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Men, masculinities and disasters: a commentary

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Abstract

This paper collates and critically reviews the literature on men, masculinities and disasters in Australia and New Zealand for the decade from 2013 to 2023. It explores the relevant literature through 6 themes of the masculinist nature of emergency services and emergency services management, the influences of masculinity in preparation for disasters, the impact of disasters on men and the role of masculinity in men's post-disaster recovery, masculinity and men's violence against women in the aftermath of disasters, the challenge to binary assumptions about gender and the implications for masculinity and diverse sexual and gender identities and how masculinism frames disaster prevention and policies addressing global warming and climate catastrophes. The origins of the research into men, masculinity and disasters pre-dates the time period of this review and arises from the early gender and disaster literature that focused on the vulnerabilities of women and girls in the aftermath of disasters. This followed an era where gendered inequalities in disasters were ignored. This review focuses on contemporary analyses confined to Australian and New Zealand authors and disaster locations.

Emergency services management: an unequal gender regime

Many authors have commented on the ways in which emergency services in Australia are gendered organisations (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013; Ainsworth, Batty and Burchielli 2014; Pease 2014; Parkinson, Duncan and Archer 2019; Tyler, Carson and Reynolds 2019; McKinnon 2022). Tyler and Fairbrother (2014) note that rural firefighting and emergency management in Australia are not only structurally dominated by men, they are also culturally embedded with dominant constructions of masculinity. Pease (2014) characterised emergency services as an 'unequal gender regime' used to describe patterns of gendered inequality in specific institutions such as workplaces, government and other apparatuses of the state.

Ainsworth, Batty and Burchielli (2014) explored women's accounts of voluntary firefighting in Australia to understand the ways in which masculinities and femininities are constructed in a context where hegemonic masculinity is valorised. When women demonstrate competence and effectiveness through a demonstrated ethic of care in what is traditionally regarded as a 'masculine' occupation, they unsettle the dominant narrative that affirms men's gender identity through doing a 'man's job'. Consequently, women experience significant pushback from men through heightened displays of masculinity and aggressive, hostile, sexualised and threatening behaviours.

Eriksen and Waitt (2016) interrogated the ways in which firefighting in Australia is framed as a gendered narrative that constructs a form of firefighting masculinity that emphasises crude humour, masculine

swagger and hypermasculine bravado. It reproduces men's privilege through fostering a perceived chivalrous protection of 'women at risk' that disempowers women and reproduces gendered power hierarchies (Eriksen 2014).

Parkinson, Duncan and Archer (2019) identify the major barriers to women's leadership in emergency services organisations in Victoria. They note the mechanisms that men use, such as swearing, watching pornography, using threatening language and behaviour and excluding women from training to maintain a 'boys' club' and 'blokey' environment. The men did not see themselves as problematical or powerful or actively excluding women in spite of the evidence to the contrary. The authors recommended a Gender Equity Review Panel to monitor approval given to women for leadership training and deployment to fires and to recruit a critical mass of women recognising that 'Some women who succeed on men's terms comment that they enjoy working in a male environment, so are reluctant to see it change' (Parkinson, Duncan and Archer 2019, p.88). The authors suggest ways to overcome the 'boys' club' culture of sexism and discrimination in the services.

Tyler, Carson and Renyolds (2019) examined gender relations in the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Australia and concluded that fire services were 'extremely gendered organisations'. Extremely gendered organisations such as the military use structure, ideology and practices of the organisation to gender all aspects of organisational functioning to construct a 'male organisation'. The authors argue that emergency services organisations such as the CFA are 'military-like' and mirror the masculinist dimensions of military organisations. This explains why bringing more women into the CFA is likely to fail to shift the cultural and structural dimensions of patriarchal control.

There are divided opinions on what progress is likely to be achieved by increasing the numbers of women in emergency services organisations that are male-dominated and culturally masculinised. Affirmative action and diversity and inclusion approaches encounter resistance and pushback from men who feel threatened by the inclusion of women in firefighting.

Masculinity and disaster preparation

There is an increased recognition that there are gender differences in preparation for disasters (Parkinson and Duncan 2013; Tyler 2013; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013; Rushton, Phibbs, Kenny and Anderson 2020; Farhall, Gibson and Vincent 2022). In relation to bushfires, research demonstrates that women are more likely to prefer 'leaving early' and that men are more likely to want to 'stay and defend' (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013). These differences lead to disagreements and conflict between men and

women about the best course of action to take during a time of fire risk. Men are perceived as being rational when it comes to making decisions and the notion of leaving early was perceived to be associated with femininity. One of the issues shaping these gender differences is the deeply embedded protector role that men take on in relation to their family, their home and their source of income. In the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009, men's inability to fulfil that protector role led them to feeling they had failed as protectors and as men (Parkinson and Zara 2016, Rushton et al. 2020).

The personal decisions by men and women were fostered by the ways in which dominant forms of masculinity are embedded in the Australian Government policy of 'prepare, stay and defend' in response to bushfires (Rushton et al. 2020). The fact that emergency management policies are led by men, traditional stereotypes of masculinity shaped the responses of emergency services organisations to issues of physical and psychological safety (Farhall, Gibson and Vincent 2022).

Parkinson and Duncan (2013) explored the ways in which gendered norms influenced men's and women's decision-making during the Black Saturday bushfires. They noted that more women than men left early before the arrival of the fires and that few heterosexual couples had an agreed formal fire response plan. Consequently, disputes arose during the immediate crisis of responding to the fire emergency. The connection between masculinity and staying and femininity and leaving were on full display as couples negotiated their courses of action. The consequences of not having a fire response plan can reverberate between couples during and after the recovery as the process brings into question ideas about masculine protection.

Although contemporary Australian Government policy recommends the preparation of written fire response plans, there is no evidence since Parkinson and Duncan (2013) that significant numbers of heterosexual couples have prepared fire plans. Where there are no fire plans, there is potential that masculinity gendered norms in relation to courage, risk and protection are likely to prevail and could lead to increased fatalities in fires.

Gender differences in risk were also evident during the COVID-19 pandemic where men were more reluctant than women to wear masks, they did less handwashing and did not adhere as closely as women to social distancing requirements (Pease 2024). It was important for men to convey strength and being in control and to downplay the seriousness of the virus. Consequently, as well as disregarding risks to themselves, men were more likely to behave in ways that caused risk to others.

Disasters and men: masculinity and post-disaster recovery

Most of the gendered aspects of post-disaster research have focused on women's experiences of disasters. Notwithstanding the reality that the majority of men occupy privileged positions in relation to women, men generally, and marginalised men in particular, are also significantly affected by disasters (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013; Pease 2014; Rushton et al. 2020; Parkinson 2022a; Parkinson et al. 2022). However, at the beginning of this 10-year review period, there was limited information on men's experiences of disasters and their capacity to recover from them (Hazeleger 2013).

Pease (2014) argued that men's traumatic experiences of disasters can be usefully informed by the literature on deployment trauma. Drawing on the experiences of male combat veterans, men's experience of loss of control in combat was seen as a failure of masculinity. The research showed how masculinity influenced veteran experiences of, and recovery from, trauma. Pease (2014) suggested that the insights from men's experiences of deployment trauma could be used to inform the recovery process for men traumatised by disasters.

Parkinson and Zara (2016) explored the emotional and personal costs for men in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria. The major theme from their interviews with participants was to do with men's experiences of 'losing control' both during and in the aftermath of the bushfires. The men who embodied hegemonic masculinity were expected, and expected themselves, to be decisive, unemotional, stoic and courageous in the face of the fires. Some men spoke of being expected to just 'get over it' and were unable to give expression to their grief during the post-disaster period, leading some to suicide ideation. The men were rewarded for showing a veneer of strength. Research interviews revealed the respondents' experiences of high levels of alcohol abuse, drug use, depression, suicidality and an inability to acknowledge their suffering and to reach out for support. In Parkinson (2022a), 'I thought you were more of a man than that', many of the men felt they had failed to live up to the test of their manhood.

While most post-disaster research documents the differential effects of disasters on women, in the case of bushfires, men are over-represented in death-toll statistics (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013). Tyler and Fairbrother (2013) suggest that one of the reasons for men's higher rates of death may be related to the construction of hegemonic masculinity in rural areas. Pease (2014) also noted the rural context of many disasters and the construction of rural masculinities that reflect patriarchal belief systems, control of local decision-making, gendered division of

domestic labour and the subordination of women in paid employment. Pease (2014) argued that locating men and masculinities in the urban-rural continuum can inform understanding of the effects of disasters on men in rural communities.

In New Zealand, Rushton et al. (2021) explored men's gendered experiences of the Kaiboura/Waiiau earthquake in 2016. Drawing on the concept of 'geographies of emotion' that challenge masculinist rational and objective ways of knowing, the research showed the emotional and embodied effects of disasters on men. Rushton et al. (2021) argued that emotional experiences are neglected in disaster research where disaster scholarship has adopted a masculinist mode of analysis. Similar to research in Australia, men in New Zealand are encouraged to be strong, aggressive, reliable, stoic and calm and to avoid behaviours that could be interpreted as feminine. Consequently, acknowledgment of vulnerability and giving expression to emotions are to be avoided.

Masculinity and men's violence against women in the aftermath of disasters

In Australia, the major contribution to interrogating men's violence against women in the aftermath of disasters comes from Parkinson and Zara (2013) and Parkinson (2015, 2019, 2022b). Before undertaking research, Parkinson and Zara (2013) noted that increased violence against women by men after disasters was largely unexplored in Australia. They published the first Australian report on domestic violence in the aftermath of disasters, following research into women's and men's experiences of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009.

Because men were unable to live up to the societal expectations of masculinity during the bushfires, men's feelings of inadequacy and destabilising of the protector-provider role led to increased anger among men. Anger was a more acceptable emotion for men to express than distress. Even when this anger translated into violence against their female partners, this violence was excused because of what the men had experienced during the fires (Parkinson and Zara 2013).

Most of the women participants talked about either increased levels of violence after the bushfires or acts of violence against them occurring for the first time in the aftermath of the fires (Parkinson 2017). While it is not suggested that the disaster caused the men to act violently, the men's inability to acknowledge their vulnerability and the pressure to cover up their distress due to expectations about masculinity allowed the men to express anger, rage and violence specifically directed towards their partners (Parkinson 2015).

The women experiencing the violence and health professionals were compassionate towards the men because of what they had suffered. There was also concern that public acknowledgment of increased levels of violence might undermine community cohesiveness and the representation of the men as heroic in the face of the bushfires (Parkinson 2017). Prioritising the compassion for the men's suffering led to ignoring and excusing men's violent behaviours against women.

Beyond the binary: masculinity and diverse sexual and gender identities

Rushton et al. (2020) note in New Zealand, that disaster management policies foster a hypermasculine body politics (ways in which the social construction of differences are embodied) that excludes non-heterosexual bodies. Rushton et al. (2020) argued that gender and sexual minorities are further marginalised in disaster research. Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Hughes (2016) investigated LGBT experiences during the Brisbane floods of 2011 by exploring the interaction between masculinities and sexual and gender minority identities. The research documented the discriminatory practices that gay men and lesbians experienced when interacting with cis-gendered Australian military personnel who were assisting with recovery. Masculine, heterosexual and cis-gender privilege among responders led to increased experiences of LGBT people feeling marginalised during the recovery process.

While researchers are encouraged to acknowledge men's gendered experiences of disasters and the gendered nature of emergency management services and policy responses to disasters, increasingly, researchers raise concerns about disaster literature that compares men's and women's experiences in ways that reproduces the sex and gender binary (Rushton et al. 2019; Gaillard et al. 2021; McKinnon 2022).

Rushton et al. (2019) argued that disaster research should extend the definition of gender beyond the binary of men and women. They say that sex can best be understood as a spectrum as opposed to a binary and both gender and sex are fluid and open to interpretation rather than fixed in 2 exclusive categories. They challenge the concept of sex as physical or biological characteristics of bodies and argue that sex, like gender, is socially constructed by biological theories and dominant discourses.

Rushton et al. (2019) analysed 260 published journal articles and found that only 12 articles explored gender and sex beyond the binary of men and women and male and female. They argued for the use of the term 'SOGIESC' (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics) to replace the term 'LGBTIQ+' as it was derived from a Western context. Gaillard et al. (2021) argued that the binary of men and women does not fully

address the gendered dimensions of disasters because it excludes diverse gender and sex minorities. They argued that binary conceptions of gender foster compulsory heterosexuality and marginalise those who do not fit into the gender binary.

In recent years, critical studies of men and masculinity have acknowledged that masculinity as a range of behaviours and practices are not necessarily associated with male embodiment (Pease 2023). It is unclear what it would mean to conceive of masculinity outside of the gender binary and either disconnected from male bodies or only connected to the male body as one point of identification among others. Pease (2023) explored the implications of posthuman subjectivity for men, suggesting that it requires men to dis-identify with dominant frames of gender and anthropocentric privilege. He argued against men developing new forms of masculinity and encouraged men to embrace their embodiment and affective attachment to the world while moving beyond gendered subjectivity.

While this move towards inclusive approaches to gender is important to address the marginalisation of gender and sexual minorities, concern is expressed by some feminists that gender inclusivity may shift the focus away from gender hierarchy and cis-men's privilege and power. Gendered subjectivity has been important for feminist politics. It is understandable that some women will not want to give up the quest for a more positive identity when their negative identity has been a source of discrimination and oppression. Many women will be cautious of moving beyond traditional gender boundaries (Pease 2023). This is part of a wider debate about gender politics that cannot be fully explored here. The gendered experiences of cis-women and cis-men must be addressed in ways that do not homogenise gender and reproduce the hierarchal gender binary while not disadvantaging cis-women and girls.

Masculinism, climate change and disaster prevention

While gender analyses of disaster events have focused on lived experiences of disasters and involvement in emergency services organisations, Pease (2016, 2021a, 2021b, 2024) explored the links between elite men's contribution to global warming and the increased likelihood of disasters. Drawing on feminist environmentalism and critical studies of men and masculinities, Pease (2016) explored the environmental consequences of hegemonic masculinity for both the causes of, and responses to, climate change. He noted the gender differences between men's and women's ecological footprints and the greater resistance that conservative 'white' men have to addressing the causes of increased global heating. Both climate change science and environmental activism are shaped by

dominant forms of masculinity in ways that limit men's responsibility to take effective action to address the causes of environmental disasters.

Pease (2021a) challenged the move by some environmental activist scholars to construct ecological masculinities as an alternative to dominant breadwinner and eco-modern masculinities that fuel the environmental crisis (Hultman and Pulé 2018). He argued that it is masculinism, as the ideology of patriarchy, that has shaped men's exploitative and extractive attitudes and practices towards nature that creates environmental crises. Pease (2021a) reaffirmed materialist ecofeminist analyses to challenge essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity that suggest feminine principles that are more caring towards nature. Instead, he argued that it is important to reject masculinity as an identity for men and to foster an 'ethic of care' in men that breaks the gender division of care between men and women and encourages men to do emotional care work, practice empathy, become vulnerable and develop solidarity with women and to open up to emotional connections to nature and all living beings.

Pease (2021b) argued that a gendered analysis of disasters must challenge the sense of invulnerability, rationality and autonomy embodied within men that encourages arrogance, dominance and control and exploitative and extractive relations with nature. Consequently, to address the causes of environmental disasters, men must develop embodied, affective and entangled subjectivities that enable greater affinity and compassion for humanity and the planet.

Pease (2024) analysed how a masculinist mindset contributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and limited the public policy responses to mitigating its risks. Male-dominated governments and corporations managed the pandemic through anthropocentric responses to the natural environment and uncontrolled consumption patterns. The masculinist mindset was incapable of seeing connections between pandemics, the crisis of global warming, environmental disasters and the destruction of animal habitats. Masculinism was evident in responses to the pandemic that prioritised individual freedom and the economy over community health and wellbeing and care for vulnerable members of communities. Pease (2024) advocated a reimagining of public policy responses to pandemics by underpinning public life, governance and relationships with non-human others by a feminist ethic of care.

Conclusion

This review of a decade of research and literature from Australia and New Zealand showed that masculinism, hegemonic masculinity, male dominance and power permeate emergencies and disasters. These gendered dynamics have consequences for understanding disasters,

for preparing for them and responding to them and to recovering from events that cause upheaval for individuals and communities. More importantly, this review suggests that we need to reimagine our policy responses to the causes of disasters by addressing the masculinist approach to our relationship with the environment and recognising our human entanglement and interdependence with nature.

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