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# Hegemonic Masculinity and the Gendering of Men in Disaster Management: Implications for Social Work Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

Disaster studies have been slow to address gender issues in the management of disasters. Given the neglect of gender in the previous scholarship on disasters, most of the recent writing on the gendering of disasters has understandably focused on women's experiences in relation to risk management, emergency responses, post-disaster recovery and reconstruction. There has been little interrogation of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity and men's privileged positioning in patriarchal gender regimes impact on the various stages of disaster management. In this paper I draw upon my experience in researching men and masculinities in Australia to draw connections between men's privilege, rural masculinities, men's experiences of trauma, men's violence and men's gendered experience of disasters, especially in relation to bush fires. The paper relates insights arising from these studies to men's responses to disasters, their involvement in disaster management and their post-disaster experiences. The implications of this analysis for a disaster curricula in social work education is outlined.

**Keywords:** *Disaster studies; Gender and disasters; Hegemonic masculinity; Masculinity and trauma; Rural masculinities; Emergency services; Critical social work*

## INTRODUCTION

As a social work educator located in the critical and radical tradition of social work (Pease, 2009a; Pease, 2013a), who focuses on the development of pro-feminist practice with men (Pease, 2009b; Pease, 2011) and the interrogation of privilege (Pease, 2010), how do I come to the debates about educating social work students about natural disasters? For some years now, I have been challenged by my environmentalist colleagues and friends to think about the centrality of climate change and sustainability in developing social justice agendas. While I have had a general layperson's awareness of environmental crises and I have acted in my personal life to reduce my ecological footprint, I have not until recently pursued these issues within a critical gendered analysis of natural disasters in social work.

As is often the case, it would take an invitation from "out of the blue" to act as a catalyst to move me out of my comfort zone into new territory. I was invited to become part of an advisory group on research into the experiences of men after the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria. My involvement in that advisory group led to an invitation to present a keynote paper at a conference in Melbourne on the gendering of men in disaster management and the impact of disasters on men (Pease, 2013b). For that purpose, I was asked to consider the relevance of my work on critical masculinity studies to understand the gendering of men in disaster management and responses. In this paper, I consider the implications of that work for educating social workers and social work students about disasters.

## GENDERING DISASTER STUDIES

Disaster studies have been slow to address gender issues in the management of disasters. The literature emerged only in the 1990s with the publication of the collection edited by Enarson and Morrow (1998a) which brought women's experiences of disasters into the foreground. Many of the contributors in this anthology demonstrate how the main theoretical perspectives in disaster studies have been male oriented. The gender and disaster literature addresses the different ways in which men and women prepare for a disaster event, how they deal with it and how they experience its aftermath.

Much of the early contributions focused on the different ways in which disasters impacted on women and men, including gender differences in mortality following disasters. It has been noted that disasters have a greater impact on women and children than they do on men (Pittway, Bartolomei, & Rees, 2007; True, 2012). Research demonstrates that men and women have different perceptions of risk and different responses to disaster warnings (Tyler et al., 2012). Women are more likely than men to want to evacuate and men are more likely than women to want to remain and fight the fire. While women are more likely than men to lose their lives in most natural disasters (Neumayer & Plumper, 2007), research in Australia shows that men are three times more likely to die in bushfires compared with women (Tyler, 2013).

To understand the significance of gender in disasters, one must understand the gender differences in perceived risk. To contemplate evacuating an area during a natural disaster, one must first perceive that there is a degree of risk in staying behind. Research demonstrates that men perceive disaster events as less serious and less risky than do women

(Fothergill, 1998). Hence, men are less likely to hear warnings and are less likely to be concerned with danger and potential threats to suffering and loss of life. This explains, in part, why women are more likely than men to want to respond to warnings and evacuate.

Women are more inclined to want to avoid risk, partly to do with their relative powerlessness in society, while men are more inclined to perceive themselves to be at less risk because of their greater power and control (Bateman & Edwards, 2002). Enarson (2000) suggests that women are more likely to perceive greater risk because they *are* at greater risk in global disasters in terms of their increased vulnerability. Tyler (2013) cites research that demonstrates that the differences between men and women in response to risk led to disagreements about whether they should leave with their families or whether they should stay and fight the fire. This often led to people changing their plans as the fire approached.

Taking risks is a key characteristic of contemporary masculinities, especially in rural communities. Men demonstrate their manhood and their toughness by seeking risky and dangerous activities (Tyler et al., 2012). Men “prove” their masculinity by taking risks, and fighting fires provides men with opportunities to demonstrate their courage and bravery in the face of calculated risks (Baigent, 2001).

## **MASCULINITY AND TRAUMA IN THE AFTERMATH OF DISASTERS**

Research demonstrates that disasters have different psychological impacts on women and men (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013a). More generally in relation to help-seeking, the construction of masculinity and the norms about men and emotions inhibits the capacity of many men to reach out for support during crises (Fox & Pease, 2012). It has been widely noted that there is little research on the psychological consequences of disasters for men and the effects that masculinity has on their attempts to come to terms with the aftermath of disasters.

Fordham and Ketteridge (1998) identify evidence about the long-term effects of traumatic events on men. They argue that men are often unable to express their emotions at the time of the extreme event and consequently, they may experience delayed stress symptoms years after the disaster. Part of the issue for many men is that in a disaster situation, they do not experience themselves as being in control, which is part of their “normal” state of being. They often experience themselves as being helpless to prevent or manage the disaster, which is at odds with their notion of masculinity (Fordham & Ketteridge, 1998).

In fire disasters, there is considerable pressure on firefighters to manage their emotions in the face of dangerous and distressing situations. The association of firefighting with courage, bravery, danger and heroism, draws upon the notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000). However, there are costs associated with the normative expectations of role performance by firefighters where any expression of emotion or vulnerability will be seen as a sign of weakness or femininity (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008). While firefighters experience disgust, stress and fear, they are often concerned that any expression of these emotions would limit their capacity to carry out their responsibilities. As Yarnal, Dowler, & Hutchinson (2002) express it, in their article examining the impact of gender expectations on firefighters’ expression of emotions: “Don’t let the bastards see you sweat”.

Men's traumatic experiences of disasters can be informed by the emerging literature on deployment trauma (Fox & Pease, 2012; Highgate, 2001; Karner, 1994; Wessely, 2006). Karner (1994) has focussed on the relationship between combat trauma and masculinity in terms of a self/social-narrative. In her 1994 doctoral thesis, Karner explored the influence of ideas of masculinity or manliness on the experience of, and recovery from, combat trauma. Through a series of interviews with Vietnam veterans in a US Veterans Administration inpatient program, she sought to find which "social resources" the men used to make sense of their Vietnam experience. Karner's (1994) research indicates the central influence of understandings of traditional masculinity upon veterans' experience of, and recovery from, combat trauma.

As Connell (2000) demonstrates, the long-standing or "traditional" Western conversation about manliness or masculinity has several consistent features. Foremost amongst these is an emphasis upon independence and self-sufficiency; of mastery over one's body and external objects; and of proving manliness by domination and control, even when that involves a high risk of harm. The use of aggression and violence is seen as a virtue and as a particularly truthful test of manhood. Traditional ideas of masculinity also involve an allied commitment to stoicism, to mastering pain and limited emotional expression (Fox & Pease, 2012).

Given the expectations of traditional masculinity, trauma as a loss of control can be seen as a failure in masculinity and a failure to conform to one's self-conception and one's expectations and assumptions about one's relationship with the world. In particular, it is concerned with a man's response to danger and violence (Karner, 1994). For a man traumatized by violence, it often involves a form of internal disintegration or rupture as a central dimension of his identity is not confirmed. Moreover, what was a resource is no longer available. Not having acted as a man is expected to, for many men, their ability to participate in that conversation about manliness is compromised and uncertain – leaving a gap or emptiness in their sense of self (Fox & Pease, 2012). These insights from men's experiences of deployment trauma can be used to inform the recovery process for men traumatized by disasters.

### **The Social Construction Of Gender And Masculinity In Disasters**

Understandably, most of the gender and disaster literature has focused on how women are affected by disasters and, in particular, on women's increased vulnerability in many disaster contexts (Enarson & Morrow, 1998a; Enarson, 2012). However, in explicating the differences in experiences between women and men in disasters, it is important not to essentialise them. We also have to be careful not to treat women and men as two separate, homogeneous groups (Bolin, Jackson, & Crist, 1998). Tyler et al. (2012) have pointed out that much of the gender and disaster literature has failed to consider the social construction of men's and women's roles and is in danger of essentialising the differences between the ways in which men and women respond to disasters.

While much of this literature provides an opportunity for women's experiences to come to the foreground, there has been very little attempt, in the global North at least, to make sense of how women's experiences are related to the wider context of gender inequality and male dominance (Tyler et al., 2012). It is suggested here that gender hierarchy and

patriarchal societal arrangements contribute to women's increased vulnerability in disasters. Hence, we need to understand the social construction of patriarchal privilege and dominant forms of masculinity.

There is an enormous volume of literature on men and masculinities. Theoretical approaches have ranged from psychoanalytical, Jungian sex role theories through to materialist and discursive approaches (Pease, 2002). In this article, I argue, following Connell (2000), that it is most useful to understand men and masculinities as involving six key dimensions:

1. Multiple masculinities that arise from different cultures, different historical periods and different social divisions between men.
2. Different positions reflected in these multiple masculinities in relation to power, with some forms of masculinity hegemonic and dominant while other masculinities are marginalised and subordinated.
3. Institutionalised masculinities embedded in organisational structures and in the wider culture, as well as being located within individual men.
4. Embedded masculinities that are represented physically in how men engage with the world.
5. Masculinities produced through the actions of individual men.
6. Fluid masculinities that change in relation to the reconstructive efforts of progressive men in response to the changes in the wider society.

Within this theoretical context, Connell (2000) identifies hegemonic masculinity as the culturally dominant form of masculinity that is manifested in a range of different settings. Such masculinity is promoted as a desirable attainment for boys and young men to strive towards. It is presented as heterosexual, aggressive, authoritative and courageous (Connell, 2000). The manliness of men and boys is judged by their ability to measure up to this normative notion.

Connell's (2000) identification of forms of marginalised and subordinate masculinities is also useful in understanding the relationship between gender and its intersections with other dimensions of stratification such as class, race and sexuality. Connell (2000) uses these concepts to illustrate how the diversity of masculinities is marked by hierarchy and exclusion. Thus, critical masculinity studies with its understanding of masculinity as relational, socially constructed, enacted and institutionally embedded has much to contribute both to gender and disaster studies generally, and to critical social work responses to men and women in disasters specifically.

### **Situating Men's Responses to Disasters in Australian Rural Contexts**

To make sense of gendered experiences in disasters, we need to understand the way in which masculinity is constructed in pre-disaster contexts. Tyler et al. (2012) suggest that the wider literature on masculinity and rurality will provide important insights into the gendering of disasters.

Weisheit, Wells, and Falcone (1995) identify a number of socio-cultural aspects of rural areas that may have implications for gender relations: greater social and political conservatism; stronger enforcement of gender rules and traditional roles in the family; a strong belief in the privacy of family matters; a mythology of mateship among men and reinforced patterns of female subordination; distrust of outsiders and a suspicion of policy solutions “imported” from the city; less anonymity and privacy; greater levels of surveillance, particularly of women and girls and strong social controls operating through informal and intimate processes and mechanisms. These social influences are seen as differentiating rural culture from urban.

Research in rural communities in Australia has for some time identified the prevalence of patriarchal belief systems, conservative social norms and stereotypical gender roles in shaping family life. In 1992, Ken Dempsey undertook an extensive study of gender inequality in an agricultural community in Victoria. Published as *A Man's Town: Inequality Between Women and Men in Rural Australia*, Dempsey identified “Smalltown” (the name given to the Victorian town) as a patriarchal system. This was reflected in men's superior power and the economic dependence of women that results and the ideology of gender that defines men and their activities as superior and women and their activities as inferior (Dempsey, 1992).

Men's dominance was reflected in the following: men's control of local decision-making bodies; the segregated men's service clubs; men's control of the churches; the dominance of male sport; the role of pub drinking in gender segregation; the segregation of friendships and informal interaction; the domestic division of labour; the subordination of women in paid employment; and the traditional gender attitudes of men and women (Dempsey, 1992).

Fourteen years later, Hogg and Carrington (2006) discovered the same dimensions of patriarchal control in the public and civic spheres of the rural communities that they studied. Such aspects of the public sphere and civic culture in rural communities appear to be more patriarchal than corresponding sites in cities (Hogg & Carrington, 2006.) Thus, it can be argued that rural communities are more likely to have conservative dominant ideologies in relation to gender and diversity issues.

This is not to suggest that there is a homogenous patriarchal culture in rural communities. As Neame and Heenan (2004) point out, rural communities are not wholly conservative, any more than urban areas are wholly progressive, on gender issues. Just as there are conservative people in cities, there are also progressive people in rural communities. While the sexual double standard is more common in rural communities, it is not the only form of gendered subjectivity.

Historically, masculinity studies have been city-centric or “metro normative”, as Kenway, Kraack, & Hickey-Moody (2006) name it. It is only in recent years that a literature on the relationship between rurality and the construction of masculinity has emerged. In recognition of the diversity between men, masculinity scholars have started to articulate differences between rural and urban masculinities through understanding the specific influences of rural and urban communities upon particular groups of men (Bye, 2003;

Campbell & Bell, 2000; Campbell, Bell, & Finney, 2006; Johnson, 2001; Kenway et al., 2006). Thus, just as it is important to understand men in relation to class, sexuality, ethnicity, age and able-bodiedness, it is also important to see how men are situated in relation to the urban–rural continuum (Kramvig & Stien, 2003). It is argued here that there is a connection between rural practices and activities and the social construction of masculinities in rural communities (Little & Jones, 2000). Given the rural context of many disasters, this literature could inform social work practice with men in the aftermath of disasters.

### **Emergency Services as an Unequal Gender Regime**

Research demonstrates that emergency management in general and bushfire response and firefighting in particular are overwhelmingly dominated by men (Tyler et al., 2012; Weiss, Zara, & Parkinson, 2013). Recent research in Australia reveals that men constitute more than three quarters of all personnel in rural fire services (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b). Furthermore, most of the women in these organisations are in administrative roles rather than in the area of direct emergency services responses (Tyler, 2013). Tyler (2013) notes that many emergency services organisations have a military history and that they function in highly masculinized ways, with a command-and-control style of management.

This pattern of gendered inequality in emergency services can be understood by reference to Connell's (1987) concept of gender regimes. Connell (1987) used the notion of "gender regimes" to describe the current pattern of gender relations within specific institutions such as workplaces, schools, government and other apparatuses of the state. An unequal gender regime is characterised by unequal power relations between men and women.

It has been pointed out by many writers that firefighting is a highly masculinised form of behaviour (Ainsworth, Batty & Burchielli 2013; Baigent, 2001; Eriksen, Gill, & Head, 2010; Pacholok, 2013; Tyler et al., 2012). Fighting bushfires is clearly regarded as "men's business" (Tyler et al., 2012). It is dominated by men and associated with the characteristics of traditional masculinity. Qualities such as mateship, strength, aggression and courage are so linked to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000), that the idea of women firefighters is seen as an oxymoron. However, within emergency services there appears to be little acknowledgement of the masculinized nature of bushfire fighting. It is assumed to be based on objective and scientific premises, rather than a socially constructed notion of men's and women's roles (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013b).

Firefighting is highly praised in all societies (Thurnell-Read & Parker, 2008; Sargent, 2002; Yarnal, Dowler, & Hutchinson, 2002). In popular literature, firefighters are granted heroic status. A firefighter is a hero and "man's man". It is understandable that, given the danger involved in fighting fires and the rescuing of people from burning buildings, firefighters will be accorded the status of heroes (Sargent, 2002). Similarities are often made between engaging in combat in a war zone and fighting a fire because of the physical danger associated with both activities (Ainsworth et al., 2013).

Baigent (2001) refers to this form of masculinity as "firefighters' masculinity", a form of masculinity constructed in the context of a sexist para-military organisation. As Baigent was himself a firefighter for many years before undertaking a PhD in sociology on



masculinities in the fire services, he shows some understanding of the resistance of firefighters to the notion of socially constructed masculinity and the consequences of this masculinity for women's lives.

Baignet (2001) notes that firefighters are exempt from any public criticism. However, women's experiences of working alongside firefighting men identify less positive expressions of masculinity. In the study conducted by Ainsworth et al. (2013), many male firefighters teased and humiliated the women in the fire service and their use of offensive and abusive language was experienced as threatening by the women (Ainsworth et al., 2013). As in other male-dominated occupations, if women are able to do a job that is traditionally seen as "a man's job", then challenges are made to the masculinity status associated with it (Pease, 2002).

Baigent (2001) also raises questions about the extent to which firefighters are interested in the prevention of fires. He asks, if it is the professional ethos to save lives and to prevent damage from fires, why do many firefighters resist being involved in fire-*prevention* work? As fire prevention would potentially stop fires and save lives, firefighters should engage in fire-prevention behaviours as part of their overall brief. However, the reluctance of many firefighters to do so leads Baigent (2001) to question how much their commitment is to community safety or how much it is to a particular sense of self associated with a heroic masculinity that rescues people from burning buildings.

### **The Impact of Disasters on Gender Relations and Gender Inequality**

Pacholok (2013) argues that the crisis generated by a disaster can destabilize hierarchical gender patterns. It is important to understand when a disaster unsettles gender hierarchy and when it reproduces gender inequalities. Peek and Fothergill (2008) found that the traditional gender division of labour (with men as protectors and women as nurturers) was even more pronounced following Hurricane Katrina. Women's care-giving roles are likely to increase in the aftermath of disasters. The process of rebuilding and reconstruction are borne disproportionately by women (Tyler et al., 2012).

The disruption of men's role as protectors creates uncertainty and feelings of inadequacy for many men (Enarson, 1999). Austin (2008) argues that gender roles are broken down and reconstructed in disasters because the institutional supports for gender role performance are destabilised during disasters. As sites such as the workplace, the home and the institutions of the state may be destroyed during a disaster, many men may feel a threat to their dominance. Austin (2008) demonstrates how an expression of hyper-masculinity among men could be a response to the loss and stress associated with natural disasters. As men experience a sense of loss in their dominance in work, politics and intimate relationships, they may resort to a hyper-masculinity to restore their hegemonic influence. This may explain, in part, men's increased levels of violence in intimate relationships with women following disasters. Many commentators have noted that men's violence against women increases in the aftermath of natural disasters (Enarson, 1999; Harris, 2011; Scanlon, 1998; Sety, 2012; True, 2012; Wilson & Philips, 1998).

In an analysis of one of the largest wildfires in Canada, Pacholok (2013) interrogates the impact that the fire had on gender relations. She noted that some men who were unable

to practice hegemonic masculinity in the face of the disruption of their dominance, were able to develop more egalitarian subjectivities and practices. However, she concluded that, notwithstanding the softening of masculinity among some men, there was no significant change in gender hierarchy in the aftermath of the disaster. She is thus not hopeful that crises in masculinity generated by disasters will lead to progressive changes in gender relations (Pacholok, 2013).

### **Towards a Critical Feminist Approach to Social Work and Disasters**

What does the preceding analysis mean for social work and social work education?

Many social work writers have commented on social work's historical links with disaster management and response (Dodds & Nuehring, 1997; Pyles, 2007; Rowlands 2013; Zakour, 1997). Zarkour (1997) and Pyles (2007) have even argued that disaster relief and intervention is an essential part of social work's mission. However, it is only in recent years that social work has identified disaster education as a new area of inquiry in the social work curriculum (Rowlands, 2013). This raises the question that this special issue of *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* addresses: what theories, knowledge and skills should inform curriculum design, pedagogy and content?

In recent years various modules and courses have been developed in response to these questions. (Brady & Firth, 2009; Katherine Kendall Institute for International Social Work Education, 2007; Rowlands, 2013). It is personally disappointing that most of the new curriculum developments are informed primarily by social work's traditional roles in coordinating relief efforts and providing emergency services and traumatic stress interventions (Pyles, 2007; Zahour, 1997). In a review of all papers presented at the Disaster Planning, Management, and Relief Conference (Katherine Kendall Institute for International Social Work Education, 2007) I found no acknowledgement of the structural causes of ecological destruction and environmental crises and there appeared to be no awareness of the emerging gender and disaster literature. Of the wider social work and disaster literature reviewed for this article, only one article emphasized the importance of social work adopting a critical feminist approach to disaster interventions (Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Rees, 2007) and only one article proposed a community development approach to disaster intervention (Pyles, 2007).

Pyles (2007) argues that, by emphasizing psychological functioning and stress debriefing in the aftermath of disasters, social work is neglecting its commitment to social justice and social change. Pittway et al. (2007) emphasise the importance of moving beyond crisis support, clinical interventions and disaster relief. They advocate a critical feminist approach to disaster interventions, and they encourage social workers in disaster situations to challenge the structural issues related to patriarchy, class and power that perpetuate social injustice.

### **A Gender and Disaster Response in the Social Work Curriculum**

Other contributions to this special edition will debate the pros and cons of whether disaster education should be integrated into the existing curriculum or whether special modules should be developed to address the experience and impact of disasters. Whichever approach is chosen, it is argued here that specific knowledge and skills for disaster responses in social work should be informed by coverage of the following ten key areas of gender and disasters:

- The different ways in which disasters impact on women and men;
- The gendering of risk taking and risk avoidance in the lead-up to disasters;
- Gender differences in responses to the trauma of disasters;
- The contribution of feminist theory and critical masculinity studies to shedding light on the causes of disasters;
- The Australian rural context of bushfire disasters in Australia;
- Male domination in emergency services and the consequences for disaster response;
- The impact of disasters on gender roles and gender inequalities;
- The gendered nature of climate change and environmental destruction;
- Critical social work responses to disaster management;
- Critical social work responses to disaster prevention

## CONCLUSION

A gender analysis is useful in providing insight into all stages of disaster management and response (Fothergill, 1998). However, in spite of calls for increased attention to gender analyses in disaster studies, it has been noted that there is little contemporary literature on the gendered aspects of disasters in Australia (Tyler et al., 2012). The emerging literature on social work and disasters is not exempt from this criticism. In light of the above, in educating social workers and social work students about how to intervene in the consequences of natural disasters, attention must be given to an analysis of gender inequalities and their impact on women and men before, during and after disasters.

While most of the gender-aware disaster research is on the impact of disasters on men and women and how they deal with recovery (Enarson & Meyreles, 2004), a gender analysis is also highly relevant in relation to understanding how natural disasters can be prevented. While this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, by exploring the contribution of critical masculinity studies to addressing gender issues in disaster studies, I have become more aware of the need to gender the causes of environmental crises which are often at the heart of many disasters. This has led me to a broader recognition of the gendered nature of climate change and environmental destruction (Alston, 2013; Besthorn, 2003; Boetto & McKinnon, 2013; Dankelman, 2010), which I intend to address in future research. If the social work curriculum is to effectively educate students about disasters, it must draw upon critical masculinity studies, gender and disaster studies and gender and sustainability studies to provide theoretical foundations for a critical theory informed social work and disaster curriculum.

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