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More men die in bushfires: how gender affects how we plan and respond

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More men die in bushfires: how gender affects how we plan and respond

Abstract

The recent bushfires in Western Australia and South Australia are a reminder of the deadly potential of bushfires in this country. Four people lost their lives in the WA fires, and two people are confirmed to have died in the SA fires. It is now well documented that women and men are exposed to bushfire risk in different ways and degrees due to everyday divisions of labour and gendered norms. A range of factors influence how people prepare for, respond to, and recover from bushfire. These include: the type of work they do; responsibilities for children, older and disabled people; and the distribution of decision-making power within the household. Gender roles often mean that women take responsibility for the safety of vulnerable household members, while men protect the home and property. A number of studies have documented the tendency for women to want to leave and men to stay and defend.

Keywords

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THE CONVERSATION



More men die in bushfires: how gender affects how we plan and respond

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Men and women prepare and respond differently to the threat posed by bushfires. Raoul Wegat/AAP

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It is now well documented that women and men are exposed to bushfire risk in different ways and degrees due to everyday divisions of labour and gendered norms.

A range of factors influence how people prepare for, respond to, and recover from bushfire. These include: the type of work they do; responsibilities for children, older and disabled people; and the distribution of decision-making power within the household.

Gender roles often mean that women take responsibility for the safety of vulnerable household members, while men protect the home and property. A number of studies have documented the tendency for women to want to leave and men to stay and defend.

More men die in fires, but number of women increasing

Fatality statistics highlight the role of gender in vulnerability to bushfire. Analysis of 552 bushfire-related deaths in Australia between 1900 and 2008 found that 67% were men, who mostly died outside while protecting assets. The proportion of men dying in bushfires declined since 1955 (to 57%), while the proportion of women increased from 16% between 1900 and 1954 to 38% after 1955. Women mostly died while sheltering or evacuating.

The gender distribution of fatalities on Black Saturday followed similar trends, 58% male and 42% female.

Our research published in the journal *Geographical Research* this month examined gendered responses to the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. This involved analysis of over 600 interviews and a mail questionnaire of 1,314 households conducted with survivors across the fire-affected areas. This data was collected following Black Saturday by the Bushfire & Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre's Research Taskforce.

Different responses

The influence of gender on planning and preparation was evident in interviews with survivors. Men often talked about "hard" preparations, such as reducing fuel and setting up sprinkler systems. Women often spoke about "soft" preparations, such as planning household responses and measures to ensure the safety of children and other household members.

Women more often reflected critically on their level of preparedness, with more than three-quarters saying they would have liked to be more prepared (compared to 68% of men).

In terms of intended responses, men more often wanted to stay and defend against bushfire (56% v. 42%) and women more often wanted to leave as soon as they knew a fire was threatening (23% v. 11%). Of those who intended to "wait and see" (an approach discouraged by fire agencies), men were more likely to intend to wait until the fire arrived before deciding whether to stay or leave (11% v. 7%) and women were more likely to intend to stay and defend but leave if they felt threatened (20% v. 15%). Very few men or women had intended to leave on all days of high fire danger, regardless of whether a fire had started (both 2%).

Analysis of the interviews revealed that responsibility for children, the elderly and other vulnerable household members influenced many people's intentions to leave. In many cases, women left and men stayed behind to defend the house and property.

In some cases, household members disagreed over their intended responses, with a number of women reporting that their intention for everyone in the household to leave conflicted with their male partner's intention. These disagreements tended to happen in households where people had not adequately planned or discussed their response with other household members, and in situations where plans changed at the last moment.

In terms of actual responses, men more often stayed to defend (62% v. 42%), while women more often left before or when the fire arrived (54% v. 35%). Small proportions of women (5%) and men (3%) reported that they sheltered inside a house or some other structure, in a vehicle, or somewhere outside.

Women were more receptive to advice from relatives, friends, neighbours and emergency services, particularly when advice related to leaving. Men more often reported feeling confident that they could protect themselves and others (85% v. 71%) and their house and property (75% v. 59%). Men were more likely to say they would stay and defend against future bushfires than women (83% v. 68%).

Improving safety

These findings largely support past research on bushfire and gender, which has highlighted that women more often intend to leave and men more often want to stay.

However, we challenge characterisations of staying to defend as a masculine response and leaving as a feminine response. While some women expressed a strong desire to leave, others were committed to staying to defend - and 42% did so. Similarly, there were many men who never considered staying to defend an option.

A number of these findings suggest opportunities for enhancing community bushfire safety. The tendency for women to reflect more critically on their level of planning and preparedness

suggests there are opportunities to develop bushfire awareness and education programs designed specifically to engage and meet the needs of women.

Similarly, the finding that women were more receptive to bushfire-related advice suggests opportunities for tailoring and communicating information, advice and warnings to women. It is also important that residents in bushfire risk areas plan and discuss the intended responses of all householders to avoid last minute disagreements and decisions.

It is important to stress that because of ingrained gender norms in Australian culture, many of the issues raised in our analysis are unlikely to be resolved by outreach programs and information provision by emergency services alone.



Gender

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