



Bushfires are “men’s business”: The importance of gender and rural hegemonic masculinity[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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This paper offers a critical review of the international literature on gender, disaster and rural masculinities. Empirical reference is made to bushfires in Australia, offering new evidence from the State of Victoria. Bushfires loom large in the Australian imagination and there is an increasing amount of research now being conducted in relation to bushfire events. A significant gap remains, however, with regard to the issue of gender. Despite increasing evidence that gender plays a significant role with reference to disaster risk assessment, preparation and response, a gendered analysis of bushfire preparation and response has not been a sustained research priority. Building on the writing of others, a critical assessment is provided of the concept of a specifically Australian, rural hegemonic masculinity as a possible way of better understanding the social dimensions of gender, and bushfire preparation and response in the Australian context. This conceptual consideration is extended to draw attention to the process whereby alternative conceptions of masculinities may emerge. This recognition provides a basis for further research on gender and disaster internationally.

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1. Gender and bushfire in Australia

Bushfires loom large in the Australian imagination. The Black Saturday fires, which occurred in the southern state of Victoria in early 2009, constituted one of the worst natural disasters in post-colonial Australian history. They also ranked as one of the most deadly sets of wildfires the world has seen in the last 150 years (Cameron et al., 2009). Following Black Saturday, there has been significant public discussion in Australia about how best to understand the relationship between people, place and bushfires: how best to prepare for, communicate about, respond to and recover from these kinds of disaster events. One theme that has arisen focuses on gender in the context of bushfire. With the notable exception of an article published in this journal by Eriksen and colleagues (2010), there has been almost no published academic research the importance of the social construction of gender in relation to bushfire research and response.

The neglect of gender as an important element of Australian bushfire research is out of step with the growing international literature on gender and disaster, which seeks to better understand women in emergency situations (e.g. Enarson and Chakrabarti, 2009; Enarson and Morrow, 1998). Mirroring wider trends in gender and disaster research in (post)-industrialised nations, there is little consideration of the wider cultural construction of men’s and women’s gender roles and an understanding of gender as relational. Moreover, these sets of research tend to focus on specific case studies of discrete disaster events and “the individual woman” (Enarson, 2009, p. xvi). While there has been some attempt to make room for “women’s voices” and consider women’s experiences of bushfire in Australia (e.g. Cox, 1998), there has been almost no attempt to understand how this relates more broadly to the social construction of gender and the institutionalised inequality between men and women, particularly evident in rural areas.

The lack of gendered analysis in bushfire research is also striking given the evidence put forward by researchers in the field. While gender and gendered roles are often evident in the data, gender tends to remain invisible as an analytical category in much of the relevant literature. When surveying current bushfire research in Australia with a gendered analysis in mind, the critical importance of gender becomes quite clear. In the authors’ own bushfire-related research, for example, gender has emerged as an important theme to analyse and explain, in its own right (e.g. Fairbrother et al., 2012;

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Tyler, 2012). What has emerged is that gender is ever-present in the narratives of those living in bushfire-prone locations, mostly rural areas and areas at the urban–rural interface. As will be discussed in section six, rural gender roles have consequences for bushfire risk perception, preparation, and response. In brief, men are seen as responsible for (quite literally) fighting the fire, while women are more likely to be found in caring and support roles, in particular, taking care of children. Perhaps as a result of this gendered division of labour, women are much more likely to favour evacuation as a response to a bushfire threat, while men are more likely to want to stay. While these trends can be found in evidence provided by previous research (e.g. Bolin et al., 1998; Mozumder et al., 2008; Scanlon et al., 1996), for the most part, no connections have been made to broader social construction of gender (c.f. Eriksen et al., 2010; Eriksen and Gill, 2010), an omission which this article seeks to address.

1.1. Bushfire in Australia

A social constructionist approach to rurality (see: Bryant and Pini, 2011) is used here to explore the ways in which people living in non-urban areas tend to understand their own circumstances. This approach allows for the recognition of the construction of “the rural” to include areas which may not, functionally speaking, be rural at all. Many authors have noted, for example, that notions of rural hegemonic masculinity as “real masculinity” still have influence in urban or peri-urban contexts (e.g. Hogg and Carrington, 2006). Thus, social notions of rurality often extend beyond literal boundaries and conceptual definitions.

Understanding the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and bushfire means recognising that preparedness measures and dealing with bushfire events rely on stereotypically masculine attributes (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It must be noted, however, that such forms of masculinity are neither fixed nor static, including notions about heterosexuality, male–female relations and female dependency, homophobia, physicality and ideas associated with control and authority (Connell, 2005: 90). This concept of hegemonic masculinity is not straightforward and remains contested (see: Beasley, 2008; Flood, 2002; McInnes, 2008). While seldom noted in relation to bushfire, Eriksen and others (2010) do use the concept to help explain the place and position of women in urban–rural interface landscapes, concluding that the practice of bushfire management as “men’s business” remains intact despite demographic and structural change which could be assumed to challenge such conceptions (p. 340). The strength of this analysis is that it places the idea of hegemonic masculinity on the conceptual framework for considering gender and bushfire but it is limited in that the analysis rests on a relatively fixed view of gender relations rather than masculinities *per se*. Paradoxically, even where analysis recognises the contestability and tenuousness of masculinities the focus still tends to be on the sustenance of hegemonic masculinity, and the maintenance of boundaries, rather than their disaggregation. While the focus on boundary maintenance is critically important, the possibility of disaggregation and fracture (and resistance) is equally valuable. Hence, while opening up an important dimension in relation to gender and bushfire, it is also necessary to question the complexity of the construction of hegemonic masculinity as well as the processes for realising alternative masculinities.

In order to fully understand the background to the data and arguments presented here, the Black Saturday fires, and the policy context that was in place at the time of the fires, must be taken into account (see Teague et al., 2010). With the events of Black Saturday, which occurred the year before the project interviews took place, there was a heightened public awareness of the prepare, stay-and-

defend or leave-early (often shortened to “stay or go”) policy which had been adopted by most Australian rural fire agencies. This policy, which Community Fireguard (CFG) programs (educational awareness) promoted, encouraged families to choose between evacuating well before the fire threat reached their homes, or to prepare their homes and plan to “defend” them against an oncoming bushfire (Fairbrother et al., 2010; Tibbits and Whittaker, 2007). There was a sturdy belief among governments, fire agencies and many researchers prior to Black Saturday (e.g. Handmer and Tibbits, 2005; Tibbits and Whittaker, 2007), that staying to defend, was often the safest option, epitomised by the slogan: “People save houses, houses save people” (Rush, 2009, p. 15). This is in contrast to most of North America, for example, where voluntary and forced evacuation is the most common policy approach to wildfire (McCaffrey and Rhodes, 2009). It is contended here that the preference for “staying to defend” prior to Black Saturday may be related to dominant constructions of rural hegemonic masculinity. It may also help to explain why, unlike disasters worldwide where women are usually over-represented in death-toll statistics (Enarson and Chakrabarti, 2009), men are over-represented in death-toll statistics in Australian bushfire events (Haynes et al., 2010).

1.2. Gender: a neglected area of research

There is a significant gap in terms of a social constructionist approach to gender in the literature on bushfire in Australia. In the rare instances when women are specifically mentioned, there can be a tendency to essentialise gender rather than acknowledging the changing constructions of masculinity, femininity, and gender roles. As a result, when gender is mentioned in bushfire research, it is often only as a superficial category rather than as an important element of the overarching framework of analysis. For example, in a study of bushfire fatalities in Australia between 1900 and 2008, Haynes and others (2010) found that men were significantly more likely than women to die during a bushfire event. Gender was clearly an object of the analysis and indeed the authors gesture towards men’s increased likelihood to actively defend a house during a fire while women are more likely to “shelter passively”, but this provides no indication of why such gendered differences occur.

Indeed, the gender differences in death rates may not appear to be particularly critical when seen in isolation. Compared with the international literature on gender and disaster, however, the data from Haynes and colleagues (2010), displays an unusual and significant trend. It is widely recognised in gender and disaster literature that women are generally more vulnerable to the effects of disaster and that, furthermore, women tend to be over-represented in death-toll statistics (Enarson and Chakrabarti, 2009). Following the Asian tsunami in 2004, for instance, women made up as much as 80 per cent of the dead in certain parts of Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka (Ariyabandu, 2009). The problem is also evident in more industrialised countries. In Japan, for instance, women, particularly socially marginalised women such as single mothers, are more likely than men to be injured or killed during earthquakes (Masai et al., 2009). The higher death tolls for women can be due to a range of factors, including gendered restrictions on movement in public, dress codes, access to information and child-caring responsibilities but also as a result of the material consequences of gender inequality and social marginalisation (Enarson and Morrow, 1998). In brief, women are less likely to hear or understand official disaster warnings, less likely to be able to act freely on official (or informal) warnings but are more likely to feel responsible for the care of others, particularly children, the sick and the elderly (Fothergill, 1998).

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