such as natural disasters.
The suggestion that women prefer evacuation because they are over-concerned or ill-educated about bushfire would be almost laughable if only it were not so dangerous. Unlike the trend in disasters internationally, where women are over-represented in death tolls, in Australia, more men than women die in bushfires (Haynes et al., 2010). In a survey of bushfire deaths in Australia from 1900-2008, Haynes and colleagues suggest that one of the reasons men may be over-represented in bushfire fatalities is that they are more likely to “actively defend a house” during a fire while women are more likely to “shelter passively”. This clearly contradicts the idea that the best model of bushfire safety is therefore to teach women to, essentially, adopt a masculinised model of “stay and defend”.

Part of the problem is that the issue of masculinity is rendered largely invisible in discussions of bushfire. The existing view of gender and bushfire in Australia is that both policy and practice for bushfire response are thought to be based on objective and empirical, if not scientific, bases. This focus overlooks the effect of male dominated and culturally masculinised emergency management, bushfire response and fire-fighting (Beaston & McLennan, 2005; Eriksen et al., 2010; Poiner, 1990; Robertson, 1998). Therefore the largely masculinised activity of “staying to defend” becomes represented as simply the objective norm. Women become seen as different, and are deemed in need of programs to teach them the “correct” response to bushfire.

The invisibility of masculinity problem is not new (e.g. Campbell et al., 2006; Campbell & Bell, 2000; Tyler, 2012). As Campbell and Bell (2000: 536) explain, masculinity is generally a “generic, unmarked category of power” and, as a result, masculinity remains invisible “while femininity is continually marked for special emphasis.” It is therefore imperative that future research into gender and bushfire, and disaster events more generally, makes the construction of masculinities visible. The need to consider masculinities is also intertwined with the understanding that gender is relational, that is, gender roles are constructed in relation to each other rather than existing autonomously. Campbell (2006) explains this aspect further in the context of rural masculinity by stating that: “rural masculinity is equally an aspect of the lives of men and women…The way rural men conduct their lives has a huge impact on how rural women live their lives, for gender is a relational matter” (p. 2). It is therefore
important to understand the construction of both masculinity and femininity when considering gender and disaster.

Given the anomaly of men’s over-representation in bushfire fatalities in Australia, it is imperative to consider the social construction of masculinity and, in particular, rural hegemonic masculinity (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2011, forthcoming). Focusing on rural hegemonic masculinity is important, not only because of the bushfire threat in many rural areas, but also because notions of rural masculinity as “real masculinity” still have extensive influence in urban or peri-urban contexts (Hogg & Carrington, 2006). Furthermore, understanding the gendered dynamics operating around bushfire can quite literally be a life or death issue. In an environment where “staying to defend” is valorised and masculinised, while leaving is seen as weak, ill-informed and feminised, respecting women’s preference for evacuation, while vital, will remain difficult.
References


