Masculinity takes the stage: power, privilege and culture in disaster resilience

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In 2024, the Australian Disaster Resilience Conference hosted a panel discussion on masculinities, culture and disaster resilience. Five men working in the emergency management sector were on the panel facilitated by Dr Emma McNicol. Here are some reflections on the discussions during the session and those that followed.

Understanding the different ways that disasters affect men, women and gender-diverse people is essential for building safety and resilience for future disasters. Yet within disaster discourses, commentary and investigations on men and masculinities has often been limited to describing men's participation in frontline response agencies. As such, the Masculinities, Culture and Disaster Resilience Panel at the 2024 Australian Disaster Resilience Conference asked: 'How does culture influence our understandings of masculinity?' and 'How do varying understandings of masculinities influence our perceptions of, and responses to, disasters?'.

The panellists were John Richardson, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, Dr Bhiamie Williamson, National Indigenous Disaster Resilience, Steve O'Malley, Gender and Disaster Australia, Collin Sivalingum, Australian Red Cross and Antony Ruru, Fire and Emergency New Zealand. The discussion explored new ways of thinking about masculinities and natural hazards and how disasters can be a place of transformative opportunities that address entrenched gendered inequality and rigid conceptions of gender.

When asked, 'how have you learnt to become a man?', the men spoke candidly about their upbringings, role models, careers and parenthood. When asked, 'how have you observed gender to operate in the disaster resilience sector?', the men reflected on changing contexts in the sector and how an environment that was once dominated by white men is today becoming more open and inclusive.

The panel discussion was an effort to expand the conversation around the influence of gender in emergency management and sought to explore how gender is a relevant concern for everyone working in the disaster space. Recent research has demonstrated how both during and immediately after a disaster, women are at increased risk of experiencing domestic and family violence.[1,2]

Research has also found that when gender discrimination is not a priority, recovery efforts may reinscribe inequality.[3] These findings are especially urgent in the context of increasingly severe, simultaneous and cascading disaster events.

Audience reception and interrogating representation

The panel was very well attended and received an abundance of positive feedback. While the panel sought to include a wide range of representatives from different organisations as well as in a range of roles across the sector (including first responders, academics and

Conference attendees heard from panellists Antony Ruru, Fire and Emergency New Zealand, Collin Sivalingum, Australian Red Cross, Steve O'Malley, Gender and Disaster Australia, John Richardson, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience and Dr Bhiamie Williamson, National Indigenous Disaster Resilience.

Image: AIDR

organisational leaders), audience members shared some concerns about the panel's composition. Some wondered if it was appropriate for an all-male panel to examine masculinity in the sector. One attendee commented that all the panel members were cisgender male, heterosexual and married fathers. In my view, these concerns warrant a thoughtful response and provide a meaningful opportunity for reflection, especially if we are united in wanting an inclusive future for the sector.

At its core, feminist and gender theory maintains that masculinity and femininity entail strict codes of conduct.[4] In a paramilitary context, like the emergency management sector, men are discouraged from expressions of vulnerability.[5] Given this context, the panel was, in my view, especially valuable to allow men in leadership roles to show openness, honesty and (what we might call) 'gender-critical thinking'. Gender-critical thinking is where an individual explores their gender, assessing how they came to be the person they are as well as attempting to evaluate the privileges and/or disadvantages ascribed to them by virtue of their gender. Indeed, several audience members said how unusual and special it was to hear men in this context explore the adequacy of their male role models while growing up, including childhood experiences of violence.

It is important to note that, while the panellists were all cisgender heterosexual husbands and fathers, the panel presented Indigenous and non-Indigenous views on the issue side-by-side in open dialogue. The panel discussions pointed to a bright future for the sector where men can openly and critically discuss their gender identity and in which Indigenous voices are not merely included, but foregrounded. However, there is still work to do to make that future a reality. As such, concerns about the composition of the panel should be taken seriously. Cisgender, heterosexual, married men represent traditional conceptions of masculinity and routinely achieve leadership positions in their professions.[6,7,8] They expect to be listened to, they are listened to, and their intimate confessions are likely to be perceived as more poignant.

Without contribution from men who are not partnered with women and who are not fathers, we miss out on hearing their valuable perspectives. If we want to know

what it is like for LGBTQI+ people or those who do not, or cannot, conform to traditional perceptions of masculinity, then a panel like this would need to include a diverse ensemble of men. But there is a deeper conceptual issue at stake here. In my discussion with conference attendees, I sensed that the concerns about the composition of the panel included a wariness that men are unable to fully interrogate masculinity; that, as humans, we struggle to step outside of ourselves and see our privilege with lucidity and humility.

Are we experts on our(selves)?

Most of us are willing to ascribe people authority in assessing when an aspect of identity has diminished their social power or status, most obviously in instances of discrimination. For example, we would not question a woman's assessment of how her gender plays a role in a job interview or question when a person of colour explains how they encountered racism in a medical setting. It gets trickier when we expect people, or people expect to be able to, evaluate privileged aspects of their identity. Perhaps we can all agree on the fact that (cisgender, heterosexual) men can expound on masculinity. Men themselves are in the best position to explore what it is like to be a man and to reflect on their understanding of the gendered expectations and pressures they confront and negotiate. Surely, we can learn a great deal on the experience of men in the sector from talking with men in the sector.

The question remains whether men alone can comprehensively and critically explore their own masculinity. They are unlikely to be experts on how they are perceived as men, specifically how their male identity intersects with broader structures of privilege and power. If we accept men as reliable narrators of 'being men' and the codes and pressures they have felt as men, this does not make them experts in the way that their 'masculinity' is perceived by others (by women and by gender-diverse people) and how their masculinity can afford them power over others. We can all be experts on our own lives, but this does not make us experts on our privilege nor how we are perceived.

The aspects of identity that lend us social power are not only likely to blind us to privilege but there is reputable research in neuroscience that demonstrates that power can diminish our empathetic capacity to see things from the less powerful individual's perspective.[9,10] None of this is to say that events like this panel should not be run in the future or even that all-male panels should not explore masculinity. Conversely, it might do the opposite.

If we want to hear about what it is like to work alongside men in the sector we can best hear it from panels of women and gender-diverse people. If we want to hear about colonial racism in the sector we should assemble a panel of First Nations peoples. But there is something important about a moment in which the (so-called) powerful party stands up and tries to self-examine their privilege.

The willingness of the panel members to authentically discuss their understanding of masculinity and the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives on the issue was a valuable contribution in a sector that has typically closed down men's opportunities to be vulnerable and to reflect on assumed gender roles. We should think about the success of panels like this not just in terms of what the panellists say but in terms of the ongoing dialogue it generates. Men cannot have the final word on masculinity any more than white people can have the final word on race. The discussion that such events generates, where individuals from different cultural backgrounds can interrogate their own blind spots, is where genuine inclusivity is forged.

Endnotes

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