Women and LGBTQIA+ disaster leadership in high income countries - a literature review

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Introduction

Disasters are essentially a social phenomenon (Tierney 2018). Gender and sexuality, along with other social identities/determinants, underpin the experience of disaster, and individual experiences are embedded in wider processes of social marginalisation and/or transformation (Dominey-Howes et al 2025; Rolf et al. 2020). Recent research (McNaught et al 2025) has observed that while the negative impacts of disasters on individuals, communities and ecosystems are well described - in particular women's vulnerabilities in disasters (e.g. Kreutzer 2018; Parkinson 2019) - there is far less emphasis on disaster leadership and agency of women and gender and sexually diverse people. Enarson & Meyreles (2004) point out that this research gap exists especially in high income country contexts. For over 20 years there have been calls for capturing the diverse household, community and professional roles that women play in disasters which are so often invisible (Enarson, 2001). This long standing and vexing neglect in the literature makes the recognition and support of women's agency and leadership more difficult and must be addressed as climate-related disasters intensify.

This paper reviews the academic and grey literature from 2015 to 2025 on leadership and disaster in high income countries[1], identifying key leadership activities before, during and after disaster, leadership challenges and gaps in research. This review has gone 'beyond the binary' (Rushton et al. 2019) to explore the experiences of women and gender and sexually diverse people. We use Enarson's typology of disaster work (Enarson 2001) to organise our findings from this review of the literature: leadership in the household, community and organisational spheres.

Household leadership sphere:

[1] We include material presenting data from 24 countries, all of which are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2025) and rank within the top 30 countries ranked by the Human Development Index (HDI 2023): Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Australia, Denmark, Sweden, Ireland, Germany, Netherlands, Finland, Belgium, New Zealand, Canada, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Japan, Korea (Republic of), United States of America, Israel, Slovenia, Austria, Spain, France, and Italy. Our detailed approach to this review is available at: https://osf.io/4ds9v/files/k8z9w

Many women undertake the work of maintaining and rebuilding their families during and following disaster (Tully 2015) and some open their homes to others who have lost theirs (Foote et al. 2024). Even women no longer physically present in a household following their own migration from a disaster-affected region can retain the responsibility to encourage very place-attached family members to relocate permanently, or to act to support their families remaining in those places. This may include attempting to convince their families to evacuate such as during Hurricane Ida in the US (Folse 2024). Women navigate these challenges with family from a physical distance which exacerbates logistical challenges. Folse (2024) perceives these responsibilities as part of the 'disaster carescape' (merging micro relations with macro contexts) and a feature of having their 'heart in two places'.

When in household leadership settings, women's contributions to recovery can be highly strategic, for example, business innovation and diversification of income streams of First Nations women (Casey et al. 2022). However, women's work has been shown to be limited by broader structural failure in disasters. Household level observations show how caregivers were impacted by the extended closure of schools and childcare providers in disasters (Foote et al. 2024). Women's decisions to stop working or stop their home-based businesses can occur in favour of prioritising household leadership (Tully 2015). This demonstrates how some women focus on family over work and income-generating leadership (Tully 2015). Whilst this may facilitate involvement in other activities to support their household (and community) it may also have implications for women's economic, social, cultural and support situations (Foote et al. 2024). In addition, as disaster-response work is often executed "without fanfare" it can reinforce traditional stereotypes of women providing unpaid support and care work, the costs and impact of which goes unrecognised (Tully 2015, p4).

We identified one paper which included observations on women's leadership at the household level in the context of the Australian 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires and their attempts to protect their children (including those still in utero) (Allen et al. 2022). These proactive efforts included strategies around preventing smoke inhalation by sealing their homes as much as possible, mask-wearing, pre-planning time outside based on triangulating data from various air pollution/air quality apps and using indoor air purifiers (which had become prized commodities and required much ingenuity to source). These efforts illustrated how women felt 'completely responsible' for their unborn child's air. For example:

"Sarah experienced gestational diabetes and used swimming at a local open-air pool to manage it. She described the constant fear that doing what was good for diabetes – physical exertion – meant breathing more heavily and inhaling more smoke particles which might be detrimental to her baby" p287-288.

Allen et al.'s (2022) study of bushfire smoke exposure explores the efforts women made, and women's sense of responsibility, inadequacy and guilt in the context of the impossibility of avoiding the all-pervasive smoke and the inadequate evidence of the impacts of smoke inhalation through a 'new materialist' feminist framing. They stress that "…humans can act, but this agency is not theirs alone" (p282) and that the responsibility for the air their children breathed never was and never would be primarily a mothers' responsibility.

Reviewing literature pertaining to the household level reveals a sense of women's obligation to protecting and caring for households during and following disaster. Despite the important role this plays, this burden raises questions of environmental justice considerations regarding who takes ultimate responsibility for increases in household disaster risk linked with climate change. Experiences of gender and sexually diverse people's leadership at the household level was non-existent in the literature and is a significant and concerning gap which needs to be addressed.

Community leadership sphere:

A core feature of women's leadership in communities impacted by disasters was women's access to social capital and their skill in drawing on social networks to deliver material needs to affected community members (Du Plessis et al. 2015; Meguro & Osaki 2015; Tully 2015). Women's extensive social networks have a significant impact on the delivery of resources and on the provision of emotional support and wellbeing (Du Plessis et al. 2015; Folse 2024; UNISDR 2015; Tully 2015). For example, women's social networks were able to deliver lifesaving resources, such as food, and were able to keep people warm and dry in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake (Du Plessis et al. 2015). Through accessing social media pages and harnessing their social capital, women were able to identify community members that needed specific help, such as elderly residents who were less mobile needing water delivered (Du Plessis et al. 2015, p159). Women's social networks also provided a foundation for community gatherings that combatted social fragmentation and promoted mutual aid (UNISDR 2015, p. 54). Foote et al. (2024) report that women who were able to

commit time, energy and other resource into supporting others outside their household were able to dedicate themselves to this because they had not been directly exposed to the disaster themselves or had "...a supportive husband or friends who cooked for them, and children who were old enough to care for themselves" (Foote et al. 2024 p30).

Women were also documented as leaders in facilitating community healing post disaster (Walker et al. 2021; Maidment et al. 2019; Foote et al. 2025). Women played a role in healing their communities through arts and crafts initiatives and creating locations where residents could share their stories (Maidment et al. 2019; Walker et al 2021). Women created physical spaces that fostered social connectedness and encouraged healing through sharing experiences; "you can identify [the feeling] with other people and you put it down on paper or in any other form of artwork" (Maidment et al. 2021, p24). This literature captures the intangible contributions from women to the welfare of their community, and Mainment et al. recognise those contributions as leadership.

Scholarship that documents Indigenous women's leadership in disaster settings has emphasised the role of cultural values in this process, such as First Nations' practices of deep listening (Keevers et al. 2024) and prioritising land protection (Barger et al. 2024). Leadership may take on different definitions across cultural contexts. A case study of women's leadership at the community level in Aotearoa after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake documented an approach to leadership framed by Māori cultural values (UNISDR 2015, p. 68). The women leading their community through recovery adopted a collective approach to leadership that set aside hierarchical power relations, agendas and egos through communitarian cultural practices (UNISDR 2015, p68). The grassroots, women-led initiative built off a culturally informed leadership style reduced social and economic hardship for more than 180 elderly Māori, immigrant and refugee disaster-affected people after the earthquake.

There is a dearth of scholarship on the leadership of gender and sexually diverse people in disasters. However, Gorman-Murray et al. (2018) documented stories of queer resilience that capture the ways gender and sexually diverse people have led their communities through disaster related hardship. Whilst not using the term 'leadership', this work reveals how shared, interpersonal networks led by queer and trans groups collectively fostered

material and emotional support for disaster affected residents (p180). Interpersonal networks in and beyond local neighbourhoods facilitated the provision of food, bedding, accommodation and cleaning assistance. Whilst material resources can be of critical importance for community members, equally important is the emotional support that was documented by Gorman-Murray et al. (2018), this type of leadership helped mitigate adverse feelings of displacement, and fostered community connection - an important component of leadership that can mitigate the negative mental health impacts of disasters (Matthews et al 2020).

The literature identifies many challenges for women and gender and sexually diverse people's leadership at the community level in disasters. An increased responsibility to care for others had negative impacts on women, hindering their independence and own agency in their lives (Folse 2024). Women whose leadership at the community level engaged with activism as documented by Casey et al. (2022), cited spaces as culturally unsafe and the challenge this posed for First Nations women when navigating government-led processes. Challenges around navigating "interlocking systems of racial, sexual, gendered and class oppression" (McTighe & Haywood 2017, p12) were also documented. For gender and sexually diverse people, Gorman-Murray et al. (2018) explored the challenge that marginalisation had on queer resilience, and in particular, transphobia. There are many challenges faced by women and gender and sexually diverse people when leading their communities through the hardship of a disaster. Important to note is that these challenges exist in non-disaster times and can be exacerbated in the context of crisis.

Organisational leadership sphere:

Women in professional roles in community service organisations such as disaster recovery organisations and child protection filled a vacuum in government support during and after disasters, often going well beyond their job descriptions to help their distressed clients (Foote et al 2014; Jahn 2025; Plessis et al 2015; Yoshihama & Yunomae 2018). Disaster Case Managers at the New York Relief Centre supported Puerto Ricans displaced by Hurricane Maria (Jahn, 2025). A Native Hawaiian women-led organisation (Barger et al. 2024) and women in a variety of professional positions in earthquake ravaged Christchurch (Plessis et al 2015) supported communities through their personal networks and contributed many unpaid hours "to secure services and materials given a low priority" (Jahn, 2025 p26). In Australia, a senior female leader of an NGO arranged flood rescues of children in her care

because she couldn't contact emergency services (Foote et al. 2024, p39). 'Waminda' - a women-led Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation - used culturally safe and place-based practices to navigate complex post-bushfire community relationships in ways that mainstream services could not (Keevers et al. 2024). The 'Koori Kitchen' that emerged in Lismore, Australia in the aftermath of catastrophic flooding provided refuge and a safe space for First Nations and sexually and gender diverse community members (Foote et al. 2024). In some cases, the additional workload occurred in the context of the professionals themselves having their homes, workplaces and road infrastructure heavily impacted, compounding stress and fatigue (Foote et al. 2024; Plessis et al. 2015).

The literature also highlights women's small business leadership in the aftermath of disasters. In Australia, the National Rural Women's Coalition identified that in rural communities many small businesses are operated by women (often in the home to enable flexibility) and that these businesses "carry emergency credit or provide informal debt facilities for the wider community in times of disaster" (Tully 2015, p5). Tully notes that this credit is often not recovered. Business leadership in Japan included the establishment of a micro-enterprise to continue food preparation work that was initially undertaken voluntarily, and a small business created by a 23-year-old woman to communicate with disaster affected young women in Fukushima (Meguro & Osaki 2015). These business-related cases across countries created dual outcomes of providing opportunities for income generation for women and support to disaster affected communities.

More formalised leadership settings involve championing and 'institutionalizing' women's leadership into policy settings (UNISDR 2015; Kimber & Steele 2021). The Governor of Chiba, Akiko Domoto drew upon her networks and access to power to mobilise the women of Japan to form a coalition that supported post-2011 earthquake recovery. The Governor and the 'Japan Women's Network for Disaster Risk Reduction' also championed learning from Japan's domestic experiences of the earthquake in 2011 into the international realm over the following 4 years through incorporating women as agents of change in the UNISDR Sendai Framework for Action 2015-2025 (Kimber & Steele 2021). In Australia women came together to initiate a Gender and Disaster Taskforce between 2014-2016 which enabled cross-sector and cross-stakeholder communication and collaboration on gender and disaster-related research, policy and practice (UNISDR 2015). These examples set up policy

and governance settings for input by women and formalise the agency of women in disaster settings.

In emergency agency settings such as fire services, leadership by women and gender and sexually diverse people displays attributes that play an important role, but this leadership is often underestimated, behind the scenes or in some cases self-sabotaged (Danielsson & Eriksson 2022; Eriksen et al 2016; Faas & Parreno 2024; Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) (2016); Moseley 2017; Owen et al. 2024). Colleagues of women in an emergency leader's professional development program in Australia and New Zealand consistently rated their leadership attributes highly, linked with developing networks and establishing trust with colleagues (Owen et al. 2024). However, the women themselves were more likely to underestimate their leadership qualities. The authors advocate that leadership frameworks be expanded to include important traits linked with emotional intelligence because all leaders should have these qualities. In Swedish forest fires, women's leadership was relegated to traditional caring roles that received less recognition in response planning. Additionally, the exhaustion of women and men firefighters was approached differently – the exhaustion of women firefighters was seen as evidence of not being fit for the job, while male firefighters who were fatigued were cared for by women (Danielsson & Eriksson 2022).

The Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center in the USA led scenarios with the emergency management sector demonstrating that the LGBTQ+ community have a "unique set of experiences with hazards" and the agencies tasked to assist them, stressing the need for greater inclusion of LGBTQ+ voices (Faas & Parreno 2024, p136). The women-led HAG in Australia actively promotes the role of women in formal humanitarian leadership, highlighting that "when women are in decision making roles, humanitarian response outcomes are more effective and inclusive" (HAG 2016, p1). HAG (2016) and Eriksen et al. (2016) also note that women self-select out of leadership roles due to caring roles and/or organisational cultures.

Although there is more research available at the organisational level, women and gender and sexually diverse people must often operate outside the bounds of their professional roles to fulfil needs of disaster affected populations. This agility and willingness to go 'above and beyond' is driven by a deep concern for the welfare of others, sometimes at significant personal cost to themselves.

Gaps in current research:

Literature that captured the leadership of gender and sexually diverse people was scant in our review and urgently needs more attention in scholarship. LGBTQI+ community members experience heterosexist discrimination and marginalisation in disasters, which demands new ways of organising when addressing hazards (Gorman-Murray et al 2018). An opportunity for further research identified in this review includes shifting the notion of what 'leadership' means to be more flexible and inclusive of different styles (UNISDR 2015). This includes recognising that certain traits such as empathy and emotional intelligence are those of leaders, and not just traits indicative of interpersonal skills or those that belong to women (Owen et al. 2024). Expanding research on women and gender and sexually diverse people's leadership therefore means extending traditional notions of leadership beyond the archetypical 'command-and-control' approach to disaster management. Equally important is capturing the outcomes and the monetary value of disaster work, both unpaid and voluntary, to recognise and value the contributions of women and gender and sexually diverse people to recovery and resilience (Tully 2015). Importantly, further research is needed to understand how women and gender and sexually diverse people's leadership can be supported, including for their own care for wellbeing (McNaught et al. 2024; Foote et al. 2024). Attention must also be paid to the ways women and gender and sexually diverse people's leadership can be developed, including skills in systems advocacy (Foote et al. 2024). The literature suggests that building an evidence base on leadership outcomes informed by gender and intersections with race, culture, sexuality and class could lead to more equitable and just disaster management (McTighe & Haywood 2017, Gorman-Murray et al 2018). The literature is neglectful of experiences of leadership that present strengths-based solutions to hardship and the role of women and gender and sexually diverse people in disaster preparedness.

Conclusion:

This review confirms that women and gender and sexually diverse people make fundamental and critical contributions to leadership in their households, communities and their workplaces before, during and after disaster. The importance of this topic has been acknowledged for nearly 25 years (Enarson 2001) yet has remained under researched, under resourced and largely invisible in official disaster practice and policy arenas. The alarming implications of

Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment Report (DCCEEW & ACS 2025) demonstrates that we can't wait another 25 years for this work to be acknowledged and supported.

Our review of the (scant) body of literature found that when women and gender and sexually diverse people lead, disaster responses are more inclusive, community-driven, and effective in building long-term recovery and resilience. The grey and published literature contains instances, sometimes detailed, of these contributions ranging from strategising to attempt to protect their (un)born children from the effects of bushfire smoke, rescuing, feeding and housing people during and immediately after disaster and supporting people throughout the long period of adaptation following disaster. In doing this care work women and gender and sexually diverse people draw on their considerable pre-existing networks and their skills and strengths in leading in their households, communities and workplaces. Outcomes can include reduction in social, economic and physical impacts on disaster affected populations.

Despite this, the invisibility of this work, self-selection and systemic barriers limit their involvement in decision-making (Hatton 2017; Eriksen 2016). While gendered vulnerability is important to acknowledge in policy, training and research, a focus primarily from a deficit and victim lens can skew perceptions and perpetuate ignoring the agency and achievements of women and gender and sexually diverse people. There's a huge opportunity to value and support the leadership of women and gender and sexually diverse people for stronger, more equitable disaster outcomes. It is important that the skills of these groups (including caring and a sense of community responsibility) are recognised as essential to disaster recovery work and given as much attention as built infrastructure which is almost always prioritised. There is also still plenty that we don't know, especially how women and gender and sexually diverse people might best be supported in this work through enhanced visibility and development of their leadership and practices for improvement of their wellbeing in these roles.

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