

Moving Beyond “women are the problem”:

How Can We Better Understand the
Gendered Nature of Bushfire in Australia?

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ABSTRACT:

Emergency management in Australia is noticeably male-dominated. Recent research into rural fire services in Australia has shown that women make up less than a quarter of volunteers and that many are placed in non-operational or administrative roles.

This situation is not unique to Australia and many emergency and disaster management organisations around the world still lack significant female membership. Fortunately, there is now increasing recognition that women's lack of representation in these institutions is a problem. This recognition generally takes two forms: the targeted recruitment of under-represented groups, and targeted programs for women to learn about bushfire safety (e.g. 'Fiery Women' in South Australia).

While these approaches do at least recognise gender as an issue, in this paper we outline why such measures are inadequate and occasionally misguided. Attempts to incorporate women, which tend not to acknowledge the masculinised nature of existing institutions, are likely to fail in attempts to recruit a more diverse workforce and will fail to transform existing practices. Similarly, some programs targeting women emerge from (unsubstantiated) assumptions about women's lack of knowledge and / or vulnerability, and thus hold women up as "the problem" against an implicit male norm.

It is suggested here, that in order to move forward, we must face the ongoing implications of a male-dominated emergency services sector and acknowledge that particular concepts of masculinity affect understandings of appropriate bushfire preparation and response.

Emergency management in Australia is noticeably male-dominated. Recent research into rural fire services in Australia has shown that women make up less than a quarter of volunteers and that most are placed in non-operational roles. This situation is not unique to Australia and many emergency and disaster management organisations around the world still lack significant female membership. Fortunately, there is now increasing recognition that women's lack of representation is a problem. In terms of fire agencies in Australia, this recognition generally takes two forms: the targeted recruitment of women and targeted programs for women to learn about bushfire safety. While these approaches do at least recognise gender as an issue, this paper outlines why such measures are inadequate and occasionally misguided. Attempts to incorporate women, which do not acknowledge the masculinised nature of existing institutions, are likely to fail in attempts to recruit a more diverse workforce and will fail to transform existing practices. Similarly, some programs targeting women emerge from (unsubstantiated) assumptions about women's lack of knowledge and / or vulnerability, and thus hold women up as "the problem" against an implicit male norm. It is suggested here, that in order to move forward, we must face the ongoing implications of a male-dominated emergency services sector and acknowledge that particular concepts of masculinity affect understandings of appropriate bushfire preparation and response.

It should be noted at the outset that the study of gender is not concerned with biological differences between men and women. Gender refers specifically to the "socially learned behaviour and expectations that distinguish masculinity and femininity" (Peterson & Runyan, 1999: 5). For a number of decades now, the social construction of gender has been a focus in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, with gendered analyses evident in areas ranging from criminology to international political economy. While disaster studies has lagged somewhat behind in incorporating gendered analyses, since the late 1990s there has been a steady increase in international literature dealing with the relationship between gender and disaster. One of the most obvious ways in which the gendered nature of disaster tends to be identified, is the heavily male-dominated nature of formal disaster response and emergency services organisations. While women's actions are an important part of responses to disaster events – the international evidence suggests women's contributions are crucial to disaster mitigation and recovery – women tend to be largely excluded from official emergency response agencies (Enarson & Chakrabarti 2009; Enarson & Morrow 1998),

Australia is no exception to this trend. As Robertson (1998: 201) contends, emergency management in this country has been "[b]y tradition if not by right, a male prerogative...Emergency services organisations, so similar in nature and activity to the military, were regarded as very much a male domain". While this situation may be slowly changing, it is still very much an issue today and may be exacerbated in the context of rural fire services as fire-fighting is especially culturally masculinised. As Baigent (2005: 45) notes, fire-fighting is "by any measure a male dominated occupation" and "[c]ulturally speaking, the work of fire-fighting is extremely masculinised". It is not only that fire-fighting is associated with traditional characteristics of masculinity, such as physical strength, mateship, courage and aggression (Maleta, 2009), but that the concept of fire-fighting is seen as so inextricably linked with men that "the notion of women fighting fires still does not fit into society's picture of fire-fighting" (Baigent 2005: 60). This is certainly reflected in the low rates of women's participation in the operational areas of rural fire agencies in Australia (Batty & Burchielli 2011; Beaston & McLennan 2005).

In 2005, for instance, Beaston and McLennan found that women made up between 12 and 24 per cent of volunteers in Australian fire services, and that the vast majority of these female volunteers tended to be in support and administrative roles. The lack of women in these services, and the segregation of women to non-operational areas within these services, is an on-going problem. Last year, for example, the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Victoria reported that women made up approximately 13 per cent of their operational volunteers and only three per cent of their career fire-fighters (CFA 2012).

The low numbers of women in rural fire services is becoming accepted, at least at an organisational level, as

a problem by many fire agencies. There is evidence, for example, of targeted recruitment drives for women, some dating back more than a decade (e.g. CFA 2000). The focus on encouraging women to join rural fire services, while admirable in many ways, only considers half the issue. It is essentially an “add women and stir” (Bunch 1987) approach, which simply tries to incorporate women into a pre-existing male model. By specifically targeting women it also implicitly positions them as “the problem.” That is, the major hurdles to raising the number of female volunteers are seen to be women’s ideas and perceptions about fire-fighting (Batty & Burchielli 2011). There is still scant recognition that men’s attitudes and perceptions have an important role as well.

In order to move forward, it is important that rural fire agencies acknowledge that they are often, both materially and culturally, unwelcoming, if not hostile, places for women. On a practical level, there are issues such as male-only changing rooms and toilets in many facilities as well as ill-fitting “one-size-fits-all” protective clothing, in effect designed for men (McLennan et al. 2007). As McLennan and colleagues (2007: 67) point out, these problems are relatively easily fixed if appropriate funding can be found, but in the meantime they “send a demoralising message to women volunteers” that they are either not welcome or not valued as equal members. But practical concerns such as these may be more easily addressed than deeply embedded cultural issues.

The cultural representation of bushfire-fighting in Australia is closely intertwined with notions of militarism, mateship and masculinity (Tyler et al., 2012; Schauble, 2002). Indeed, such cultural representations of masculinity and bushfire are sometimes referenced as a reason why women may be reluctant to volunteer for rural fire services (Batty & Burchielli 2011). What is not typically acknowledged, however, is that this traditional understanding of bushfire-fighting also affects the culture within organisations. With fire-fighting and masculinity so closely linked (Baigent 2005), it is not only women who may have difficulty imagining themselves as part of rural fire services (particularly in operational roles). Men within brigades may find the inclusion of women a challenge to pre-existing notions of their contribution to both the organisation and their community. This problem has been investigated much more thoroughly in other heavily male dominated organisations, most notably the military (e.g. Enloe 1983; Jeffreys 2007; Sasson-Levy 2011). The entrance of women into these institutions can be interpreted by some male members as a threat to the very existence of the organisation itself (Sasson-Levy 2011).

In heavily male dominated organisations, like the military, the “threat” of women’s entry is often met with serious harassment (Sasson-Levy 2011). Again, there is evidence that this is problem in rural fire services. McLennan and colleagues (2007) note that many of their female survey respondents reported having experienced harassment during their time in fire agencies, but the authors conclude that the problem is similar to most other workplaces in Australia. In contrast, more in-depth, qualitative research with current and former female members of the CFA, conducted by Batty & Burchielli (2011), shows harassment to be an ingrained problem. Most of their respondents reported having experienced sexual harassment. This ranged from individual incidents, such as “being yelled at on the fire-ground by male fire-fighters on a passing truck to ‘show us your tits’”, to more institutional level problems such as being shown pornographic videos during official trips (Batty & Burchielli 2011: 317). These problems suggest that there are still serious institutional and cultural level issues regarding the “boys’ club” atmosphere in parts of emergency management. These will need to be addressed if women are to become equal and active members of emergency services organisations.

The “add women and stir” approach is not only an issue within rural fire services, it also affects attempts at community engagement. This is illustrated well by the few bushfire safety programs that are specifically aimed at women. In a recent article on the “genesis of women’s programs”, for example, the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) explains that they originally started such programs in the hope that “wives and partners of brigade members should be self-sufficient and ready to defend their property and family in an emergency” (RFS 2013: 17). A similar approach was adopted at the inception of the “Fiery Women” program in South

Australia, which clearly pushed a “stay and defend” message (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013). The program was deemed a success by researchers and representatives from the South Australian Country Fire Service (CFS) because while only “39.39% of the participants reported a ‘stay and defend’ bushfire strategy before the workshops...this increased to 84.84% at the conclusion of workshops” (DeLaine et al., 2008: 9).

The assumption at the heart of these programs is that women should be specifically targeted because they are more vulnerable during bushfire events or less knowledgeable about bushfire events. Indeed, this was made quite explicit in the review of “Fiery Women”. DeLaine and colleagues (2008) claim that intervention is necessary to target women because they are more likely to lack knowledge of appropriate bushfire response. Given the significant lack of women in the fire-fighting services, such an assertion may be plausible, but the researchers rely primarily on a study by Beringer (2000), who makes unsupported claims about women’s lack of bushfire knowledge. He states that:

“When asked whether they would evacuate if another fire were to threaten, 23% [of residents surveyed] said they would evacuate their home. Of those respondents who would evacuate, 67% were female and 33% were male. The responses from females indicates [sic] that they may have a poor understanding of bushfire behaviour as well as the role of the CFA [Country Fire Authority] and hence may perceive the bushfire to be a greater threat which would lead to a greater likelihood of evacuation” (Beringer, 2000: 12).

No evidence is presented in support of this statement. Instead, Beringer simply equates preference for evacuation with a lack of knowledge about bushfire safety.

Such assumptions tend to underpin much of the agency-dominated discussion around bushfire safety in Australia, although the international conversation is markedly different. International studies on gender and disaster evacuation preference show that women are more likely than men to favour evacuation. In some places, this is actually seen as virtue. Enarson (2009), for example, shows that women’s more common preference for evacuation is seen by many emergency agencies overseas as a valuable asset in promoting risk aversion. There is an understanding that a preference for evacuation is less likely to stem from ignorance, and more likely to stem from gendered norms of responsibility (e.g. care-giving). This understanding, highlighting the social roots of gendered behavioural difference, is further supported by studies on risk perception, which show that privileged groups – in particular, wealthy, white men – are much more likely to have low risk perception (Finucane et al., 2000); while the poor, minority groups, and women are more likely to have high risk perception. Finucane and others (2000) suggest this stems, not from a lack of education, but rather from inequality, different environmental factors, and life experience.

The suggestion that women prefer evacuation because they are overly concerned or ill educated about bushfire is not only an unfounded assertion; it may also be a dangerous one. Unlike the trend in disasters internationally, where women are over-represented in death tolls (Enarson & Chakrabarti, 2009), in Australia, more men than women die in bushfires. Indeed, a recent survey of bushfire deaths has shown that almost three times more civilian men than women died in bushfire events in Australia between 1900 and 2008 (Haynes et al., 2010). Haynes and colleagues (2010) suggest that one of the reasons men may be over-represented in bushfire fatalities is that they are more likely than women to “actively defend a house”. This clearly contradicts the idea that the best model of bushfire safety is therefore to teach women to adopt a masculinised model of “stay and defend”.

Confronting these sorts of cultural and institutional assumptions about gender and bushfire can be very difficult. It is promising to see that at least some acknowledgement of the role of gender is taking place within organisations like the CFA, RFS and CFS. However, if the discussion around gender remains based on ill-founded assumptions about women and does not address issues of men and masculinity, progress will be very limited. Incorporating a recognition of existing cultures of male dominance and the cultural

masculinisation of bushfire-fighting can help broaden discussions about bushfire safety, may facilitate better community engagement, and might help to underpin more successful attempts at rectifying the gender imbalance in rural fire agencies.

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