

# **Men, Masculinities and Disaster: A Literature Review Australia and New Zealand 2013-2023**

## **Introduction**

This paper reviews the literature on men, masculinities and disaster in Australia and New Zealand from 2013 until 2023. It first explores the masculinist nature of emergency services and emergency services management; second, the influences of masculinity in preparation for disasters, third, the impact of disasters on men and the role of masculinity in men's post-disaster recovery; fourth, masculinity and men's violence against women in the aftermath of disasters; fifth, the challenge to binary assumptions about gender and the implications for masculinity and diverse sexual and gender identities; finally, 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 following an era where gendered inequalities in disasters were ignored (see Enarson and Pease, 2016, for an analysis of this early literature on gendering disasters). This review is focused on contemporary analyses confined to Australian and New Zealand authors and disaster locations.

Furthermore, while it is noted in this review that marginalised men are more significantly impacted in disasters, and that it is important not to frame men as a homogeneous group, this review has not addressed the issues faced by Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) or the experiences of people marginalised by age or disability. There were no published accounts of the experiences of these groups within the review period in Australia or New Zealand.

## **Emergency Services Management: An Unequal Gender Regime**

A number of writers have commented upon 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) noted that rural firefighting and emergency management in Australia were not only structurally dominated by men, they were also culturally embedded with dominant constructions of masculinity. Pease (2014) characterises emergency services as an 'unequal gender regime', drawing upon Raewyn Connell's concept of gender regimes to describe patterns of gendered inequality in specific institutions such as workplaces, government and other apparatuses of the state.

Ainsworth et al. (2014) explore 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 push-back from men through heightened displays of masculinity and aggressive, hostile, sexualised and threatening behaviours.

Eriksen and Waitt (2016) interrogate the ways in which firefighting in Australia is framed as a gendered narrative which 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 et al. (2019) identify the major barriers to women's leadership in emergency services 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 interviewed did not see themselves as problematical or powerful or actively keeping women out in spite of the evidence to the contrary. The authors recommend 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' (p. 88). Further, they suggest strategies have to overcome the 'boys' club' culture of sexism and discrimination in the services.

Tyler et al. (2019) examine gender relations in the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Australia and conclude from their research that fire services are 'extremely gendered organisations'. Extremely gendered organisations such as the military utilise structure, ideology and practices of the organisation to gender all aspects of organisational functioning to construct themselves as a 'male organisation'. The authors argue that emergency services such as the CFA are 'military-like' and thus mirror the masculinist dimensions of military organisations. This explains why, the authors argue, bringing more women into the CFA in itself is likely to fail to shift the cultural and structural dimensions of patriarchal control.

It is evident from the literature in this section of the review that there are divided opinions on what progress is likely to be achieved by increasing the numbers of women in emergency service organisations that are male dominated and culturally masculinised. As women in these organisations know all too well, affirmative action and diversity and inclusion strategies encounter considerable resistance and pushback from men who feel threatened by the inclusion of women in firefighting.

## **Masculinity and Disaster Preparation**

There is an increasing 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 bush fires, 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 gender 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 more 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 to them feeling they had failed not only as protectors but also as men (Parkinson & Zara, 2016; Rushton et al. 2020).

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

Parkinson and Duncan (2013) have taken a deep dive into the ways in which gendered norms impacted on men's and women's decision making during the Black Saturday

bushfires. They noted that more women than men left early following the arrival of the fires and that few heterosexual couples had an agreed upon formal fire plan. Consequently, disputes arose during the immediate crisis of responding to the arriving fire. The connection between masculinity and staying and femininity and leaving were on full display as couples negotiated their course of action. The consequences of not having a fire plan can also reverberate between couples during and after the recovery as the process brings into question ideas about masculine protection.

Although current Government policy recommends the preparation of written fire plans, there is no evidence since Parkinson and Duncan's 2013 article that significant numbers of heterosexual couples have prepared fire plans. Where there are no fire plans, it is likely that masculinity gendered norms in relation to courage, risk and protection are likely to prevail and this is likely to lead to increased fatalities in fires.

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

### **Impact of Disasters on Men: Masculinity and Post-Disaster Recovery**

As previously noted, most of the gendered terrain of post-disaster research has 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 impacted as men by disasters (Tyler and Fairbrother, 2013; Pease, 2014; Rushton, Phibbs, Kenney and Anderson, 2020; Parkinson, 2022a; Parkinson et al. 2022). However, at the beginning of this ten 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 upon the experiences of male combat veterans, he outlined how men's experience of loss of control in combat can be seen as a failure of masculinity. He demonstrated how masculinity influenced veterans' experience of, and recovery from, trauma. Pease 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 emerging from their interviews with men was to do with their experiences of 'losing control' both during and in the aftermath of the fires. The men who embodied hegemonic masculinity were expected, and expected themselves, to be decisive, unemotional, stoic and courageous in the face of the onslaught 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 to suicide ideation. The men were rewarded for showing a veneer of strength. The interviews revealed the men's experiences of high levels of alcohol abuse, drug use, depression, suicidality and an inability to acknowledge their suffering and to reach out for support. As Parkinson's (2022a) title captured in a later paper on the research, 'I thought you were more of a man than that', many of the men felt that they had failed to live up to the test of their manhood.

While most post-disaster research documents the differential impact 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 during bushfires may be related to the construction of hegemonic masculinity in rural areas. Pease (2014) also notes the rural context of many disasters and the construction of rural masculinities which reflect patriarchal belief systems, control of local decision-making, gendered division of domestic labour and the subordination of women in paid employment. He argues locating men and masculinities in the urban-rural continuum can usefully inform understanding of the impact of disaster on rural men.

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

### **Masculinity and Men's Violence Against Women in the Aftermath of Disasters**

In the Australian context, the major contribution to interrogating men's violence against women in the aftermath of disasters comes out of the research conducted by Parkinson (Parkinson and Zara, 2013; Parkinson, 2015; Parkinson 2019; Parkinson, 2022b). Before undertaking the 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 fires, men's feelings of inadequacy and destabilising of the protector and provider roles lead 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 interviewed talked about either increased levels of violence after the fires or acts of violence against them emerging 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 dominant expectations about masculinity allowed the men to express anger, rage and violence specifically directed towards their partners. (Parkinson, 2015).

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

### **Beyond the Binary: Masculinity and Diverse Sexual and Gender Identities**

Rushton et al. (2020) note in the New Zealand context, that disaster policies foster a hypermasculine body politics that excludes non-heterosexual bodies. They argue that gender and sexual minorities are further marginalised in disaster research. Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Hughes (2016) investigated LGBT experiences in the 2011 Brisbane floods, by exploring the interaction between masculinities and sexual and gender

minority identities. They document the discriminatory practices that gay men and lesbians experienced when interacting with cis-gendered Armed Services personnel who were assisting with recovery. Masculine, heterosexual and cis-gender privilege among responders led to increased experiences of marginalisation by LGBT people during the recovery process.

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

Rushton et al. (2019) argue that disaster research should extend the definition of gender beyond the binary of men and women. They argue 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 two 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.

The authors' (Rushton et al. 2019) analysed 260 journal articles and found that only 12 articles explored gender and sex beyond the binary of men and women and male and female. They argue for the use of SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics) to replace the terms LGBTIQ+, as these are derived from a colonial and Western context. Gaillard et al. (2021) similarly argue that the binary of men and women is unable to fully address the gendered dimensions of disasters because it excludes diverse gender and sex minorities. The authors argue 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 currently unclear what it would mean to conceive of masculinity outside of the gender binary and either disconnected to male bodies or only connected to the male body as one point of identification among others. Pease (2023) explores the implications of posthuman subjectivity for men, suggesting that it requires men to dis-identify with dominant frames of gender and anthropocentric privilege. He argues against men developing new forms of masculinity and encourages men to embrace their embodiment and affective attachment to the world, while moving beyond their gendered subjectivity.

While this move towards more inclusive approaches to gender within the gender and disaster field is important in addressing the marginalisation of gender and sexual minorities, there is concern 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 thus 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 need to be addressed in ways that on the one hand do not homogenise gender and reproduce the hierarchal gender binary, while on the other hand do not disadvantage women and girls.

## **Masculinism, Climate Change and Disaster Prevention**

While gender analyses of disasters have primarily focused upon lived experiences of disasters and involvement in emergency services organisations, a small body of literature by Pease

(2016; 2021a; 2021b; 2024) has explored the links between elite men's contribution to global warming and the increased likelihood of disasters. Drawing upon feminist environmentalism and critical studies of men and masculinities, Pease (2016) explores the environmental consequences of hegemonic masculinity for both the causes of, and responses, to climate change. He notes 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 also shaped by dominant forms of masculinity in ways that limit men's responsibility to take effective action to address the causes of environmental disasters.

In a later work, Pease (2021a) challenges the move by some environmental activist scholars to construct ecological masculinities as an alternative to dominant breadwinner and eco-modern masculinities which fuel the current environmental crisis (Hultman and Pule 2018). Pease argues that it is masculinism, as in the ideology of patriarchy, that has shaped men's exploitative and extractive attitudes and practices towards nature which create environmental crises. He reaffirms materialist ecofeminist analyses to challenge essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity which posit eternal feminine and masculine essences which are more caring towards nature. Instead, he argues 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 more emotional care work, practice empathy, become more vulnerable and develop solidarity with women, to open themselves up to emotional connections to nature and all living beings.

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

In a recently published chapter, Pease (2024) analyses how a masculinist mindset contributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and limited the public policy responses to mitigating it. Male dominated governments and corporations facilitated the pandemic through anthropocentric responses to the natural environment and uncontrolled consumption patterns. The masculinist mindset further was incapable of seeing connections between pandemics, the crisis of global warming, environmental disasters and the destruction of animal habitats. Masculinism was also evident in developing responses to the pandemic through prioritising of individual freedom and the economy over community health and wellbeing and care for the most vulnerable. Pease (2024) advocates a reimagining of government and public policy responses to pandemics by underpinning public life, governance and our relationship with non-human others by a feminist ethic of care.

It is clear from this review that masculinism, hegemonic masculinity, male dominance and power permeate the whole field of disasters and these gendered dynamics have consequences for understanding disasters, disaster preparation and responses to them, and disaster impact and recovery as well as disaster prevention.

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