

Sources of resistance and success: gender justice in emergency management around the world

Dr Debra Parkinson

Executive Director
Gender and Disaster Australia

We've yet to figure out all the sources of resistance to gender justice and so I fear "we" are just passing it along to the next generation...along with climate chaos. Political work is at the core of both struggles and women can lead the way.

(Elaine Enarson, Independent Scholar, Colorado, United States of America (Personal Communication, 27 April 2024))



© 2024 by the authors.
License Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, Melbourne, Australia. This is an open source article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>). Information and links to references in this paper are current at the time of publication.

Introduction

For this edition of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Gender and Disaster Australia (GADAus) explored factors and influences that affect diverse genders within emergency management – either increasing or reducing inclusion for these groups. There are harmful consequences when emergency management planning is not inclusive of women and non-binary people and, therefore, not representative of communities.

To this end, I invited international colleagues to offer their ideas for how to improve and diversify the sector so that it may be fairer for women (while increasing the capacity of the emergency management sector). They were also asked to offer observations of successful initiatives working well to improve disaster risk reduction for women in their countries.

The women I asked are leaders in this important field of inquiry and have rigorously engaged with questions of gender and disaster/emergency management for years. I asked women, because, at this time in history (2024), the number of women killed by men in Australia has doubled in the first 4 months of the year. In the US, one state after another retracts and denies women's rights to abortion following the overturning of *Roe Vs. Wade* on 24 June 2022 (Totenberg and McCammon 2022). Let's hear women because change after disasters can be progressive or regressive. The last weekend in April 2024 saw thousands of women, men, non-binary people and children join protests right across

Australia to demand an end to violence against women. In this moment, real and progressive change is possible.

The same moment hangs in the balance for climate change and what it means for the world's climate change canary, Australia. Floods have ravaged large parts of the country in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. Residential areas have been hard-hit and homeowners face the prospect of not being able to insure their property (Davis 2024). Reports by the Insurance Council of Australia¹ read like trailers for apocalyptic films, and many look to the 2024–25 bushfire season with trepidation. Memories of the Black Summer bushfires in 2019–20 are seared into the collective consciousness, unprecedented in the damage wrought to our country. First Nations people's sorrow is yet to be fully acknowledged. The gendered effects of disasters (complex, cascading and compounding) remains unrecognised.

This paper presents initiatives from other countries that are deemed worthy by women who understand emergency management. There are ways to be fair and just to women within emergency services organisations and ways to be fair and just to women who survive disasters and receive the services of emergency services organisations. Philosopher and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft said, 'It is justice, not charity that is wanting in the world' (Wollstonecraft 1792). I commend these initiatives to emergency management decision-makers.

1. Insurance Council of Australia, at <https://insurancecouncil.com.au/about-us/>.

Benefits of integration

The ideas documented here aim for justice for women in the emergency management realm and will increase any nation's capacity to meet the challenge of increasing extreme weather events we now face. The concept of the 'disaster cycle' of prevent, prepare, respond, recover is disrupted as one disaster follows on the heels of the previous one before people have a chance to recover. The scale of the problem is clear, yet it only increases the tendency of emergency managers to dismiss calls for gender justice. As Elaine Enarson recognised their response can be characterised as, 'Don't talk to me about gender, I have a disaster on my hands!' (Parkinson, Zara and Davie 2015, p.26).

The initiatives outlined are evidence that addressing gendered issues will help to address the challenges within emergency management as it now exists. If women and non-binary people are included in emergency management planning and frontline response roles, the capacity of the sector will surge. The volunteer base for fire and emergency services has been declining for a decade and a primary reason is that macho culture prevails and this alienates groups that don't align. Women, non-binary people and people from other marginalised groups are often left aside or actively mistreated. This is to the detriment of the emergency services sector and their communities. A gender-inclusive culture will increase the capacity of the sector by drawing on a greater and more diverse group of people. The following initiatives are generously offered from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Iran and Sweden.

United States of America

Lori Peek, Professor, Department of Sociology and Director of the Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado Boulder

(Personal Communication, 30 April 2024)

The U.S. emergency management profession, as well the field of hazards and disaster research, were dominated by white men for decades (Anderson 1990). This tide turned, however, in the 1970s and 1980s as structural barriers began to weaken and more women entered higher education and the workforce. Today, women make up about 33% of all emergency management directors in the United States (Data USA 2023) and 52% of self-identified social science disaster researchers (Peek et al. 2020a). Increased representation of women in emergency management and disaster research matters for many reasons—perhaps most importantly because demographically and functionally diverse teams are better equipped to make critical decisions (National Research Council 2014; Peek et al. 2020b). It is therefore

essential that we continue to ensure that women and other members of historically underrepresented groups are encouraged to become emergency managers and disaster researchers, socially supported in their degree programs and professional positions, and paid equally for their work.

Women who reach the highest levels in emergency management agencies and academia are now paving the way for the next generation of leaders, which will greatly benefit the continued diversification of the workforce. Consider, for example, that when Deanne Criswell was appointed Administrator of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (the first woman to ever assume the role) she ushered in a new era that includes more women in the agency's top leadership positions than at any other point in its nearly 50-year history. As another example, more women are now establishing and leading academic hazards and disaster research careers and institutes across the nation. Change is possible. But it takes focus, leadership and a commitment to organizational change.

United Kingdom

Maureen Fordham, Professorial Research Associate in Gender and Disaster, Centre Director, IRDR Centre for Gender and Disaster, University College London

(Personal Communication, 30 April 2024)

Making emergency management fairer to women includes understanding and applying intersectional approaches to allow for the diversity in those whom emergency management serves. For example, a simplistic and homogenous characterisation of 'women' may miss the particular needs of older women (who may have been singularly characterised or triaged as 'elderly') without recognising the specific needs of elderly women as having fewer financial resources and more often living alone, which can limit capacities to act in emergencies, may lead to undiagnosed heart conditions (more common in women), among other concerns. Similarly, a trans woman may have particular needs related to sexual and reproductive health, psychological impacts through experienced stigma or loss of dignity through inadequate sanitation facilities. Seeing the whole person in context is important to know what questions to ask someone or which facilities to prepare, to avoid exacerbating an already stressful situation. There are likely to be common consequences which can be prepared for and which will respond to the needs of diverse social groups. A new initiative in the UK between University College London's Centre for Gender and Disaster and Public Health Wales Emergency Preparedness Resilience and Response is exploring in what ways equalities and equities issues are experienced and embedded in everyday practice and policy.

Within emergency management itself, it requires a scaling up of female representation at all levels but especially in higher levels of management and leadership. It is not sufficient to include a token female representation when there needs to be a critical mass of feminine (or feminist) attitudes and values to counterbalance the overwhelming dominance of masculine culture in the profession if it has become detrimental or toxic.

Canada

Lorraine Greaves, Principal, Galvanizing Equity Group Inc and Senior Investigator, Centre of Excellence for Women's Health

Nancy Poole, Director, Centre of Excellence for Women's Health and Principal, Galvanizing Equity Group, Canada

(Personal Communication, 30 April 2024)

It is crucial to consider what the sex/gender dynamics are in responding to an emergency. For all groups, sex and gender factors interact with each other and the environment to create different vulnerabilities to risk and hazard, mental and physical health, diseases and conditions. These vulnerabilities can be amplified in some neighbourhoods, social contexts, settings and occupations. Behind this, ongoing sexism, racism, colonialism and ableism stream into the mesh of the overarching responses to emergency situations creating replications of injustice and inequity. Canada mandates the use of sex and gender-based analysis plus (SGBA+) approach in federally funded initiatives to assess how all of these factors affect policies and actions, such as emergency response plans. Simple sex/gender data disaggregation to provide guidance for service provision and products is one result. Similarly, creating specific evacuation plans for women in domestic violence shelters to preserve their safety and privacy in crises such as fast-moving fires could respond to a gender analysis. Unfortunately, SGBA+ analyses are not tracked nor enforced by the federal government and similar policies do not exist at provincial and municipal levels. Nevertheless, the key opportunity lies subsequent to this integration. Real progress will result if the focus of emergency response is a gender-transformative approach that responds to emergencies and improves gender equity at the same time. In this way, responses can consider the issues raised by SGBA+ and also incorporate shifts in approaches that reduce inequities. This challenge needs to infuse the education and training of responders, response planning and policy development and implementation. This higher bar will help reduce the collateral of emergencies such as exposure to disease, enhanced poverty, precarious housing, unmet health needs and the perpetuation of domestic violence. When gender transformative solutions are sought, overall

health, particularly women's health, the health of sexual and gender minorities and other vulnerable groups is enhanced. This approach will help build a resilient emergency response system that contributes to social justice and better health for all.

Iran

Sanaz Sohrabizadeh, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Public Health and Safety, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

(Personal Communication, 27 April 2024)

Gender-based emergency management has been an important issue in developing countries such as Iran. For instance, the Global Gender Gap Report 2023² ranked Iran as 143 out of 146 countries. That is, the gender gap is a considerable challenge in Iran as a highly disaster-prone country where people have been affected by frequent catastrophic disasters so far. Iran benefits from one of the most effective primary health care systems in the world. The primary health care network has been widely distributed in all rural and urban regions and applies a community-based approach for providing health care services. Using the potential of primary health care established in local and national levels can be highly recommended to improve women's capacities and participation on strengthening community-based emergency management. Women can be educated and trained to perform disaster risk reduction measures and teach their families, neighbours and community members. Iranian women have proved their strong intentions to play their roles in planning, organising and conducting community-based disaster risk reduction projects and interventions.

Sweden

Erna Danielsson, Professor in Sociology, Risk and Crisis Research Centre, Mid Sweden University

Kerstin Eriksson, PhD, RISE Research Institutes of Sweden, affiliated Assistant professor at Risk and Crisis Research Centre, Mid Sweden University

(Personal Communication, 30 April 2024)

Established definitions of crisis management shape specific behaviours and habits associated with particular genders (Enarsson 2016), as evidenced in regulations and reports issued by authorities within the Swedish crisis management system (Kvarnlöf and Montelius 2020). This gender order influences crisis management practices, shaping patterns and norms within the field constrained by gender norms (Forsberg Kankkunen 2004). Our research in Sweden reveals that crises are framed to

2. World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2023, at www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/.

focus on relevant actors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, portraying women in elderly care and health care roles and men in higher managerial positions interpreting the crisis (Danielsson 2020; Danielsson et al. 2023). In wildfires, male firefighters are portrayed as heroes while women, often volunteers, are predominantly assigned caregiving roles (Danielsson and Eriksson 2022). In school fires, firefighters emerge as heroes, while women teachers are frequently perceived not as professional educators but as victims (Danielsson 2021). Similarly, in the military, barriers to achieving gender equality aren't just resistance; they also form a recurring pattern hindering normative changes (Linehagen 2022, 2023).

Reshaping the gendered framework within the crisis management system requires attention to the structures outlined in governmental mandates, public inquiries, and regulations (Danielsson and Sjöstedt 2020; Kvarnlöf and Montelius 2020). Additionally, the media plays a crucial role in shaping narratives from crises, determining who receives a voice in crisis reporting and what is deemed essential to report (Öhman et al. 2016). If authorities and media continue to focus on the male norm in their writings and reporting of crises, achieving fair representation in emergency management will remain challenging for women.

Australia

Imagine a gender equality policy for the emergency management sector matched with an action plan and accountability for its implementation with consequences for lack of progress.

In Australia, we have to imagine it, because so little has been achieved over the past 15 years to change the low rates of women in frontline or leadership roles in emergency management. Take for example, the proportion of career firefighters who are women in Fire Rescue Victoria. It stands at approximately 4%. In 2016, the then Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning commissioned research to increase rates of female inclusion (DELWP 2016). The rate was then 4% (p.12). This is not the result of women preferring not to be firefighters. Women are actively excluded from this role, as evidenced in the research, and by one report or inquiry after another in Australia.

Gender is relevant both to women within emergency services organisations (career and volunteer) as well as to women in communities affected by disasters. In 2015, with input from approximately 500 emergency management practitioners, the then GAD Pod led the development of National Gender and Emergency Management (GEM) Guidelines. The guidelines stated:

Gender issues are known to compound the damaging effects of disaster on survivors. Increasing understanding of the relationship between gender and disaster will improve the health and wellbeing of (all) affected by disaster across Australia.

A recent addition to the GEM Guidelines addresses evacuation and relief centres and notes:

Existing guidelines on evacuation planning in Australia reflect the emergency management sector's broader lack of attention to gender. There is often resistance to requests for inclusion or consideration of safety needs (that go beyond) the imminent threat of disaster. However, it is possible to do both – well before any disaster – by planning ahead and educating staff and volunteers. Given the complex experience of safety in public spaces for women and people of diverse gender and sexual identities and the prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment, evacuation centres must be safe for those sheltering. Lives are endangered if community members choose to take their chances to escape fires, floods or cyclone rather than go into an evacuation centre where they feel unsafe.

The National GEM Guidelines are identified in the *National Midterm Review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2060 Report* (Commonwealth of Australia 2022). Australia's commitment to the gender pillar of the Sendai Framework is important. It sets a standard that means we must prove actions are underway to progress gender equality in the emergency management sphere. As in all social change work, actions must be 'top-down' and 'bottom up'. Achieving such a central goal as gender equality for both inside and outside emergency services organisations will take concerted effort in the face of resistance. Nevertheless, it is urgent, fundamental and inevitable.

Summary

We learn from the endeavours of other counties and our international colleagues. Table 1 provides a summary of needs, actions, outcomes and what it will take to progress gender equality in emergency services and planning.

Conclusion

Equal inclusion of women and non-binary people in emergency management results in increased capacity and greater safety and resilience. To achieve this, culture has to change and it has to change fast – because equal representation matters.

Table 1: Needs, actions, outcomes and what it will take to progress gender equality in emergency services and planning.

Country	We need:	We need to:	We will get:	It will take:
United States of America	More women leaders in emergency management and research.	Offer women social support and equal pay.	Better functioning teams; Role models for young women.	Focus, leadership, commitment to change.
United Kingdom	A critical mass of women in emergency management and leadership; understanding of how to serve diverse communities.	See the whole person in context when emergency management serves the community. Counter dominant masculine cultures in emergency management.	An emergency management system that anticipates and responds to diverse social groups; a better experience for people in a stressful situation.	Education, preparation, engagement with diverse people.
Canada	A SGBA+ (sex/gender-based analysis+) and a gender transformative approach (responding to emergencies while improving gender equity).	Use sex/gender-disaggregated data; Know how sex and gender factors are increasing vulnerability, for example women in domestic violence situations.	Better health for all, a resilient emergency management system.	Training of responders, education behind planning and policy development.
Iran	More emergency management participation by women to strengthen community-based emergency management.	Use existing networks, such as the primary health care network, to improve women’s capacity to undertake disaster risk reduction work in their communities.	A flow-on benefit as women share their new disaster risk reduction knowledge with families, neighbours and community members.	Attention to the gender gap, local and national commitment, women’s strong intentions.
Sweden	Fair representation for women in emergency management and media portrayal.	Reshape the gendered framework in emergency management, visible in government mandates, public inquiries and regulations. Shift the focus from the ‘male norm’ in emergency management and reporting.	A fair emergency management field, no longer constrained by the (old) gender order. More accurate portrayal of women and men in emergency management.	Accurate reporting by media, government and the emergency management sector; vigilance to identify and remove ‘patterns’ hindering gender equality.
Australia	Equal participation of women in emergency management; gender equality inside emergency services organisations and in emergency management services to the community.	Embed the GEM Guidelines into every disaster and emergency management organisation.	Increased capacity of the emergency management sector, improved health and wellbeing of all involved in emergency management and all affected by disasters.	Urgent, concerted action in the face of resistance.

References

Anderson William A (1990) ‘Nurturing the Next Generation of Hazards Researchers’, *Natural Hazards Observer*, 15(2):1–2.

Commonwealth of Australia (2022) Australia’s National Midterm Review of the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* Report. https://nema.gov.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/Australia%27s%20midterm%20review_0.pdf

Danielsson E (2021) ‘Crisis management made visible – a case study of a school fire’, *Journal of Emergency Management*, 19(5):479–492.

Danielsson E and Eriksson K (2022) ‘Women’s invisible work in disaster contexts: gender norms in speech on women’s work after a forest fire in Sweden’, *Disasters*, 46(1):141–161. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12464>

- Danielsson E and Sjöstedt-Landén A (2020) 'Leader normativity in crisis management: Tales from a school fire', *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 11(2):139–165. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12182>
- Danielsson E, Alirani G, Oscarsson O, Große C, Olausson PM, Jacobsson J and Öhman S (2023) *Att ta ledartröjan i krisen, Utvärdering av MSB:s samordningsuppdrag under Coronapandemin*. RCR Working Paper Series: 2023. (Assuming the leadership role in the crisis, Evaluation of MSB's coordination mission during the COVID-19 pandemic.)
- Data USA (2024) Emergency Management Directors (<https://datausa.io/profile/soc/emergency-management-directors>) (data set), accessed 26 April 2024.
- Davis J (30 April 2024) *Home insurance costs spike as parts of Australia at risk of becoming uninsurable*. ABC website www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-30/insurance-industry-urges-government-to-step-in-on-flood-zones/103752652) ABC News, accessed 8 May 2024.
- DELWP (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning) (2016) *Women in fire and emergency leadership roles*, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Gad Pod. <https://genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FINAL-Vol-2-20160216.pdf>
- Enarson E (2016) 'Men, Masculinities and Disaster: An action research agenda', in Enarson E & B Pease (Eds.), *Men, masculinities and disaster*. Routledge London, New York.
- Forsberg Kankkunen T (2009) 'Två kommunala rum: Ledningsarbete i genusmärkta tekniska respektive omsorgs-och utbildningsverksamheter'. N.S., 36 Doctoral thesis, monograph, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm. (Two municipal spaces: Leadership in gender-marked technical, care, and education activities.)
- Kvarnlöf L and Montelius E (2020) The Militarization of Covid-19. *Dagens Arena*, (31).
- Linehagen F (2022) 'Collective agreement as investment in women in the Swedish Armed Forces A critical discourse analysis', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(3):364–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2035213>
- Linehagen F (2023) 'Gender (in) equality within the Swedish Armed Forces: Resistance and Functional Disinclination'. Dissertation, Lund University.
- National Research Council (2014) *Convergence: Facilitating Transdisciplinary Integration of Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, Engineering, and Beyond*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Öhman S, Giritli Nygren K and Olofsson A (2016) 'The (un) Intended Consequences of Crisis Communication in News Media: A Critical Analysis', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 13(5):515–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2016.1174138>
- Parkinson D, Zara C and Davie S (2015) 'Victoria's Gender and Disaster Taskforce', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 30(4):26–29. <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-oct-2015-victorias-gender-and-disaster-taskforce/>
- Peek L, Champeau H, Austin J, Mathews M and Wu H (2020a) 'What Methods Do Social Scientists Use to Study Disasters? An Analysis of the Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) Network', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(8):1066–1094. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764220938105>
- Peek L, Tobin J, Adams RM, Wu U and Mathews MC (2020b) 'A Framework for Convergence Research in the Hazards and Disaster Field: The Natural Hazards Engineering Research Infrastructure CONVERGE Facility', *Frontiers in Built Environment*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fbuil.2020.00110>
- Totenberg N and McCammon S (24 June 2022) *Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, ending right to abortion upheld for decades*. NPR website www.npr.org/2022/06/24/1102305878/supreme-court-abortion-roe-v-wade-decision-overturn accessed 8 May 2024.
- Watt M (25 June 2022) *What is Roe v Wade and why is the US Supreme Court overturning abortion rights?* ABC website www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-25/what-is-roe-v-wade-why-has-the-us-supreme-court-struck-it-down/101183054, accessed 8 May 2024.
- Wollstonecraft M (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London: Printed for J. Johnson.

About the author

Dr Debra Parkinson is a researcher and the Executive Director of Gender and Disaster Australia. She is a strong advocate in the field of gender and disaster and has made significant contributions to policy and public perception of increased violence against women in disasters and issues related to gender and emergency management.