

Gender and Disaster: Scoping Review

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October 2023

Introduction

As the frequency and severity of disasters continue to increase in Australia and worldwide as a result of climate change, it has never been more pressing for research to focus on how we can prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster. Since the 1990s gender has emerged as a major consideration in the field of disaster research, stemming from a recognition that women and men have different experiences and needs at all stages of disaster (Enarson, Fothergill & Peek, 2018; Enarson & Morrow, 1998). It is well established that gender neutral policy is implicitly biased towards the experience of white heterosexual men (Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Fairbrother & Tyler, 2019; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013a). While challenges in conducting research on gender and disaster remain, studies show that disasters exacerbate existing inequalities and reveal gaps in policy and planning in all stages of emergency situations that further marginalise the most vulnerable members of our community (O'Malley, Parkinson, Leonard, Kaur, & Mackay, 2022; Parkinson et al., 2018; Sohrabzadeh & Parkinson, 2022).

Women and gender and sexual minorities face many challenges in all stages of disaster, beginning with exclusion from participating in community disaster preparedness, to increased gender based violence, discrimination and harassment during response and recovery (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, & McKinnon, 2014, 2018; Leonard, Parkinson, Duncan, Archer, & Weiss, 2022; Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard, & Archer, 2022;). This paper will briefly outline the key issues for women, men and people of diverse gender and sexual identities in relation to disaster drawing on gender and disaster research published across the previous decade. The paper explores tensions between differing theoretical understandings of gender as well as the centrality of the male/female dichotomy in analysis, arguing that regardless of individual experience it is important to continue to understand the complexities of the dominant construction of gender as dichotomous. The paper concludes by suggesting it is essential to strike a balance between the individual and structural dimensions of gender and sexuality in disaster.

Women and disaster

The scholarly field of gender and disaster was established because of the apparent vulnerabilities women face in disaster. Research confirms that globally women are more likely than men to be injured and lose their life as a result of disaster (Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Tyler and Fairbrother 2013b). Women are more susceptible to the consequences of disasters in a number of different ways and at all stages of disaster from exposure to risk, response and recovery (Parkinson et al., 2018; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013a). For example, even before a disaster takes place, women are largely excluded from preparedness planning and response agencies (Parkinson, Duncan & Archer, 2019). Following disaster, women and their children experience new or increased domestic violence (Enarson, Fothergill & Peek, 2018; Parkinson 2019; Parkinson, Lancaster, & Stewart, 2011; Parkinson, & Zara, 2013; Sety, James, & Breckenridge, 2014). As well as an increase in demands for women's unpaid - and

often undervalued - work and caregiving responsibilities (Rushton, Phibbs, Kenney, & Anderson, 2020). In the recovery from disaster, an increase in informal caring roles coupled with less jobs being available for women, means that women's return to employment is more inhibited than men's (Spencer et al., 2018). Overall women are more negatively impacted in disasters than their male counterparts because disasters occur within existing societal power relations that disadvantage women and privilege men (Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Fairbrother & Tyler 2019; Parkinson, Duncan, Kaur, Archer, & Spencer, 2022; Pease 2014).

Crucially, gender and disaster research identifies that women experience disadvantages because of their "social and economic positions in society", rather than being explained by an essential biological or inherent difference between men and women (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b, p. 21). Socio-political factors including gender inequality contribute major limitations to women's access to resources, knowledge, networks, public life and decision making power (Fairbrother & Tyler, 2019; Rushton et al., 2020). Disaster foregrounds the often lethal results of these social conditions. For example, the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami disproportionately affected women who made up to 80 percent of deaths in parts of India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka (Rushton et al., 2020; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b). While there were attempts at naturalising the deaths of women, feminist scholars have pointed out the social dimensions (Rushton et al., 2020; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b). For example, gendered expectations about female clothing that are often restrictive, as well as having less opportunity than men to be taught how to swim, result from social conditions that hindered women's chances of surviving flooding caused by the tsunami (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b). What this body of research highlights is that for women disaster exacerbates many of the issues they already face from their unequal position in society (Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Fairbrother & Tyler 2019; Pease, 2014). Gender is clearly a major consideration, however, it is acknowledged that future research could explicitly focus on other intersectional issues (Enarson, Fothergill and Peek 2018).

Men and disaster

Much gender and disaster research has justifiably focused on women due to the many and various vulnerabilities they face compared to men. However, gendered societal norms and expectations that impact all aspects of women's experience of disaster also impact men, albeit in different ways (Eriksen, Gill, & Head, 2010; Parkinson, & Zara, 2016; Pease, 2014; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b). This is because gender is relational, where women are expected to conform to constructions of femininity, and men to uphold standards of masculinity (Connell, 2022; Pease, 2014; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b). Gendered expectations that play out in the context of disaster typically ascribe "men to protect and provide and women to sacrifice and nurture" (Parkinson 2020, p. 12). While gender has negative impacts for both men and women in disaster, it is important to note that gendered impacts are not experienced equally. As gender is a hierarchical power relation, men have dominance over women. This means that - as in society more broadly - men's experiences and perspectives are privileged in disaster management and response where an "over-representation of men in senior decision-making roles results in economic, social and organisational interventions that retain existing structures and reinforce existing gender inequalities" (O'Malley et al., 2022, p 45). However, as gender and disaster scholars have uncovered, there are important

complexities in gendered power relations that means men are not only privileged above women, but rather, there are certain types of masculinity that are valued over others.

A useful concept deployed in the field of gender and disaster research on men is “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2000; Fairbrother & Tyler, 2019; Parkinson, 2022a, 2022b; Pease, 2014). The concept has been used to identify a diversity of masculinities that are “marked by hierarchy and exclusion” (Pease 2014, p. 64). In situations of disaster the hyper-masculine ideal is valorised, which means that the “manliness of men and boys is judged by their ability” to meet the expectation that men are “heterosexual, aggressive, authoritative and courageous” (Pease 2014, p. 64). In Australia, for example, men are less likely than women to hear danger warnings, perceive risk and feel concerned about potentially life threatening situations (Parkinson, Duncan, Kaur et al., 2022). In relation to bushfires in Australia, men are more likely to “stay and defend” their property, as a result - and an exception - men are more likely to die in bushfires (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013a). Further, men are less likely to seek crisis support due to societal constructions about men and masculinity (Parkinson, Duncan, & Archer, 2019; Parkinson 2022a, 2022b; Pease, 2012). This can have devastating effects, contributing to depression and suicide for some men (Zara et al. 2016). Critical research on men and disasters has contributed much to the field. Importantly, this area of research highlights the need for a gender sensitive approach that goes beyond understanding how men and women are differently vulnerable to examining how gender as a social construct impacts people at all stages of disaster.

Gender and sexual minorities and disaster

More recently, research within the subfield of gender and disaster has turned to other aspects of gender and sexual marginality to explore how members of the LGBT community are differently affected by disaster (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, & McKinnon, 2014, 2016, 2018; Gaillard, Gorman-Murray, & Fordham, 2017; Enarson, Fothergill & Peek, 2018; Haworth, McKinnon, & Eriksen, 2022; King, 2022, Leonard et al., 2022; Rushton & Scarlett, 2023). Although still emerging, “this area of research is receiving increasing attention and is rapidly expanding” (Dominey-Howes, McKinnon, Gorman-Murray, & Eriksen, 2022, p. 261). The extant scholarship has made important contributions to understanding the particular vulnerabilities and resilience of LGBT people (Baumann, Sharan, & Gaillard, 2022; Spencer et al., 2018). It is acknowledged that there are significant differences and varying “levels of marginality and privilege” within and between LGBT populations (Haworth et al., 2022, p. 10). However, research has found that existing discrimination against this population is exacerbated in times of disaster (Baumann et al., 2022; Dominey-Howes et al. 2014, 2016, 2018; Dominey-Howes et al., 2022; Gorman-Murray, McKinnon, & Dominey-Howes, 2016; King, 2022; Leonard et al., 2022; O’Malley et al., 2022).

Established heteronormative and patriarchal societal assumptions and standards are recognised as major factors influencing LGBT people’s experiences of disaster and access to services (Dominey-Howes et al., 2022; Gaillard et al., 2017; Gaillard, Sanz, et al., 2017; Gorman-Murray et al., 2016; Leonard et al., 2022; O’Malley et al., 2022; Rumbach & Knight, 2014). For example, vulnerability may be increased at emergency relief shelters where there is a lack of private or ‘safe space’, the family unit is on display, and there is fear of disclosing gender or sexual identity (Dominey-Howes et al., 2022; Gaillard et al., 2017; Gaillard, Sanz, et al., 2017; Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard et al., 2022). This is especially heightened in rural

contexts where conservative social norms may be prevalent (Pease 2014), or when faith-based organisations are involved in service delivery (Gaillard et al., 2017; Gaillard, Sanz, et al., 2017; King, 2022; Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard et al., 2022). Indeed, LGBT people are blamed in public discourse globally for causing disaster events because they have “sinned” therefore inducing “god’s wrath” (Rushton & Scarlett, 2023). Further, there is an absence of LGBT experiences of disaster reported by the Australian media (McKinnon, Gorman-Murray, & Dominey-Howes, 2017) and exclusion of gender and sexual minorities from emergency management response and recovery plans (Dominey-Howes et al., 2016; Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard et al., 2022) as well as a lack of understanding of LGBT people’s specific needs among emergency services personnel (Leonard et al., 2022; Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard et al., 2022). These factors contribute to further marginalisation, discrimination, harassment, violence, abuse and social isolation during and after emergencies (Dominey-Howes et al., 2022; Gaillard et al., 2017; Gaillard, Sanz, et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2022; O’Malley et al., 2022; Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard et al., 2022).

As noted above, the LGBT population is not a homogenous group and different identities experience different types of marginalisation in different contexts (Haworth et al., 2022). For example, lesbian and bisexual women experience two types of “mutually reinforcing” discrimination occurring at the intersection of sexuality as well as sexism and misogyny (Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard et al., 2022, p. 77). A rare study on lesbians and bisexual women’s experiences of disaster in Australia showed lesbians and bisexual women faced sexist and homophobic discrimination and abuse “both as recipients of services and as paid or volunteer staff” (Parkinson, Duncan, Leonard et al., 2022, p. 78). For trans and gender diverse people, the registration process at emergency relief centres has been acknowledged as a point of potential exclusion because gender and sexual minorities may not fit the male or female tick box (Gaillard, Sanz, et al., 2017; Dominey-Howes et al., 2022). Additionally, toilets and amenities that are sex segregated may not be suitable for trans and gender diverse people (Dominey-Howes et al., 2022; Nicholson, 2022). This area of research highlights important considerations at both the policy and practical level.

Emerging tension

An increasing focus on gender and sexual minorities in the subfield of gender and disaster research reveals differing theoretical understandings of gender as a concept, resulting in tensions between interpretations of problems and solutions. The main tension rests on understandings of gender and the centrality of the male/female dichotomy in analysis. Gender and disaster scholars drawing on sociological or feminist perspectives understand gender as “above all, relational. It is a social structure and a major pattern in human social life” (Connell, 2022, p. 6). These scholars articulate a structural conception of gender where “gender is understood as a form of social structure within which *persons of all genders* are embedded” (Enarson and Pease 2016, p. 6, emphasis added). This means that gender is not “simply a biological dichotomy between male and female; or [...] an individual and very personal identity” but rather, a broader social pattern (Connell, 2022, p. 6). Crucially, scholars from this perspective take the dominant construction of dichotomous gender as central to analysis, even though that is not how gender is experienced by each individual (Enarson & Pease, 2016; Fairbrother & Tyler, 2019; Pease, 2014; Parkinson, 2022a, 2022b; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013a, 2013b).

In contrast, gender and disaster scholars drawing on queer theory have argued that “the male/female dichotomy is an insufficient construct with which to address the gendered dimensions of disaster” (Haworth et al., 2022, p. 2). The very existence of gender and sexual minorities has prompted scholars to assert that the “traditional concept of gender is limiting” (Larkin, 2019, p. 61). Scholars drawing on queer theory have argued further that binary gendered conceptions and language erases and “excludes the lived experiences of gender and sexual minorities” (Haworth et al., 2022, p. 2). It follows that dichotomous gender constructions, not only in policy and practice, but also in conceptual analysis then cause “further marginalisation of groups that are already marginalised” (Dominey-Howes et al., 2022, p. 260). The proposed solution is to “move ‘beyond the binary’ and [...] disrupt automatic assumptions that [sex and gender] are omnirelevant categories” (Rushton, Gray, Canty, & Blanchard, 2019, p. 10). In this way, queer interpretations of gender challenge sociological and feminist understandings of gender as a powerful social construct imposed on individuals that informs all aspects of life.

Queer theory provides important contributions to the field by emphasising the diverse experiences and needs of gender and sexual minorities. However, the tendency to focus on the individual risks overshadowing the structural dimensions of gender and sexuality, potentially limiting the ability to address broader systemic inequalities and power dynamics in the context of disasters. As Enarson and Pease point out, gender is too often simplistically understood as “an identity or an attribute of individuals rather than a set of practices involved in the reproduction of institutions and an attribute of social structures” (2016, p. 5). Going “beyond the binary” and abandoning gender as a dichotomous social structure and central point of analysis underestimates the role of “powerful gender hierarchies and subjective gender norms” in disaster (Enarson & Pease, 2016, p. 11). Certainly, the prevailing gender dichotomy plays a defining role in categorising those outside of the binary system as a minority. Even individuals who do not conform to binary gender are nonetheless defined in relation to the established gender dichotomy. To begin to unpick the various consequences of the gender dichotomy - including the experiences of gender and sexual minorities - it must continue to be the centre of analysis. This is especially important in disaster management where the gender dichotomy is particularly pronounced, emphasising the practical challenges of transcending the binary framework.

Conclusion

Gender and disaster research has evolved from its initial focus on women's vulnerabilities in disaster response and recovery. Research has consistently shown that women globally experience disproportionate susceptibility to the impacts of disasters, from exposure to risk, preparedness and response, to recovery. These vulnerabilities are rooted in societal power relations that disadvantage women and privilege men. Importantly, this field of research has highlighted that women's disadvantages are linked to their social and economic positions in society, rather than being explained by innate biological differences between men and women. While the field has predominantly concentrated on women, gender and disaster research acknowledges that gendered societal norms also affect men in various ways. Specific forms of masculinity are valorised during disasters, imposing unrealistic standards on men, which has resulted in devastating consequences. This hierarchical power relation means that men's experiences and perspectives are privileged in disaster management, perpetuating existing gender inequalities.

Recent research has expanded the field to include the experiences of gender and sexual minorities in disasters. This emerging area of study reveals the unique vulnerabilities and resilience of LGBT individuals. Discrimination, harassment, violence, and social isolation are prevalent during and after disasters, with existing societal norms and standards exacerbating these challenges. There is also a notable absence of LGBT experiences in disaster reporting and exclusion from emergency management response and recovery plans. While a growing body of research focuses on diverse gender and sexual identities, it is important to continue to understand and recognise the contours of the dominant construction of gender as dichotomous, and that femininity is constructed to fit masculinity, even if this does not reflect everyone's personal experience. The tension between sociological or feminist and queer perspectives underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that considers the individual and the structural dimensions of gender and sexuality in the context of disasters. By recognising and addressing these complexities, gender and disaster research can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable disaster management and response framework.

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