Rurality, gender and disaster: a commentary

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Abstract

Australia has experienced a number of catastrophic disaster events in recent times both as slow-onset, for example the drought between 1996 and 2010, and rapid-onset including the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, the bushfires in several states in 2019–20 and the floods in northern New South Wales in 2022. Overlaid on these events was the global pandemic that caused widespread morbidity and mortality and constrained communities from finding mutual support in organised gatherings. While Australia has experienced major climatic events, the way they are addressed will determine how resilient the country will be in the face of future major events. This paper focuses on the gendered aspects of disaster experiences in rural areas of Australia. It will assist those with the capacity to help affected communities and respond with a clear understanding of the way gender shapes the disaster experience.

Introduction

The term 'gender' refers to the social factors and opportunities that shape us as male or female. In a disaster context, UN Women (2023) defines gender as:

...what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context at any given time. It determines opportunities, responsibilities and resources as well as power associated with being female or male. (UN Women 2023)

Before, during and after disasters there can be differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources as well as decision-making opportunities (UN Women 2023, p.1). While gender-based inequalities are noted in emergency management practice, what tends to be ignored are people who identify as LGBTIQA+ and that gender can be experienced across a continuum of experience. Critical to any nuanced analysis of gender are the intersectional factors that shape and extend gender vulnerability including poverty, indigeneity, ethnicity, age, income, ability, education, marital status, occupation, religion and location (Djoudi et al. 2016), all of which can accentuate the gendered complexities of the disaster experience.

While gender shapes the lives, experiences and patterns of behaviour adopted by women and men, gendered effects can differ across time and geography with, for example, rural and regional areas often identified as overtly male dominated. Campbell, Bell and Finney (2006, p.5) state that 'rural life is typically highly patriarchal'. Pini (2005, p.401) reinforces this, noting that there is often a particularly clear divide between men's and women's roles and activities in rural settings. Kinnval and Rydstrom (2019, p.5) contemplate similar gender inequalities after the 2010 Haitian earthquake and noted that 'a catastrophe does not land in a socioeconomic and political void'. Rather it lands in a social system where inequalities and disadvantage are already firmly established and these inequalities can be cemented if responders accept these inequities and operate within their constraints. Alternatively, response actions can challenge and reshape gender relations providing much-needed relief and activating equitable gender arrangements.

While the way gender is enacted can appear differently in various societies, in the context of disasters, hyper-masculinity can be accentuated and implicit hegemonic

masculinity is often reinforced (Knuttila 2016). In studies undertaken in a diverse range of disasters including the New Orleans flood disaster (Enarson 2012), floods and cyclones in Bangladesh (Rezwana and Payne 2020; Alston 2015), droughts in Australia (Whittenbury 2013) and fires in Australia (Parkinson 2019) and Canada (Drolet 2019), women and girls are shown to be particularly vulnerable in this hyper-masculine context and their vulnerability and the uneven gendered power relations that reinforce these reduce access to resources including information, leadership roles and resources. Women are more likely to be rescuing children and looking out for aged relatives and this makes them particularly vulnerable during rapid-onset events.

In studies conducted in rural Australia including the Millenium drought (Alston and Kent 2004, 2006), bushfires (Alston, Hazeleger and Hargreaves 2014), reduced water in the Murray-Darling Basin (Alston, Clarke and Whittenbury 2018) and following the Lismore floods (Foote, Alston and Betts 2024), a range of factors that impact on women during and after disasters have been exposed. These include:

- increased stress from managing off-farm or out-of-home work and increased on-farm work replacing hired labour
- financial instability that leads to women needing to work off-farm or to increase their work hours
- emotional distress resulting from financial instability
- increase in violence experienced or experiencing violence for the first time
- concern about a husband's mental health at the same time as ignoring own health
- concern for children's health and worry over education particularly when financial circumstances result in boarding schools being financially inaccessible
- a lack of accessible support services
- closure of critical services including birthing services (Dietsch et al. 2008)
- a lack of government financial and other support for women's community efforts before, during and after disasters
- burnout resulting from significantly increased voluntary work following disasters
- a lack of recognition and leadership roles for women in community preparedness and post-disaster initiatives.

Gender is a critical factor that shapes the disaster experience. The vulnerability of women and girls is recognised in research as well as in United Nation's policies and practices. As such, achieving gender equality during disaster responses is recognised as a human right and a critical approach in disaster planning and management (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2023).

Gender equality is also recognised as a major goal (Goal 5) of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Women 2023) because of its importance to health and wellbeing and the building of resilience. It is also included in the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* (UNDRR 2015). In fact, gender equality in the context of climate disasters is recognised as the most significant sustainable development goal (UNDRR 2023a). The *Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework* also recognises the need for a 'gender and child-specific lens' when undertaking disaster evacuation and support (Department of Home Affairs 2018, p.13). Such international and national recognition of gender as a critical response factor, and the overt practice of gender mainstreaming adopted at international and national levels in the context of disasters, is a positive step to gender equality. Ensuring that this becomes more than a tick-a-box response at all levels, from international to local, and through all phases from preparedness to disaster rebuilding remains a work in progress.

Disaster preparedness

Disaster preparedness refers to the process of being ready for whatever disaster might occur. The *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* (UNDRR 2023a) highlights that the overall goals of preparedness actions are to reduce mortality as well as the numbers of people affected. These goals are mirrored and expanded in the *Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework*. Essentially, international and national efforts are designed to ensure communities prepare for disasters by adopting mitigation and adaptation strategies that ultimately build the resilience of both people and landscapes.

Local governments and community organisations now consider having their own disaster preparedness plans as essential. It is critical that aspects of gender are included in these plans in both the preparation for disasters and in composition of preparedness committees. Making sure they include women, men and representatives of the LGBTIQA+ community is comprehensive good practice. These bodies might also map the areas of potential vulnerability to particular events, they must address all potential infrastructure weak points and, if they do not have this already, they might create a vulnerability register. These registers collect information about households that might need additional assistance during a disaster, and this allows responders to check on them if particular. Local governments and community groups might include in their plans the sites where shelters will be opened (e.g. local school or hall) and have detailed plans on how these will be staffed and managed.

Questions to ask when formalising plans for designated shelters to improve gender inclusivity:

- Are there separate designated areas for women and children when required?

- Do people have access to sexual and reproductive health care?
- Do women living in rural and remote areas have access to health care including sexual and reproductive health care and maternity services?
- What plans are in place to ensure women and girls will to be safe?
- Are there separate toilets?
- Are there safe places for members of the LGBTIQA+ community?
- Are there confined areas for risky behaviour such as drinking and drug taking?
- Are there safe needle disposal facilities?
- Are police and emergency workers briefed about the need for 24-hour policing of shelters?
- Are pharmacists ready to provide emergency medication for people who have fled their homes with few possessions?
- How will all of this occur in a hurry?

There are significant gender consequences to adaptive measures. For example, work with families on farms uncovered that one of the central adaptive activities on farms is to source off-farm work, usually done by women (Alston, Clarke and Whittenbury 2018). This often involves a lengthy commute and, for some, the need to live away from the home during the week. This work also confirmed the increasing roles women play in on-farm work as the amount of hired labour is scaled back (Alston, Clarke and Whittenbury 2018). These gendered work role changes, together with significant advances in technology, are helping farming families to adapt to potential disasters. The increase in women's farm workload has been largely unacknowledged in this process but is one of the very evident outcomes of climate adaptation.

For families, having a disaster plan in place to be acted on when an event occurs is also a critical factor in survival. As shown in disasters such as Black Saturday, lives were lost because of the uncertainty around staying to defend property (which was the preferred position by males) and fleeing (the preferred position by females). The stay-or-go dilemma cost lives because families were conflicted about their response position. This often resulted in women and children leaving too late. As became standard practice in Canada following wildfires (Drolet 2019), families in Australia are encouraged to have disaster plans in place and important documents ready and a firm commitment to when they will leave should a disaster occur. Having a central point or a container in the home where documents (birth certificates, passports, health details, prescriptions, insurance documents, photo albums and other valuables) are stored that is ready to be grabbed in an emergency reduces stress at a later date, saves time when fleeing and

reduces problems associated with proof of ownership of homes and insurance details. Family disaster plans should also include a central point where the family can regather if separated. These plans are becoming standard practice in many disaster-prone areas of the world.

Critical to survival, and as demonstrated in many disaster sites, are effective early warning systems. However, poor internet connections across rural Australia can endanger lives if warnings are not received or communication about who may need help is lost. Ensuring that warnings are given early and often is critical to saving lives, particularly for the elderly, women with young children, people living with disability and others who need time to prepare. Observations in rural areas of South Africa and with communities in Vanuatu (Alston, Fuller and Kwarney 2023) and Bangladesh (Alston, Whittenbury and Haynes 2014) show that training women in climate information services and early warning dissemination has a significant and positive outcome for the survival of women and children in these communities. It also means that women are employed at the centre of the preparedness and response.

The disaster

Disasters hit without warning and may be of a scale that has not previously been experienced. This often leads to widespread chaos, loss of life and high levels of mortality and morbidity. In this environment, rapid response is essential. Studies have indicated that a 'battle mentality' takes over (see Enarson 2012). During the Lismore floods of 2022 when the official response was delayed, men and women took to kayaks and boats to rescue other people. Research has shown that the immediate post-disaster time is very much a hyper-masculine time where a 'command-and-control' mentality is enacted (see Duncan et al. 2018) and where men are expected to be authoritative, stoic, brave and, above all, to defend their family and property (Alston 2012). The unruliness of the post-disaster space can make this difficult to achieve.

Tyler and Fairbrother (2013) refer to the 'command-and-control' mentality that takes over in extreme circumstances and note that, somewhat facetiously, that bushfires are 'men's business'. However, deciding whether to stay or go in an emergency can be a source of conflict in families (Tyler and Fairbrother 2013). This is a significant point of difference that shapes the chances of survival for those involved. The consequences of these acts can result in ongoing mental health problems and a steep increase in male suicide and suicide ideation (Alston 2012).

Critical factors that shape the gendered disaster experience in rural areas where traditional gender stereotypes persist include (for women) an increase in caring roles, increase in voluntary and paid work, issues relating to finding shelter during a disaster,

experiences of increased violence, being safe, health consequences, financial instability, greater need for paid work and outmigration. For men, the disaster can result in an increase in workloads and greater likelihood of experiencing mental health issues. These changes are likely to continue well beyond the disaster period. Further, while women are a significant part of first responder teams, they are also very active in supporting the community by setting up shelters, offering social work and welfare services, organising food, responding to the stories of survivors, keeping people safe, organising clothing and other goods and generally providing safe spaces. It is these community tasks that may be overlooked in preparation for, and analyses of, crisis responses. However, these actions provide the safety needed for people to face the trauma they have experienced.

During disasters, for those who do flee, evacuation centres provide feelings of safety and are usually established by community services organisations and local governments. They provide shelter, access to food and clothing, places to sleep and share information. However, studies from across the world and including Australia, show that shelters can be unsafe for women and children and for people who identify as LGBTIQA+. Bradshaw and Fordham (2013) and Enarson (2012) note that unsafe conditions have led to violence and rape in shelters that are not properly policed; a situation that has also occurred in Australia. There are also instances where women who have experienced violence and have protective Court Orders in place find themselves in the same evacuation centre as their perpetrator (Foote, Alston and Betts 2024). A lack of continuous policing and gender-blind administrative procedures can cause women to be unsafe in areas that have been set up to protect them.

LGBTIQA+ people may also view shelters as unsafe and fear going to them. They may feel discriminated against by people in faith-based organisations set up to assist in the recovery phase and feel excluded if registration documents required to enter the shelter do not reflect their circumstances. They may experience mental health issues from the threat of having their private lives exposed and may experience harassment in shelters and uncertain access to relief services and funds (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2018).

When a disaster goes on and on as in the case of drought, there are new dynamics that shape gendered experiences. Farming families may be involved in heartbreaking and physically demanding tasks of feeding animals, destroying frail animals, carting water and coping with the devastation of watching the barren and eroding landscape die. A sense of stoicism demonstrated by men in the face of these events can have damaging effect on their mental health (Alston 2012). As a result, men are more likely to be locked into the farm and become more isolated and depressed

(Zara et al. 2016) while women are more likely to interact with their community, monitor the health of their family, ignore their own health and wellbeing and work off-farm to source the income to survive (Alston 2011, p.65). In these circumstances, relationships suffer and can turn violent. For example, Whittenbury (2013) found that violence escalated in rural communities in Australia affected by drought and peaked when 3-monthly bill cycles were due.

Post disaster

International research from a diverse range of disaster sites reveals that violence against women escalates in the aftermath of disaster. This has been documented following Hurricane Katrina in the United States (Enarson 2012, 2009), the drought (Whittenbury 2013), the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch where numbers of women seeking refuge from violence in the first month after the quake nearly doubled (Lynch 2011) and the Black Saturday bushfires (Parkinson and Zara 2013). In many of these cases, women had not experienced violence in their relationships prior to the event. Similarly, in work with communities 5 years after Black Saturday, respondents reported that many relationships had broken down in the years after the disaster with several citing the issue of men being unable to come to terms with the fact that the fire had 'beaten them' (Alston, Hazeleger and Hargreaves 2018). In the post-disaster phase, international research suggests that women will have increased workloads, greater vulnerability to sexual assault and harassment and be less likely to be included in disaster management activities (Eastin 2018; Pearse 2017). Health consequences for women during and following disasters may include emotional stress and physical and sexual health effects. These are compounded by a lack of services, including birthing services for pregnant women.

There are extensive reports of declining mental health for men after a disaster. As noted by Alston, Hazeleger and Hargreaves (2019), the destabilisation of hyper-masculinity and the inability to protect their families or save homes can manifest as poor mental health and increased social isolation. This is not helped when local men are actively excluded from community clean-up operations as was the case in some communities post-Black Saturday. In these areas, the clean-up was undertaken by contractors brought into the small communities from outside the area. Local men were actively excluded from helping and this had a profound effect on men's health. Zara et al. (2016) note that men may become vulnerable through their loss of control of their circumstances, a reluctance to seek help and an internalisation of their fears for the future. Critically, in post-disaster situations where jobs and businesses may have been destroyed, men may also 'out migrate' or take jobs elsewhere. This disruption can affect a family's wellbeing and stability.

Women also report more physical ailments resulting from their farm work, particularly when women increase their work hours in dairies (Alston, Clarke and Whittenbury 2018). Increased paid and unpaid labour are part of women's post-disaster experience and all add to women's vulnerability. In commenting on post-disaster women's work and the significant expectations on women to undertake extensive community work, Bradshaw (2015, p.554) argues that while attention to women is laudatory, in the context of disasters, this shouldn't mean a transfer to a 'feminisation of responsibility and obligation'. There is extensive evidence of women setting up and managing community services, drop-in centres, food distribution and donations (our current research in Lismore following the 2022 floods demonstrates this very clearly (Foote, Alston and Betts 2024). This work is largely unpaid and often ignored despite the vital significance of the work and often leads to burnout.

Women's post-disaster work also includes active community work. For example, following the 2022 Lismore floods, women established a community hub that continues to operate providing a safe place for people to have coffee, access services and, for some, to have a safe place to spend time (Foote, Alston and Betts 2024). This raises a significant issue relating to ongoing funding. These community-led initiatives may have difficulty accessing funding, space and credibility despite the support of the community. This leads to burnout among volunteers working for their communities. Post-disaster funding should support the initiatives that are often staffed by people who have their own disaster experience. In a post-disaster situation, women and girls may also have less access to post-disaster training, less institutional support, less freedom of association and fewer positions on decision-making bodies (Alston, Whittenbury and Haynes 2014). Their responsibilities for the aged, children and the sick or injured may also increase.

Limitations

This paper may be missing the nuanced assessment of the way intersectional factors further shape experience. For example, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women during disasters remains largely undocumented. So too are the experiences of people from CALD[1] backgrounds, older women and people living with disability. Nonetheless, understanding the gendered complexities of disasters and the intersectional factors that sharpen vulnerability provides insight into the experiences of people and communities. Extending this knowledge through an examination of intersectional factors is essential. Having a comprehensive analysis of these factors means that people in Australia are prepared for the disasters that may lie ahead.

1. CALD: culturally and linguistically diverse.

Conclusion

Gender is recognised by governments, non-government organisations, researchers and community groups as a critical determinant of the disaster experience. The issues affecting women and girls, men and boys are pertinent to the shaping of resilience. In the rural and remote context, there are consequences for women and men during and following disasters. These include health consequences, both mental and physical; an increase in workloads; financial insecurity and a lack of adequate services including IT, health and other support services. Increased violence against women and relationship difficulties have been noted in rural studies across Australia. For women, there are the added burdens of additional care tasks, increased workloads and declining access to essential care such as birthing facilities and sexual and reproductive health services. Meeting the challenges posed by disasters and their aftermath requires effective leadership at the local and national levels. This leadership will be ineffectual without the inclusion of women.

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