

## Abstract

There is a notable shift in gender and disaster research towards addressing gender and sexual minorities, with a growing body of literature arguing for the need to go ‘beyond the binary’. While critiquing the traditional gender dichotomy remains essential, discarding fundamental concepts such as the binary way in which gender is constructed at the societal level, may undermine efforts to address those marginalised by it. The violence and sexual assaults women are often subjected to in the immediate aftermath of disaster, highlights the critical need to expose the entrenched power dynamics that perpetuate inequality and oppression based on gender. The emerging tension between structural and more individualised, agentic perspectives underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that emphasises the structural as well as the personal dimensions of gender and sexuality in the context of disasters. By recognising and addressing these complexities, gender and disaster research can contribute to an inclusive and equitable disaster management and response framework. This paper provides an overview of gender and disaster research conducted over 10 years and presents findings about the experiences of women, men and people with diverse gender and sexual identities in disaster contexts.

# Gender and sexual minorities and disaster: balancing structural and agentic perspectives

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, gender has emerged as a notable consideration in disaster research, driven by the acknowledgment that women and men have distinct experiences and needs at all stages of disaster (Enarson and Morrow 1998). Research quickly revealed that, overall, women as a class are more negatively affected by disasters than are men as a class (Enarson and Morrow 1998). For example, women are under-represented and often excluded from emergency and disaster planning, are vulnerable during and after these events to domestic violence and sexual assault and face demands for unpaid work and increased caring responsibilities in preparation, response and recovery (Foote et al. 2023; Parkinson 2019; Rushton et al. 2020; Sety, James and Breckenridge 2014). Research on masculinity and disaster exposes men’s privileged status in management and response, with heightened gendered expectations promoting a hyper-masculine ideal, leading to adverse effects like ignoring warnings and avoiding help-seeking, contributing to depression and suicide (Parkinson 2022a, b; Pease 2014; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013a, b; Zara et al. 2016). Since foundational work on gender inequality, there has been an increasing interest in the field around how members of sexual and gender-diverse groups (commonly referred to as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, asexual + ‘LGBTIQ+’ themselves a diverse and non-homogenous set of individuals) are differently affected by disasters. Studies indicate that gender and sexual minorities encounter various challenges throughout disaster phases, such as, exclusion, gender-based violence, discrimination, harassment and social isolation (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2014, 2016, 2018; King 2022, Leonard et al. 2022; Parkinson et al. 2022b).

Gender and sexual minorities in disaster research reveals tensions in theoretical understandings of gender. Scholars drawing on structural perspectives view gender as a harmful social construct and hierarchical system that is fundamentally relational (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013a, b). This means that the expectation for women, collectively, to adhere to societal constructs of femininity, and similarly for men, as a class, to maintain standards of masculinity creates a reciprocal relationship. The dynamic between femininity and masculinity goes beyond explaining differences or acknowledging inequality. It reveals that gender constructs are intricately intertwined and mutually constitutive of each other (Connell 2022; Pease 2014; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b). Those adopting a structural approach see gender as intertwined with broader social, cultural and institutional structures that shape power dynamics and patterns of inequality. Therefore, they emphasise the centrality of the gender dichotomy in analysis, recognising that individual experiences of gender may not align with this construct (Enarson and Pease 2016).

Conversely, gender and disaster scholars adopting agentic perspectives challenge the adequacy of this dichotomy, contending that traditional gender concepts are limiting and ignore the realities of gender and sexual minorities (Dominey-Howes et al. 2022; Haworth, McKinnon and Eriksen 2022). They advocate for moving beyond binary constructions of gender and to disrupt automatic assumptions about sex and gender categories (Rushton et al. 2019). Agentic perspectives emphasise the role of individual agency and autonomy over structural factors. This does not mean those adopting an agentic perspective disregard power relations completely. Rather, they lean towards the agentic end of the structure/agency continuum (Germov 2013). While both perspectives ultimately envision a future without the binary gender system, the difference lies in their approaches. Agentic perspectives imply that it is possible to transcend the gender binary through individual agency and the ability of individuals to challenge binary gender norms, while structural perspectives assert the need to dismantle the gender binary by addressing systemic barriers and inequalities that perpetuate these norms at a societal level.

This paper provides an overview of gender and disaster research conducted over the past decade, emphasising key findings regarding the experiences of women, men and people with diverse gender and sexual identities in disaster contexts. The paper explores tensions arising from differing theoretical perspectives on gender and the centrality of the man/woman dichotomy in analysis. It argues that despite individual experiences, it remains crucial to understand the complexities of the dominant construction of gender as binary. It concludes by suggesting it is essential to strike a balance between the individual and structural dimensions of gender and sexuality in disaster.

## Aim

Although the academic literature on gender and disaster research is expanding internationally, with a notable emerging subfield focusing on gender and sexual minorities (Dominey-Howes et al. 2022), it remains a niche. The aim of this paper is to review the current research in this burgeoning area to identify the scope and nature of the body of literature.

## Method

A scoping review was undertaken to map the current landscape of research to shed light on the range and nature of the literature (Paré et al. 2015). A search for sources published in the previous decade (2013–23) was conducted using the centralised database interface at the Monash University library and Google Scholar using the terms: gender and sexual minorities, LGBT(IQA+); gender and disaster. There are a variety of terms and acronyms used to refer to gender and sexual minorities, meaning it is possible key texts were missed in the initial search. To mitigate this, a snowballing approach was employed to identify works cited in relevant contributions (Wohlin et al. 2022). A total of 57 publications were found in the initial search. This was refined to include only those relevant to the aims of the study, leaving 44 publications (full list in the Appendix, p.13).

The inclusion criteria were narrowly focused on literature concerning gender and sexual minorities and disaster with a focus on the Australian literature and context. A key limitation of this study is its narrow scope and the potential to exclude relevant literature with a less explicit focus on gender and sexual minorities. However, the publications included in this scoping review effectively capture much of the existing body of research on gender and sexual minorities in disaster, providing sufficient material to discern broad trends and patterns. This provides a foundation for further investigation (Paré et al. 2015).

## Women and disaster

Research indicates that disasters are ‘fundamentally social events’ (Enarson and Pease 2016:3). Globally, women as a class, face a higher risk of injury and mortality during disasters compared to men as a class, reflecting their lower social position (Enarson and Morrow 1998; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b). Collectively, women are more vulnerable during all phases of disaster, including exposure to risk and during response and recovery (Parkinson et al. 2018; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013a). For example, women are frequently excluded from emergency services agencies responsible for disaster preparedness, planning and response, which contributes to their heightened vulnerability during crises (Parkinson, Duncan and Archer 2019). Disasters also result in new or increased domestic

violence against women and their children (Enarson, Fothergill and Peek 2018; Parkinson 2019; Parkinson, Lancaster and Stewart 2011; Parkinson and Zara 2013; Sety, James and Breckenridge 2014), alongside heightened demands for women's unpaid (and often undervalued) work and caregiving responsibilities (Rushton et al. 2020). After a disaster, the rise in informal caregiving roles and the scarcity of available jobs disproportionately hinder women's re-entry into the workforce compared to that experienced by men (Spencer et al. 2018).

Violence and sexual assault are particular concerns for women and girls in the aftermath, recovery and rebuilding after disaster. For example, following the Northern Rivers floods in 2022 in the north-eastern region of New South Wales, which affected 18 small towns and settlements as well as a major urban centre, women reported experiencing sexual assaults and violence in emergency shelters (Foote et al. 2023). This occurred because men exploited the lack of proper triage and separation at evacuation centres and this had 'long lasting impacts' on women's wellbeing (Foote et al. 2023:26). Overall, women as a class are more negatively affected during disasters than men because disasters occur within existing societal power relations that disadvantage women and privilege men (Enarson and Morrow 1998; Fairbrother and Tyler 2019; Parkinson et al. 2022a; Pease 2014).

Crucially, gender and disaster research establishes that women experience disadvantage because of their 'social and economic positions in society' rather than being explained by any essential biological or inherent difference between men and women (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b:21). Socio-political factors including gender inequality contribute major limitations to women's access to resources, knowledge, networks, public life and decision-making power (Fairbrother and Tyler 2019; Rushton et al. 2020). Disaster foregrounds the often-lethal results of women's social position. For example, the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 disproportionately affected women who were 80% of the total deaths in parts of India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (Ariyabandu 2009; Rushton et al. 2020; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b). While there were attempts to naturalise the deaths of women, scholars taking a structural perspective have pointed out the social dimensions. These include gendered expectations regarding restrictive female clothing and limited opportunities for women to learn how to swim; both of which stem from social conditions that reduced women's chances of surviving flooding (Ariyabandu 2009; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b).

This research highlights that disaster exacerbates existing marginalisation of women, stemming from their unequal position in society, rather than being the root cause (Enarson and Pease 2016; Fairbrother and Tyler 2019; Parkinson 2022a). Existing research acknowledges

intersecting inequalities, recognising that not all women are equally affected. For example, racially marginalised and economically disadvantaged women often experience heightened vulnerability in disaster contexts for various reasons (Enarson, Fothergill and Peek 2018; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b).

## Men and disaster

Gendered societal norms and expectations, which influence all aspects of women's experiences during disasters, also affect men, albeit in different ways (Parkinson and Zara 2016; Pease 2014; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013a, b). This is because gender is relational, where women as a class are expected to conform to constructions of femininity and men as a class uphold standards of masculinity (Connell 2022; Pease 2014; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b). In the context of disaster, gendered expectations typically ascribe 'men to protect and provide and women to sacrifice and nurture' (Parkinson 2020:12). While gender has negative effects for both men and women in disaster, it is important to recognise that gendered effects are not experienced equally. From a structural perspective, gender operates as hierarchical power where men as a class hold dominance over women as a class. This means that - as in society more broadly - men's experiences and perspectives are privileged in emergency management and response where an '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' (O'Malley et al. 2022:45). However, as scholars have uncovered, there are important complexities in gendered power relations that mean men are not only privileged over women, but certain types of masculinity are valued over others.

A useful concept used in the field of gender and disaster research on men is 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 2000). The concept has been used to identify a diversity of masculinities that are 'marked by hierarchy and exclusion' (Pease 2014:64). In situations of disaster, the hyper-masculine ideal is valorised, which means that the 'manliness of men and boys is judged by their ability' to meet the expectation that men are 'heterosexual, aggressive, authoritative and courageous' (Pease 2014:64). In Australia, for example, Parkinson et al. (2022) state that men are less likely than women to hear danger warnings, perceive risk and feel concerned about potentially life-threatening situations. In relation to bushfires in Australia, Tyler and Fairbrother (2013a) state that men are more likely to 'stay and defend' their property. As a result - and an exception - men have been historically more likely to die in bushfires. In the aftermath of disasters, men are less likely to seek crisis support due societal norms surrounding masculinity (Parkinson, Duncan and Archer 2019; Parkinson

2022a, 2022b; Pease 2012). This can have devastating effects and contributes to depression and suicide for some men (Zara et al. 2016). Considering nuanced intersections between masculinities and LGBTIQ+ identities reveals a spectrum of vulnerabilities that adds further complexity to the discussion (Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2016). Critical research on men, masculinity and disasters has contributed much to the field. Importantly, this area of research highlights the need for a gender-sensitive approach that goes beyond understanding how men and women as distinct groups are differently vulnerable to examining how gender as a social construct impacts people at all stages of emergencies and disasters.

## Gender and sexual minorities and disaster

Another way in which the gender and disaster literature has expanded is through investigating how disaster effects vary for members of LGBTIQ+ communities, considering different dimensions of gender and sexual marginality. Although still emerging, 'this area of research is receiving increasing attention and is rapidly expanding' (Dominey-Howes et al. 2022:261). The extant scholarship has made important contributions to understanding the particular vulnerabilities, and resilience of LGBTIQ+ people (Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2016; Spencer et al. 2018). It is acknowledged that there are significant differences and varying 'levels of marginality and privilege' within and between LGBTIQ+ populations (Haworth, McKinnon and Eriksen 2022:10). However, research has found that existing discrimination against this population is exacerbated in times of disaster (King 2022; Leonard et al. 2022; O'Malley et al. 2022).

Established heteronormative and patriarchal societal assumptions and standards are recognised as major factors influencing LGBTIQ+ people's experiences of disaster and access to services (Gaillard, Gorman-Murray and Fordham 2017; Gaillard et al. 2017; Gorman-Murray et al. 2016; Leonard et al. 2022). For example, vulnerability may be increased at emergency relief shelters where there is a lack of private or 'safe space', the family unit is on display and there is fear of disclosing gender or sexual identity (Dominey-Howes et al. 2022; Gaillard et al. 2017). This is especially heightened in rural contexts where conservative social norms may be prevalent (Pease 2014), or when faith-based organisations are involved in service delivery (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2016; Gaillard, Gorman-Murray and Fordham 2017; King 2022). Indeed, LGBTIQ+ people have been blamed in public discourse globally for causing disaster events because they have 'sinned' therefore inducing 'God's wrath' (Rushton and Scarlett 2023:353). Further, there is an absence of LGBTIQ+ experiences of disaster reported in the Australian media (McKinnon, Gorman-Murray and

Dominey-Howes 2017) and exclusion of gender and sexual minorities from emergency management response and recovery plans (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2016; Parkinson et al. 2022b) as well as a lack of understanding of LGBTIQ+ people's specific needs among emergency services personnel (Leonard et al. 2022; Parkinson et al. 2022b). These factors contribute to further marginalisation, discrimination, harassment, violence, abuse and social isolation during and after emergencies (Dominey-Howes et al. 2022; Gaillard, Gorman-Murray and Fordham 2017; Leonard et al. 2022; O'Malley et al. 2022; Parkinson et al. 2022b).

As noted, the LGBTIQ+ population is not a homogenous group and different identities experience different types of marginalisation in different contexts (Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2016; Haworth, McKinnon and Eriksen 2022). For example, lesbian and bisexual women experience two types of 'mutually reinforcing' discrimination occurring at the intersection of sexuality as well as sexism and misogyny (Parkinson et al. 2022b:77). A rare study on lesbians and bisexual women's experiences of disaster in Australia showed lesbians and bisexual women faced sexist and homophobic discrimination and abuse 'both as recipients of services and as paid or volunteer staff' (Parkinson et al. 2022b:78). For trans and gender-diverse people, the registration process at emergency relief centres has been acknowledged as a point of potential exclusion because gender and sexual minorities may not fit the male or female tick box (Gaillard et al. 2017; Dominey-Howes et al. 2022). Additionally, toilets and amenities that are sex segregated may not be suitable for trans and gender-diverse people (Dominey-Howes et al. 2022; Nicholson 2022). This area of research highlights important considerations at both the policy and practical levels.

## Emerging tensions

When taken as a whole, the extant gender and disaster literature reveals differing theoretical understandings of gender as a concept that results in tensions between interpretations of problems and solutions. This paper contends that the main tension rests on understandings of gender and the centrality of the men/women dichotomy in analysis. Gender and disaster scholars drawing on structural perspectives understand gender as 'above all, relational. It is a social structure and a major pattern in human social life' (Connell 2022:6). These scholars articulate a structural conception of gender where 'gender is understood as a form of social structure within which *persons of all genders* are embedded' (Eneason and Pease 2016:6, emphasis added). This means that gender is not 'simply a biological dichotomy between male and female; or (...) an individual and very personal identity' but rather, a broader social pattern (Connell 2022:6). Crucially, scholars from this perspective take the dominant construction



of gender as binary as central to analysis, despite acknowledging that individual experiences of gender may not align with this dichotomy (Enarson and Pease 2016; Fairbrother and Tyler 2019; Pease 2014; Parkinson 2022a, b; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013a, b).

In contrast, gender and disaster scholars drawing on more agentic perspectives have argued that ‘the male/female dichotomy is an insufficient construct with which to address the gendered dimensions of disaster’ (Haworth, McKinnon and Eriksen 2022:2). The very existence of gender and sexual minorities has prompted scholars to assert that the ‘traditional concept of gender is limiting’ (Larkin 2019:61). Scholars drawing on agentic perspectives have argued that binary gendered conceptions and language erases and ‘excludes the lived experiences of gender and sexual minorities’ (Haworth, McKinnon and Eriksen 2022:2). It follows that dichotomous gender constructions, not only in policy and practice but also in conceptual analysis, then cause ‘further marginalisation of groups that are already marginalised’ (Dominey-Howes et al. 2022:260). The proposed solution is to ‘move ‘beyond the binary’ and (...) disrupt automatic assumptions that (sex and gender) are omnirelevant categories’ (Rushton et al. 2019:10). In this way, agentic interpretations of gender challenge structural understandings of gender as a powerful social construct imposed on individuals informing all aspects of life.

Agentic perspectives provide important contributions to the field by uncovering the diverse experiences and needs of gender and sexual minorities. However, the tendency to focus on the individual risks underplaying the structural dimensions of gender and sexuality, potentially limits the ability to address broader systemic inequalities and power dynamics in the context of disasters. As Enarson and Pease (2016) point out, gender is too often simplistically understood as ‘an identity or an attribute of individuals rather than a set of practices involved in the reproduction of institutions and an attribute of social structures’ (p.5). Suggestions to go ‘beyond the binary’ and abandon the centrality of gender as socially constructed and dichotomous risks obscuring the role of ‘powerful gender hierarchies’ in disaster (Enarson and Pease 2016:11). Certainly, the prevailing gender dichotomy plays a defining role in categorising those living or identifying outside of the binary system as a minority. However, even individuals who do not conform to binary gender remain defined in relation to the established gender dichotomy. To begin to unpick the various consequences of the gender dichotomy, including the experiences of gender and sexual minorities, it must continue to be the centre of analysis.

Balancing these tensions is especially important in emergency and disaster management where the gender dichotomy is particularly pronounced and emphasises the pragmatic challenges of transcending the binary

framework. A practical example of where tensions have surfaced in the pursuit of gender inclusivity is in the provision of public amenities, including in evacuation centres (Kalms and McVey 2024; Nicholson 2023). Efforts towards inclusivity have led to a shift from female/male to ‘all gender’, ‘gender-neutral’, or ‘unisex’ facilities (Kalms and McVey 2024). However, this shift eliminates spaces exclusively for women and leaves them vulnerable to potential male violence. This exposes the premature and potentially harmful outcomes of moving beyond binary gender conceptions before adequately addressing the gender binary and women’s unequal status. While some recognise amenities in evacuation centres should be separated for ‘people with disabilities, “Male”, “Female” and “All Genders”’ (Nicholson 2022:28), ‘all gender’ spaces are increasingly favoured over segregated ones (Kalms and McVey 2024). This demonstrates the practical limitations of applying an agentic approach and reinforces that this perspective should be regarded ‘in addition to, not instead of’ structural approaches to ensure practical benefits for all genders (Blanchard et al. 2023:5).

## Conclusion

Gender and disaster research consistently demonstrates that, globally, women experience disproportionate vulnerability to the effects of disasters, spanning exposure, preparedness, response and recovery. Gendered societal norms also affect men in various ways. Specific masculine ideals enforced during disasters impose unrealistic expectations on men that can lead to harmful outcomes. Additionally, research on gender and sexual minorities in disasters reveals the distinct vulnerabilities and resilience of LGBTIQ+ individuals. The literature reveals a tension arising from differing interpretations of gender and the significance of the men/women dichotomy in analysis. Agentic perspectives argue that the traditional gender binary falls short in regard to the diverse effects of disasters across genders, thereby neglecting the experiences of gender and sexual minorities and exacerbating their marginalisation. Structural perspectives understand gender as a social pattern rather than merely a biological binary or individual identity, with scholars highlighting its central role in analysis despite recognising variations in individual gender experiences.

The expanding literature on gender and sexual minorities provides valuable insights into those experiences and shows the importance of including this population in gender and disaster research. However, it is important to understand and recognise the dominant construction of gender as dichotomous and that femininity is constructed to fit masculinity, even if this does not reflect each individual’s personal experience. To understand the gender dichotomy and its consequences, including the experiences of gender and sexual minorities, it must remain the

focal point of analysis. The tension between structural and agentic perspectives underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that considers the individual and the structural dimensions of gender and sexuality in the context of disasters. By recognising and addressing these complexities, gender and disaster research can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable disaster management and response framework.

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### About the author

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## Appendix

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