

Gender justice in disaster: Outcomes Statement

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In May 2021, the Gender Justice in Disaster: Inspiring Action conference was delivered in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic. During the pandemic, the conversation about gender and disaster increasingly crossed into the mainstream, demonstrated by the recognition of the COVID-19 ‘shadow pandemic’: a sharp rise globally in violence against women and increasing gender inequality.

Other significant disasters and emergencies continued to unfold during the pandemic. In 2021, the hottest July globally since records began was recorded¹ and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change declared a ‘code red’² for humanity due to climate change. The conference recognised climate change as driving more frequent and severe disasters and emergencies. These compounding and unfolding events set an urgent context for action.

A ‘code red’ for humanity has gendered ramifications, and while existing gender inequalities affect everyone, the differential effects are likely to be more pronounced for women and women who are part of other minority populations.

The conference focused on inspiring action on gender justice to secure rights and safety in a world experiencing compounding emergencies and disasters. The delegates recognised generations of activists, practitioners, leaders, workers and thinkers who worked to secure rights and safety during emergencies and disasters. Delegates recognised existing tools and resources to implement gender justice across all phases of disasters and emergencies and called on the emergency management sector to be familiar with past conference outcomes statements and conference programs.

The conference presented 24 speakers during the main event, 7 speakers in introductory sessions and 341 attendees. It was delivered via a digital platform to maintain COVID-safe practices and, in recognition of the cognitive load caused by working online during the pandemic, adjustments were made to the conference delivery style. Instead of 3 full days of presentations, the conference was

scheduled in blocks of 3 and 4 hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays during May in 2021.

The delegates acknowledged and highlighted the significant effort being undertaken for gender justice at times of disaster. The evidence presented in the conference demonstrated that, in Australia and across the globe, disaster consequences are still deeply gendered.

Gender justice

The conference affirmed that privilege is reinforced during disasters and emergencies and that people who are marginalised, made vulnerable or excluded before an event are the most affected by it. Emergencies and disasters continue to be accompanied by escalating rates of gendered violence and a resurgence or reinforcement of gendered labour, gendered pay disparity, gender inequality in the workplace, gendered health effects and gendered poverty. These consequences fall disproportionately on women and women who are part of other minority groups.

Action for the prevention of and response to gendered aspects of disaster were identified as critical to securing the rights and safety of the community. While speakers presented on examples and evidence of these actions being embedded in the planning, response and recovery phases of emergency management, it was noted that they were often missing.

Conference delegates adopted the term ‘gender justice’ as a conceptual tool for recognising and contesting systems of power that reinforce patriarchy and privilege.

Gender justice was used to describe actions that bring patriarchy back into view. It was used to explore how patriarchy constructs gender as binary and centres and normalises human, particularly men's, privileges to rights and safety in the present at the expense of others including women, children, animals, nature and future generations. Gender justice was used to link patriarchy and colonisation as systems of oppression. It was used to unpick the ways in which patriarchy privileges individualised outcomes over group safety in decision-making at times of disaster and how it deploys violence to secure these rights and safety for a particular group of men, women and others.

Delegates recognised gender justice as multi-dimensional and paid attention to questions of how to better act in solidarity to end the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that cause the disproportionate effects of disasters. Necessary qualities of gender justice included:

- acting in solidarity
- deep listening
- building respectful and non-hierarchical relationships
- self-reflection
- empathy and embodiment
- understanding inter-reliance and inter-dependence when scoping problems and solutions in disaster and emergencies.

Gender justice was also used to describe action taken to challenge, confront and transform systems and structures in order that those systems no longer drive injustice.

Practice and research

The practice and research presented at the conference covered significant, strategic and tactical inspiration for action:

- Research into the escalating rates of gendered violence during emergencies and disasters, for example, Domestic Violence New South Wales research into violence against women in NSW during the COVID-19 pandemic, research on LGBTI experiences of the pandemic in Victoria and research into women's rights during emergencies in Iran and Iceland.
- The translation of research into existing or independent implementation tools to guide practice, for example (among many others), updating the *Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines*³ with information about breastfeeding and the Climate and Health Alliance Strategy on Climate Health and Wellbeing.⁴
- Leadership styles in newly established authorities that challenge gendered stereotypes and idealised forms of masculinity in leadership, for example, leadership at Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the appointment of the Gender Equality Commissioner in Victoria.
- Reviews of gendered discrimination and consequent implementation plans for action in the emergency management sector, for example, in Ambulance Victoria, Victoria Police and the Country Fire Authority.
- Media coverage of emergencies and disasters that include the particular experiences of men, women and others.

- Independent projects that already work in ways the conference delegates recognised as challenging systems that drive gender injustice in disaster, for example, the Australian Red Cross mentors program for disaster survivors, community-led recovery programs in fire-affected communities of East Gippsland and Victor Steffensen's Indigenous land management programs.
- Research on urban disasters, and urban design and disaster. Urban contexts are sites of unfolding emergencies. These emergencies include slow-moving disasters, like the urban heat-island effect, and the urban implications of emergencies like the pandemic. Delegates would like to see more research on gender and disaster in the urban context, and gender disaster and design, particularly informed by indigenous design and architecture.
- Colonisation is a critical context for gender justice in disaster. *Changing the Picture*⁵, presented at the conference, made a critical contribution to ensuring gender justice does more than only protect the rights and safety of those women and men with existing privilege. Delegates recognised the relevance of the principles for action contained in *Changing the Picture* and reconfirmed the call for the implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart⁶ process in Australia to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights and safety.

The conference noted that, notwithstanding this activity, the rights and safety of communities have not been secured during times of disaster. 'The community' includes the many groups identified during the 2018 Diversity and Disaster Conference.

Implementation

Implementation activities for gender equality in emergency management organisations were a focus of the conference. Emergency services agencies presented their organisational responses to findings of external reviews that identified discrimination, sexual harassment, assault and abuse. These included institutional, whole-of-organisation approaches to address harassment and assault in the workplace as well as gender inequality in recruitment, pathways to seniority, promotion to command roles and appointment to executive positions. Recognising that gender equality is a necessary but not sufficient action to secure gender justice, questions remain for emergency services agencies about what action is still needed to achieve culture change.

Delegates called for urgent action on safe workplaces in emergency services agencies. Urgent consideration should be given to implementing existing evidence-based tools and resources for securing the safety of all staff experiencing gendered violence and/or discrimination at work.

Accountability strategies to address gender injustice include legislative regimes. While the United Nations *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030*⁷ and the *Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women*⁸ provide guidance at the international level, domestic legislative regimes provide clarity. The conference noted the introduction of new accountability mechanisms since 2018. One example is Victoria's

*Gender Equality Act 2020*⁹, which includes the appointment of a Gender Equality Commissioner. The commission has enforcement and compliance capabilities that apply to publicly funded employers in Victoria. These accountability mechanisms sit alongside existing self-imposed quotas and existing discrimination legislation. Delegates welcomed further consideration of accountability mechanisms as effective means for change.

While these accountability mechanisms are welcome, delegates identified a lack of effective action as a major problem. Despite significant efforts over the past decade to address gender inequity in emergency management agencies, and the gendered effects of disasters, the conference findings underlined that gender disparities continue.

The conference called for direct, concentrated effort for systems change to achieve gender justice in disaster contexts. Incremental, individualised behaviour change and technical approaches to equalising the rights and safety of the community with those of men, have not yet achieved the change needed. Rather, delegates called for:

- engagement at every level of institutions involved in emergency management and recognition of existing best practice where it exists
- consideration of the privileges and bias that are evidenced in current emergency management practice
- integration of existing evidence and practice to address discrimination
- commitment to action for structural change, change that shifts people, practice and institutions.

The intergenerational consequences of the lack of action for transformative change include the resilience and continuation of systems that drive injustice.

A biannual conference was proposed that would track progress towards gender justice.

Conclusion

This Outcomes Statement summarised the call for action on gender justice in disaster. It should be read in the context of a decade of gender and disaster conferences in Australia and the documented outcomes from those conferences. The 2021 conference came at a time of global pandemic that focused attention on evidence that existing approaches have not led to safety.

The focus on gender justice clarified the ways in which systems and structures drive injustice: those systems and structures remain largely unchanged if gender equality work is decoupled from work that engages with patriarchal power. Many conference delegates placed patriarchy, as a system that privileges particular types of men, squarely back into the frame.

Many delegates also recognised other oppressive systems and structures like colonisation and racism, and that these systems are sometimes the primary form of oppression experienced by an individual or group during disaster.

Some may argue that now is not a time for an Outcomes Statement focused on conceptual tools and that what is needed are practical implementation plans. Those implementation plans exist, and the *Diversity in Disaster Outcomes Statement*, the *Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines*, the Climate and Health Alliance health accord and many other useful resources are available from the Gender and Disaster Australia website.¹⁰

This Outcomes Statement reflects the core problems identified during the conference: the resilience of people with power and their ability to resist, co-opt or derail change. During and in response to disaster, those with power are able to mobilise existing systems to minimise change and reinforce the structural inequalities on which their privilege depends. The 2021 conference identified that what is needed is not a set of possible technical solutions, but the conceptual tools to accurately link technical change to systemic change in order that the action inspired is effective.

Endnotes

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