Issues paper: Gender Justice in Disaster Conference 2021

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Preface

This paper is an overview of perspectives given by presenters at the Gender Justice in Disaster: Inspiring Action conference in 2021. It offers a snapshot of contemporary critical issues in disaster and emergency management. The paper draws on the key points from selected lead-in and conference presentations and provides a summary of the issues facing the emergency management sector as raised at this conference. Potential problems are identified and current or potential solutions are considered. Further reading is indicated on the disparate topics, linked by their relevance to gender in the context of disaster.

Introduction

The Gender Justice in Disaster conference in 2021 challenged the notion of a 'one size fits all' response to emergencies and disasters. The emergency management sector takes an 'interoperability' approach with mantras like, 'We work as one'. However, issues raised at the conference leave little doubt that it is by paying attention to diverse groups and multiple oppressions that the sector, in partnership with communities, can effectively prepare for, prevent, respond to and recover from hazard events.

Emergency situations exacerbate existing inequalities as evidenced by increased violence against women and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people and other minority populations. Although disasters differ around the globe, human suffering remains a constant. Disaster frequency and intensity has increased as a result of changes in climate and, according to Australian Red Cross (2017), one in 3 people living in Australia are involved in disaster. Many learn of disasters from media coverage (Diversity in Disaster 2018). While essential, such reporting is an ethical minefield on what is often 'the worst day' of many people's lives, frequently followed by a troubled aftermath. Traditional media reporting is fraught with deadlines and high stakes, and gender analysis in disaster reporting remains as rare as it is in disaster research and emergency management. Yet, the evidence base of significant gendered experiences in disasters is growing (see Parkinson in press, 2019). This issues paper, and the conference it draws from, alerts us to some of this evidence and highlights the centrality of gender to the consideration of disasters and emergency management.

The gendered aspects of disasters

The effects of emergencies and disasters are immediate and long-term and yet the long haul is rarely recognised or featured in media stories (Lead-in sessions 2 and 11 2021, Parkinson *et al.*

2020). The trauma created is felt at societal, community and personal levels. In disasters, differences can dissolve (at least in the short-term) as people face life-threatening situations together. However, recovery typically has different phases, including social fusion and cleavage (Gordon 2004, Lead-in session 10 2021). For example, stereotypical gender norms promote division and undermine our common humanity. Men, in particular, are discouraged from showing emotion and as a consequence have difficulty processing their experiences and feelings. The loss of privacy that accompanies disasters can mean a loss of intimacy and relationships may falter. More broadly, physical infrastructure is emphasised at the expense of social infrastructure. The success of recovery is how life is 5 years on: the qualities of life and the meaning and value of activities, routines and relationships within families and communities.

The imperative post-disaster is to 'build back better' for people as well as infrastructure. Yet, after the worst recorded fires in Australia in 2019–20, funding has not resulted for timely interventions of evaluated and well-regarded support for those affected, including first responders.[1] It was critical that men understood 'heroic masculinity' was an unrealistic expectation in such fires and that they had not failed to be 'the man they thought they were'. It was important in early 2020 to disrupt the documented trajectory of suffering men and increased violence against women. It was equally important for women, men, recovery workers and communities to understand the ways women are co-opted into tolerating violence from their partner after disasters and to, instead, know that disaster is no excuse for family violence. Yet in a repeat of post-Black Saturday in 2009, increased suffering of men and women through unrealistic gendered expectations went unaddressed (Lead-in session 1 2021).

Women

There were other ways gender factored into the response to the 2019–20 bushfires. A lack of planning for the needs of pregnant and breastfeeding women and of infants and young children meant that guidance in evacuation kits for babies was absent (Gribble, Peterson & Brown 2019). Such lack on information meant that mothers and babies were the last to be evacuated from the heavily smoked township of Mallacoota in Victoria and baby bottles were being washed in sinks in toilet areas. This gap was filled to some extent by academics publishing advice (Gribble & Chad 2019). Similarly, when COVID-19 arrived, governments were slow to provide information. Many parents were concerned that panic buying of groceries might make infant formula unavailable and lockdowns left maternal and child health services compromised (Lever 2020). Border closures and hospital policies that did not reflect the unique connection of mothers and infants resulted in newborns and mothers being separated. When the Victorian Government locked down residential towers in Melbourne for 2 weeks in 2020, there was little consideration given to the needs of women and children (Session 1A 2021). An immediate need for infant formula and nappies was left to charities to fill via donations (Session 1A 2021, Sardyga 2020, Session 1B 2021). Most concerningly, hotel quarantine placed the physical safety of infants and young children at risk. Safety risks included high-rise windows and balcony doors that cannot be locked, balconies with gaps large enough for children to fall through, long blind cords that pose a strangling risk and very distressed mothers (Tuohy 2021).

The economic effects of disasters are well documented and are disproportionately felt by women. These include magnification of the gendered division of labour during recovery, and the gendered division of assets and income. Underinsurance and the economic downturn experienced following disaster events increases the pressure on communities. The intersection between access to money and mental health was noted. Women often manage the wellbeing of their partner, their family, their community and, lastly, themselves. In communities, childcare workers (predominantly female) were the first to lose JobKeeper benefits during the pandemic. With reduced numbers of children in care, childcare providers lost jobs, were forced to take paid or unpaid annual leave and did not accrue leave for the rest of the year.

'Macho' culture excludes women and LGBTIQ+ people

Emergency and disaster response is traditionally a very masculine space and the stakes are high for those who challenge men who fight fires and are in respected positions. In Australia, anyone suggesting there could be problems within the cultures of firefighting risks vilification (Bolt 2019, Lathouris 2019). Yet, such privilege comes at a cost to men who attempt to live up to the 'hero' tag. This operates in a markedly different way to 'heroism'. As more women and care workers were included as 'heroes' and the PPC (personal protective clothing) changed to COVID PPE, the use of the 'hero' tag by politicians and the media diminished. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fault lines of systemic gender inequality (Leonard, Parkinson & Weiss 2020). Seldom do we see historic markers for heroic efforts applied to women or historic significance given to womens' achievements (Waters 2021, Wright 2020).

During the response phase, women's perspectives and needs are typically backgrounded, if not ignored. The over-representation of men in senior decision-making roles results in economic, social and organisational interventions that retain existing structures and reinforce existing gender inequalities (Session 6A 2021). The valorisation of hyper-masculinity in disaster relies on men ramping-up the 'masculine' traits of control, responsibility and heroism (Session 6B 2021). Hyper-masculinity is both gendered and sexualised and a demonstration of heterosexuality in the service of saving wives or female partners, children and communities. It relies on the polarisation of gender roles at the expense of non-heterosexual identities. 'Real heroes' are seen to be macho and exclusively 'straight' and can display none of the traits associated with women and LGBTIQ+ people (Session 6B 2021).

There is a growing body of research addressing the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people and how emergency services organisations must meet their needs during recovery. LGBTIQ+ people's sense

1. For example, Gender and Disaster Australia's Lessons in Disaster training, at www.genderanddisaster.com.au.

of vulnerability and fear of violence and discrimination are heightened in disasters and this can reduce their access to and use of essential services. Studies show that 'treating everybody the same' is often understood to constitute good professional practice under the guise of equality (Parkinson *et al.* 2021). However, this ignores an individual's unique identity, their relationships and experiences of institutional discrimination, and in particular those of LGBTIQ+ people including trans and gender-diverse people.

Domestic violence

There is an extensive body of research that documents increases in domestic violence in disasters. These increases are often ignored or dismissed, including victim blaming and attitudes that excuse violence as an 'understandable reaction' to stress. Response to violence defaults to crisis lines such as, in Australia, the 1800 RESPECT hotline. Following disasters, women and men who rail against, or cave in under the weight of, unrealistic gendered expectations are pathologised and medicalised. This relates to a narrow and limiting gender 'binary' (a focus on binary male-female sex characteristics rather than a spectrum of masculinities and femininities) that is socially constructed and policed.

Violence against women stems from entrenched gender stereotypes for men and women that is upheld by social institutions and systems. To change, the passive language such as 'domestic violence' or 'women being sexually assaulted' must be challenged as it masks the reality that the majority of violence is by men against their female partners and other women. A better description is 'an increase in men's violence against women', acknowledging male agency and responsibility for changing behaviours (Session 1A 2021).

Women's Saftey NSW (2020) conducted a survey of workers who provided support to 53,500 women who had experienced violence during the first month of the pandemic. Half of the respondents reported an increase in clients over this time and 75% an increase in complexity. There was initially a 'silent drop' – a decrease in numbers of women trying to access support services (see also Parkinson & Zara 2011). Courts were closed and services not accessible. Women shifted their focus to supporting family and community and there were safety concerns in seeking help. As pandemic restrictions eased, women came forward and exposed the escalation of abuse experienced during lockdown. The burden was significant for specialist workers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who dealt with increased numbers of clients as well as the temporary closure of other services.

'Not even a pandemic can stop colonisation doing what it does'[2]

Changing the Picture (Our Watch 2018) understands racism, sexism and colonisation as the drivers of higher rates of violence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Being Indigenous and being a woman need to be understood together. This is termed an 'intersectional approach' (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). Australians still experience ingrained racist attitudes and discriminatory practices emanating from authority systems. In recent years, there has been an increase in incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, partly due to the women being considered perpetrators. This is reflected in health, education and the child-protection systems that can work together to the detriment and silencing of women. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, their experiences of violence are exacerbated by the intersection of racism and sexism with the ongoing impacts of colonisation (Our Watch 2020, Session 5A 2021, Lugones 2010).

Women's Safety NSW (2020) indicates there was no emergency response actions for family and domestic violence. The organisation questioned why family and domestic violence is not part of emergency management planning and integrated into local services especially when so much evidence exists, and when clear recommendations were in place before the pandemic (Parkinson 2019, Parkinson & Zara 2013, Session 5A 2021).

Caring for Country

Indigenous land management is about prevention and working with land and the elements. In contrast, the response to extreme weather events and disasters is based on man (literally) attempting to prevail over nature. Science is a 'young' knowledge system that has a history of exploiting and rebadging cultural practices (Steffensen 2021 (this issue), Lead-in session 4 2021). This does not respect or understand old knowledge systems and the protocols around them and rarely works with Indigenous communities. Emergency services organisations and governments have generally neglected traditional Indigenous land management. Barriers to progress include:

- invisibility and neglect of the land
- people of influence do not understand the problem
- emergency services organisations still use a paramilitary style
- one person of authority can derail or stop great initiatives
- lack of funding to Indigenous people working in traditional land management.

Designing for disasters

Listening and hearing Indigenous communities and acknowledging Country in which a project is located strengthens and heals and reveals the memory of a place. Indigenous design is a concept that acknowledges that 'if nothing of your culture, history language or art is visible in the streets, parks and buildings where you live, how can you ever feel welcome?' (Greenaway 2020, Session 5A 2021).

The design sector itself is critical to disaster experience, yet, like emergency management, design practice tends to privilege white, male, middle-class perspectives, excluding non-Western contributions. Design has not moved beyond the current anthropocentric focus to benefit the environment, flora and fauna. It has not demonstrated the courage to embed truth-

2. Karla McGrady, Gender Justice in Disaster: Inspiring Action conference 2021

telling or Indigenous agency, nor to engage with Indigenous knowledge-keepers.

When disaster has destroyed buildings, local cultural knowledge has not been leveraged sufficiently, and little attention has been paid to social and psychological recovery by design practitioners. Built environment practitioners and bureaucratic egos have prevailed over reconstruction that engages and deeply listens to the community. Communities would benefit from promoting an understanding of what is valuable to them during reconstruction, to enable resilience from loss (Madabhushi, Bryar & Miller 2021, Session 5B 2021).

Climate in the 21st Century

The Western understanding of our place in the world has tended to separate 'man' from nature. This approach has 'justified' the destruction of the 'natural' environment. The word 'anthropocentric' implies all humans have shaped the planet but ignores the contribution of particular groups of humans. It ignores colonisation, capitalism and patriarchy (Davis & Todd 2017). The environmental movement reflects a dichotomy where the vulnerable and distressed are more likely to take action, while those contributing most to climate change are the least likely to take action. The poverty/privilege divide is exacerbated in disasters, including climate change. This is reflected in personal relationships where links between environmental violence and violence against women have been identified (Pease 2019).

There are also links between gender and causes of climate change, for example, carbon-based industries (predominantly male dominated) and individual performance of masculinity through high-fuel consumption activities (Verlie & CCR15 2020, Verlie 2022). The burden of mitigation and adaptation falls overwhelmingly on women, creating relationship disruption (Session 1B 2021, Lead-in session 3 2021).

Climate change has been blamed for forced migration in Australia for example the residents of Coonabaraban moving to other towns after various disasters including floods and bushfires (Harris-Rimmer 2020, 2021; Lead-in session 3, 2021). Populations across the world are dealing with climate change predictions becoming real (IPCC 2021). Implications for the insurance industry are profound, with consequences for vulnerable areas and householders. Uninsurable homes have led to lower property values, dwindling populations and poverty. Gender is central to this examination of risk (Harris-Rimmer 2021, Lead-in session 3 2021). Despite this, people working with local, vulnerable and high-risk groups have been largely excluded from municipal planning. Consequently, expertise in emergency planning – especially women's over-representation in caring roles – is lacking. Different perspectives are vital to avoid repeating mistakes (Emerald Messenger 2018, Farrow 2019, Session 2 2021). Although new legislation (Emergency Management Victoria 2020) requires community member representation on planning committees, it is unclear whether women will be included.

Eco-feminism[3] is an important approach to activism, emphasising human encounters and emotion over theory to energise and prompt action. This gendered climate change action has been ignored, mocked, undermined and denied (Session 3B 2021). Climate justice isn't just the domain of seasoned activists and debate-weary academics. Instead, young people have protested about the lack of action after bushfires and large budget allocations to fossil fuels. Climate activism is part of a larger movement for justice, for example, #metoo, Black Lives Matter and Gender Equality. These movements oppose the systemic roots of capitalism and patriarchy. Currently, activism, as a tool for awareness-raising, protest and change has taken centre stage as the pandemic dominates news cycles (Session 3B 2021).

From the mouths of the leaders

Australia is a signatory to the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030* (UNDRR), with the Australian Government adopting the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* (Commonwealth of Australia 2018). This provides a top-down approach to complement the grass roots, bottom-up approach: both of which are urged by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience. It was the intent of the Gender Justice in Disaster Conference to open and close with comments from leaders in gender justice. Decision makers and policy authors were asked to speak on their experiences of gender justice. This can inspire action.

It is recognised that, within the emergency management sector, gender concerns have, largely, been dismissed. The sector has been slow to accommodate family and caring commitments and there has been unspoken resistance to female leadership and 'just a joke' teasing. This contributes to gender violence (Bradshaw & Fordham 2013, Session 7B 2021). However, some countries have implemented policies and programs that address gender inequality, including a joint parental leave program in Iceland introduced 20 years ago and that has been evaluated very highly (Arnalds, Byork-Eydal & Gislason 2013; Byork-Eydal & Gislason 2014; Session 1B 2021).

In some of Australia's industry peak emergency organisations, including the Australian Red Cross and the Country Fire Authority, gender blindness has played out differently. Nonetheless, long histories of volunteer inclusion may reflect many of the gender biases and inequalities that continue to influence the culture of the emergency management sector. Almost 70% of Australian Red Cross volunteers identify as female and they provide psychosocial support and build community resilience. This work is vital but often seen as 'feminine' work, secondary to the 'masculine' work of disaster relief and reconstruction.

Systems in emergency services organisations rarely promote gender equity and diversity at every level. Fire and emergency services are still highly conservative, male-dominated environments, valuing a particular contribution that frequently stifles the contributions of women and other diverse employees (Lead-in session 7 2021; Parkinson, Duncan & Archer 2019). The language that preserves a masculine environment is invisible yet exists everywhere within the emergency management sector. Men have, broadly, not taken on the role to undo gender

3. A branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature.

inequality and, with it, male violence against women. Emergency frontline responders are well-respected role models and therefore must reject co-option into discriminatory workplaces.

During the conference, the decades' old claim that emergency services organisations are actively considering gender when they recruit was challenged. Three senior leaders in Victoria's emergency management sector joined the state's first Commissioner for Gender Equality in the Public Sector in a discussion fuelled by 'real life' scenarios interrogated by 4 provocateurs (Session 7b 2021). Ambulance Victoria has experienced a rapid transformation in inclusion of women from zero in 1986 to 51% in 2021. Although a leader among emergency services organisations with this overall figure, operational leadership is still male dominated. Only 38% of leadership roles are filled by women, falling to zero at operational executive levels. This has recently changed with the appointment of a woman as Chief Operations Officer. In 2020, women told their accounts of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. To their credit, Ambulance Victoria enlisted the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) to examine these issues and assist to develop a safe, equal and inclusive work environment (VEOHRC 2020).

The Country Fire Authority (CFA)[4] aims to reflect the diversity of the community it serves, including women, all genders and people from multicultural backgrounds. At the conference, CFA representatives exposed myths of firefighting equating with masculinity, pointing to current work practices that discourage working alone. Best practice is for firefighters to work in teams, assisted by new technology and equipment. Smarter and better than 2 decades ago, 'There is not a job in the fire service that women can't perform' (Session 2 2021). It is important to acknowledge history and consider the notion that, 'organisational cultures are not genderless' (Gherardi & Poggio 2001, p.257). While gender roles are dynamic and can change over time, these social constructs have traditionally been connected to hierarchical power dynamics of male domination.

The Victoria Police Gender Equality and Inclusion Command was set up in 2020 following the completion of a 5-year partnership with VEOHRC. Commissioned by then Chief Commissioner Ken Lay, VEOHRC reviewed the nature, prevalence and effects of predatory behaviour, gender inequality and discrimination on LGBTIQ+ employees. While there has been extensive progress to central systems to support gender-equal outcomes, only 35% of Victoria Police's workforce are women. This is despite the fact that policing skills are not gender-specific. A problem is that most men don't understand their privilege or biases. Consequently, a key strategy is to change the definition of 'merit' and what is valued by selection panels. In policing, the biggest threat to community safety is domestic violence – predominantly violence by men against women. Police must be trusted to perform their role to protect people and, as emergency services personnel can be exposed to instances of violence, they must be given added ways to assist in such situations.

4. There was also a VEOHRC review conducted on the CFA, however this was not made public due to a Court suppression order (Emergency Management Victoria 2018, Marozzi 2018).

Victoria is leading the nation with the *Gender Equality Act 2020* and a new role of Victorian Commissioner for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. From transparency comes accountability and the Commissioner's work with 300+ public sector organisations that employ 11% of the Victorian workforce will help create cultural change. This work progresses gender equality where slow organic change has not worked. Inequality is not treated in binary categories but is formally recognised as multi-dimensional and complex. As Einstein said, 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them'. This same sentiment is expressed in feminist terms by Audre Lorde, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde 1984).

To fundamentally change an organisation, external eyes are needed and that is the value of reviews such as those conducted by VEOHRC. Unless emergency services organisations modernise, people will be reluctant to be part of services designed a century ago by men for men. There must be a redesign as they do not serve men well, nor anyone else. These are entrenched, patriarchal cultures and tinkering won't achieve the change demanded. Emotional intelligence and simple humanity are key characteristics in recruitment of emergency management staff. Yet, misguidedly, we continue to expect women (and men who are courageous enough to express emotion) to shape themselves to fit into organisations, rather than recognising organisations need to change for the benefit of all. It is imperative for diverse communities to be involved in that change.

Conclusion

Professor Maureen Fordham, Director Centre for Gender and Disaster, University College of London, noted the uniqueness of the depth of attention to gender in this disaster conference (Session 7B 2021). She called for a 'biennial reckoning'. The Conference Outcomes Statement (in this Journal issue) enumerates initial challenges against which progress can be measured. Professor Fordham's challenge for Australia regarding Gender Justice in Disaster echoes the sentiments of her 2018 Diversity in Disaster keynote speech:

- If we know so much about gender concerns in disasters (and we do!) why don't we see the changes we expect?
- Given the scale of gender-based violence in both disasters and the everyday and given the historic gender-skewed staffing levels in emergency management, why no public inquiries or official investigations with expectations for widespread political and behavioural change?
- Can this conference be the place for a biennial reckoning of concrete changes from government and across the sector?

The next 2 years must see emergency services organisations build awareness of the gendered nature of disasters through workforce changes such as equal participation and retention. In all aspects of emergency management, emergency services organisations must collect gender disaggregated data, change their exclusionary language, enhance gender and emergency training, operationalise and embed practices and evaluate (from a gendered perspective) the services they provide. The

willingness of emergency services organisations to be involved in a '2023 Biennial Reckoning of Gender Justice in Disasters' will be evidence of progress.

Acknowledgment

This issues paper is only about the issues facing the sector regarding gender justice. View the session recordings to hear how these issues are being addressed now and into the future, at www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/conferences-events/gender-justice-in-disaster.

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