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# Responding to a fire threat – gender roles: responsibility and dependency

Helen Goodman
Research Fellow
Evaluation Framework Project, Bushfire CRC
School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning
RMIT University
Melbourne, Australia

Alison Cottrell
Project Leader
Understanding Communities project
Bushfire CRC and, Centre for Disaster Studies
School of Earth and Environmental Sciences
James Cook University
Townsville, Australia
[1]

## *Introduction*

The context in which many members of the public make decisions in relation to the threat posed by a hazard event, is usually at the household level (Proudley, 2008). This is a distinctly social context; within households there exists a complex set of roles and relationships, which are severely tested when a response such as to a fire threat is required to be made. Fordham and Ketteridge (1998) have argued that disasters offer a situation where the vulnerabilities engendered in roles become most explicit (see also Blaikie et al 1994). “The gendering of roles and behaviour in disasters and disaster planning impacts on women and men in similarly *hidden ways*, lessening the

[1] The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of Alan Rhodes (Country Fire Authority, Victoria) and Mae Proudley (Research Officer, RMIT) to this research. Alan and Mae together with one of the authors, conducted these 17 interviews on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in July 2005.

effectiveness of disaster preparedness and management" (p. 83, emphasis added). This article provides Australian case material of the different and hidden gendered responses of men and women to a fast, high intensity fire, for which there was little warning, and raises questions about the implications for community education and awareness activities provided by emergency services.

The research approach aimed to seek an overall understanding of the contexts of decisions and responses made by household members to the impending fire threat. Some of the findings of this research have been published elsewhere (see Goodman, Healey and Boulet, 2007; Goodman and Proudley, 2008)[2]. The main focus of one article on this fire (Goodman, Healey and Boulet, 2007) was on 'informal community relationships' and the important role they played particularly in relation to community members warning each other. Gender differences were only alluded to in this article, as indicated in the following paragraph:

> What was particularly instructive from interviews with the seventeen households was the extent to which experience with fire – and thus the capacity to make informed decisions about how to translate knowledge of the fire's movement into a safe plan of action – tended to lie with men rather than women. Thus, a number of women explained that they deferred to the greater knowledge and expertise of husbands for decisions about what they should do as the fire drew close. For some women, the decision to *stay together* was paramount, irrespective of whether they decided to stay at home or flee the fire; still others wanted their husband to give often very explicit directions about what to do; and others yet, for whom the prospect of fire had been a longstanding source of anxiety, were keen to leave their homes. There were, however, some paradoxical ideas about what constituted safe practice in the face of fire. (Goodman et al, 2007, p.18)

[2] Rhodes (2005) also managed and wrote up a telephone interview survey carried out by Strahan and Associates, for the Coronial Inquiry. He has also presented this data at other forums (eg Brisbane conference, 2006).

An account of the different gendered roles people in a household is published here for the first time.

## *Dependency and Responsibility*

The roots of the word *depend* come from 'de' – down from', and 'pendre' to hang from, connoting 'a person who depends on another for maintenance'; or 'the relation of having existence hanging upon, or conditioned by, the existence of something else; the fact of depending on another thing or person'. (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary). We use the word in its literal sense in this article – the idea of one person depending on another, in this case, for advice in a crisis.

*Response* has the literal meaning of 'to answer', leading to a meaning of 'answerable'; 'liable to be called to account; having authority or control; capable of filling an obligation or trust'. Taking *responsibility* as a noun, it takes the meaning of 'a charge, trust, or duty, for which one is responsible; a person for whom or thing for which one is responsible; the state or fact of being responsible; the opportunity or necessity to be responsible'. (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary). In this article we interpret the experience of some of the men, who were the one's on whom some of the women depended, as taking on this responsibility of being the giver of advice. We argue that this responsibility itself was experienced by some as a hidden burden.

We elaborate our ideas in this article around the words dependency and responsibility. For several of the women, they were 'dependent' on the men in the sense of requiring their advice to assist them to make decisions in the face of the threat of the fire. There are other meanings of 'dependence' which we develop in a subsequent article, about the role taken by women when *others* particularly are depending on them, such as is required when women are the dominant 'carers' of those who are dependent on them, including children, frail elderly or those with special needs. In this article we are only referring then to one side of the 'dependency' coin, that side when women are dependent on others for their survival. The other idea is around responsibility, and we highlight the demand made of and on men who take up the role of the 'responsible' one when it comes to decision making in relation to fire response.

In presenting this material on roles it is necessary to avoid an implied determinism (see Butler 1990, Connell 1995, Fordham and Ketteridge, 1998, Milroy and Wismer 1994, Schippers 2004, Weist, 1998). The differences in gender roles are a matter of patterns of behaviour and are not absolutes. Not all men or women have these experiences, but it is the pattern of experience that needs to be acknowledged, so communities can take the initiatives they need to take to further develop their community safety practices, and organizations whose roles are to assist communities, can develop interventions that contribute to strengthening community safety.

## *Location and timing of the Wangary fire event*

Wangary is located on the Lower Eyre Peninsula in South Australia; its main town, the City of Port Lincoln, has a population of approximately 14,000 people and is 676 kilometres from Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. The area is largely agricultural, supporting a large number of grain and grazing businesses, with coastal areas supporting a large fishing and tourist population. The landscape contains several smaller inland townships, a significant amount of native scrub and also areas of heavily forested National Park.

The fire began on Monday 10th January, 2005; despite being declared contained that evening, on Tuesday morning ('Black Tuesday') it broke containment lines and claimed nine lives, two men on a private fire unit and seven women and children, six of whom were caught in cars fleeing the fire. Ninety-three homes were destroyed along with numerous other buildings, vehicles and equipment and over 46,000 stock (Smith 2005). The Wangary fire was a severe fire event, with the grassland fire danger index peaking at over 350 (Gould, 2005).[3] Being January, it was school holiday time, the consequence being that 'care of children' would in the main be in the hands of women at that time. Rhodes (2005) reported in his analysis of data from a telephone interview study, that "more than two thirds of the respondents

[3] The Fire Danger Index is an indicator of the severity of the fire danger whereby the hotter, the drier and windier the conditions, the higher the index will be. The Index ranges from 2 (where the difficulty of suppression is rated as low), through to 5 (moderate), 10 (High), 20 – 40 (Very High), and 50-100 (Extreme). See www.esb.act.gov.au/firebreak/grass-behave.html, accessed 14/3/07. The Fire Danger Index of the Wangary fire was 350.

present at their property reported they received less than 30 minutes warning of the fire" (p.50)

## *Methodology*

Researchers from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre carried out semi structured interviews with 17 households, speaking to a total of 35 residents. These households were selected from 191 residents who participated in Rhodes' (2005) telephone survey, who answered that they would be willing to speak further with researchers. The basis of the selection was to seek households across four relatively distinct areas of the fire ground, which experienced the main force of the fire impact at different times, from 'earliest impact' to 'latest impact'. The total numbers interviewed also reflected the time available to researchers.

Sixteen of the 17 interviews were tape recorded (a total of 19 hours of taped interview), with the remaining interview transcribed from notes and subsequent recollections of the researchers present. The interviews took place in July 2005, some 7 months after the fire. Three interviewers (two females and one male) were present at 15 of the interviews, and two interviewers, both female, conducted the other two interviews.

## *Household Descriptors*

Of the 17 households, 15 were located within the perimeter of the fire ground. Two households had homes in nearby towns but had farming interests, and on the day of the fire, some family members were on those farms. Table 1 below sets out those present at the time of interview:

| **Table 1: Household members present at interview (N=17)** | |
|---|---|
| **Husband and wife** | **10** |
| **Women only; husbands absent at time of interview** | **2** |
| **Husband and wife couples with adult children present.** | **5** |

Table 2 depicts the age range and employment status of the people interviewed, and whether the households usually comprised school age or younger children.

**Table 2: Key descriptors of the households interviewed (N=17)**

| | No of households | Renting (R) or Owning (O) | Primary Income: Farming (F) Retired (R) Other (O) | **Households with school age or younger children** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Under 30 | 2 | 1,R; 1, O | O (2) | **1** |
| 30-39 | 1 | O | O (1) | **1** |
| 40-49 | 3 | O | F (1); O(2) | **2** |
| 50-59 | 8 | O | F(5) R(1) O(2) | **2** |
| 60-69 | 2 | O | R(2) | |
| 70 and over | 1 | O | F(1) | |
| **Total** | **17** | **17** | **17** | **6** |

Table 3 denotes where the household members had past or present fire service experience.

**Table 3 Current or past fire service experience of households and land use (N=17)**

| Land Use | Households with current or past fire service experience (n=11) | Households with no fire service experience (n=6) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Full time farming (owners) | 7 | 0 | **7** |
| Hobby farming (owners) | 4 | 5 | **9** |
| House rental on farm (non owner) | 0 | 1 | **1** |
| **Total** | **11** | **6** | **17** |

The data on land use, and on 'experience with fire', as depicted in Table 3, is now presented together with the location of women at the time of the fire front.

**Table 4: Land Use, Fire Experience and location of women at time of front (N=17)**

| Association between residence and land | Households with current or past fire service experience (n=11) | Households with no fire service experience (n=6) | Women away from the home (n=) | **Women at home at the time of the front (n=8)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full time farming (owners) | 7 | 0 | **2,14, (2)** | **4,8,9,10,11,(5)** |
| Hobby farming (owners) | 4 | 5 | **1,6,7,12,15,17 ( 6)** | **3,13,16 (3)** |
| House rental on farm (non owner) | 0 | 1 | **5 (1)** | |
| **Total** | **11** | **6** | **9** | **8** |

While there were a few households where other women were present, such as daughters, in Table 4 above we single out the women who were the adults and key decision makers. For the purposes of this article we deemed any adult daughters to be acting under the direction of their parents, which seemed in the main to be the case for all adult children present at the time of the fire.

Table 4 indicates that 5 adult women in the seven households who were from full time farming families, remained at the property for the duration of the fire front, whereas only 3 of the nine women from hobby farming families did so.

This article concentrates on the stories of 14 women. We exclude three women from the account provided here, women who found themselves away from their

homes *but for reasons largely unrelated to the fire on the Tuesday,* such as visiting relatives, shopping, and a medical appointment.

The location of fourteen women is highlighted in Table 5 below. Six were not present at the home at the time of the front arriving, and 8 were present. In the group of 6 where the women were not present at the time of the front, there was only one woman whose spouse was not in the region at the time, and she was assisted to leave the property by a male tradesman visiting at the time. In the remaining 5 the male partner was present at the property at the time of the front. In the group of 8 where both men and women who were present at the property at the time of the front, only one was a single woman, an elderly woman who was independent in her decision making and was assisted by a male neighbour who was on her property as he could not get through to his own. The question then becomes – how did women and men report the decision making particularly in relation to the decision made by the women, when in all cases there was a male present at the time?

**Table 5: Location of women at the time of the fire (n=14)**

| | Women away from the home | Women at home at the time of the front | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Full time farming (owners) | 2,14, (2) | 4,8,9,10,11,(5) | **7** |
| Hobby farming (owners) | 6,7,12,15,(4) | 3,13,16 (3) | **7** |
| **Total** | **6** | **8** | **14** |

Table 6 below sets out summaries of the accounts of the women's decision making.

**Table 6: Reported locus of decision making (n=14)**

| | Women away from home_accounts of decision making (n=6) | *Women at home_accounts of decision making* |
|---|---|---|
| Full time farming (owners) | Left of 'own accord' (C14: **1**)<br>Left on advice (C2: **1**) | *Acting on advice: (C8; C9: **2**)*<br>*Making own decision, influenced by presence of husband (C4;C11: **2**)*<br>*Making own decision (C10: **1**)* |
| Hobby farming (owners) | Left of 'own accord' (C6: **1**)<br>Left on advice: husbands (C12, C15: **2**) and tradesman (C7: **1**) | *Acting on advice: Nil*<br>*Making own decision, influenced by presence of husband (C3; C13; C16: (**3**)* |
| ***Total*** | ***6*** | ***8*** |

Two themes emerge in the accounts about decision making. One theme is the dependency of women on the men for key decisions in relation to their response. The other theme is the burden of responsibility for those men who either took or assumed responsibility for decision making, or where they did not, expressed such regret that it is reasonable to conclude that they *felt* a large degree of responsibility for the decisions their wives took. We discuss these differences in gender terms.

## *Decision Making*

As noted in Table 6 above, 6 women were away from the home at the time of the front, and 8 were home. Those who left the home will be discussed first.

### Location and decision making context: those who left the home

Of the six women who left the home in response to the threat of fire, two reported leaving of their 'own accord', (C6 and C14), and four on 'advice', three on advice from their husbands who remained at the property (C2, C12 and C15) and one on advice from a visiting tradesman (C7).

Leaving of "own accord"

The first woman (C14) who left her property of her own accord (from a farming family in Table 6), was at work in town, came home after a call from her husband, and then decided to leave to go to a relative's place, which was closer to the highway and the beach.

> We probably shouldn't have. We got to the road and I was in front and the fire was there and we couldn't go anywhere. It was just a bloody miracle there was a gap there [at the caravan park] and I could see the driveway. My first reaction was 'I don't want to go in there' [petrol station]. We drove in, got down to the pipeline. [We] got the kids out of the car. You could feel the heat of the fire."

This woman reported that in the previous years when her children were younger, that their plan was always "if you're in danger, get out. Take the kids and go, it used to be, so I just went. Out of the frying pan into the fire virtually.

Even though this woman very clearly made her own decision, this did not shield her husband from remorse. "I regret greatly that I didn't say 'get to town', rather than the way she went".

The second woman who reported leaving of her own accord, was a young woman (C6) who drove home to her property late on the morning of the bushfire. She procrastinated on this decision in part because she was the only one 'on' in the retail store where she worked, but in larger part because she disbelieved the warning issued by a relative (issued more than once), that her home was likely to be affected by the fire. On finally arriving home, and recognizing the proximity of the fire, she tried to get her husband and brother to make a collective decision with her, failed, and left.

> We didn't really have time to communicate….My concern right from the start is... I don't think it's a good idea to separate because that's how accidents I felt happen …... So I wanted to stay together……Barry obviously left [to move stock] and then Tom went down there to get the fire unit and I was just here by myself, so I got in the car and said …look it's not worth it…

She reported being preoccupied with the care needs of her young children who were in town. She gathered the children's pets and loaded them into the car: "For my kids, if they lose all the animals particularly all in one hit, for kids that's pretty hard." In her account of her decision to leave, she linked this decision with her presence of her children who were being looked after by a relative in town. Given she thought her husband (who had gone to move stock) may not survive, she added: "[You] can't let the kids not have a Mum.". In the event, the terrain she drove through turned out to be more life threatening than the experience of her husband and brother, though they too had a 'close call'.

While presently living on the land, neither of these two women who left of their own accord had grown up in a farming environment. They both said they felt personally underprepared for the threat of fire.

Leaving 'on advice'

The remaining four women who were away from home at the time of the fire front (C2, C7, C12, and C15) reported being advised to leave by their husbands or a visiting tradesman. Again, these circumstances were complex.

The first of these four women (the only one in this group from a full time farming household) reported that she was instructed by her husband to leave and go to town to be with another family member, while her husband and sons fought the fire at the property. When asked how her response to the advice that she should leave, she said that she felt she would "be in the way. I didn't argue with him. He's got enough to worry about." This woman left well ahead of the front, which impacted on their property later in the day.

The second of the four women (C12) reported that as her husband had greater experience with fires, she waited for a cue from him. "I wanted to go earlier, but he would say, 'no not yet.' I would say 'shall I go now?' and he'd say 'no not yet." She reported him as saying that there was "no real panic to get away early". She continued: "but like I said, I'd never been in a fire like that, I mean any fire that close, whereas he and the boys had." She understood that the trigger to go was when they saw flames. Her husband was distressed in reporting the subsequent events after the front had passed, when he took some

time searching for his wife before he was able to determine that she was safe. He seemed torn about whether it was the right thing that she left when she did.

The third woman (C15) said she was instructed by her husband to get in the car and leave.

> I was in the bedroom throwing a few clothes in a bag. He came running up and told me to get out now. I called the dog, hopped in the car because he told me to 'get out now' and took off. I could see the flames as I was driving up the drive-way. I was overtaken by smoke and flames. I couldn't see a thing. I just remember yelling out 'no, no, no, I can't see.

Due to the lack of visibility she drove the car into a fence, and remained there until her husband came to find her. Her husband was visibly upset in recounting that he believed now that advising his wife to leave was the 'basically, ….the biggest mistake of my life". The wife said that if it had been up to her she would have stayed.

The one woman in this group of 4 who reported acting under instruction, who was not advised by her husband but by a tradesman, was a woman whose husband was working over 8 hours away (C7). She had a tradesman at her home at the time of the arrival of the front. She reported just becoming 'frozen' and attributes her survival to the actions of this person who shook her out of her stunned state, and firmly and quickly told her what to do. They left just in advance of the flames.

This woman spent a lot the fire season being anxious. "When it gets to late autumn/early winter, I say 'thank goodness for that'". She said that she has always been regarded by her family as an excessive worrier, a reaction she feels that her family had again when she reported her anxiety in a telephone call to them during the day of Monday 10th January, 2005. "I think they thought I was over the top". This woman has since sold the property. "If I was here next summer, those old feelings will come back".

Of the four who left the property when advised by their husbands (or on one case a tradesman), two were most likely in life threatening situations (C7,C15)

and one in a dangerous situation (C12). In the fourth case, the fire front did not threaten that area until early afternoon, and this woman was the only one not further endangered by the timing of her departure. Those who decided themselves to leave, (C6 and C14) were in extremely life threatening situations. For some of these women, their comments during the interview reflected some insight that their departure was probably too late.

Two different members in these six households expressed the sentiment that the wives not being present may work to reduce the sense of burden which might have been imposed otherwise by her presence. One man commented that “If she wanted to go, OK. I was happy. I’d be quite happy to just have to worry about myself”. Another woman said she felt she would be ‘in the way’ so she didn’t argue when her husband ‘sent me back’. These comments contrast sharply with those other scenarios (discussed below) where a capacity to develop a working relationship during the event seemed to benefit both parties and the overall task of preserving life and property.

## Location and decision making context: those who were at their properties at the time of the front

Table 6 above shows that 8 women were at their properties at the time of the front. Two of these 8 (C8 and C9) reported acting ‘on advice’ from their husbands, one more explicitly on instruction (C8) than the other (C9). The remaining six reported both making their own decision, but also being positively influenced by what they described as the strength they gained from the presence of their husbands. We refer to this below as ‘socially influenced self directed’ decision making.

<u>Operating ‘on advice’</u>

The first of the two women who concentrated in her account on her husband’s advice, reported that she drew on the strength from her husband’s active involvement and experience as a fire service volunteer. She reported saying to him: “Command me what to do. We’ve got no time to communicate. Direct me what to do……He doesn’t have to lose his life trying to find me….I did exactly as I was told.” She said she felt that women are ‘very illequipped and illtrained without our men”. Her husband added – ‘the wives don’t know what to do”.

The second of the two women who reported acting on advice from her husband, noted that that while she initially had raised with her husband the idea that she and their daughter might leave, that he said emphatically: "You're not going." This was not difficult for his wife to accept. She reflected during the interview: "Really, what *is* the point of leaving? If you went to town you'd sit in there and you're absolutely useless, whereas here if you stayed you could fight the fire or do something." Interestingly, the young adult son in this household, who was less easy to engage in the interview process, did comment on his father's advice to him mother and sister, with the comment: "what if it wasn't the right decision?". He seemed to be anticipating a future heavy burden of male responsibility in decision making. That this particular fire also turned the tables on 'normality' was clear in the wife's comment on the *usual* roles played in this family. "[Usually] the women get to do the food to feed the fella's and you keep abreast of where they are, and the fella's go off and fight it. They come home in 24 hours and it's all out, but that wasn't the case with this one".

<u>Socially influenced self directed decision making.</u>

The remaining 6 women who were at home during the fire (C3, C4, C10, C11, C13, and C16), reported that they played a role in their own decision making, but were also influenced by the presence and advice from their husbands. In the first household, the husband was reported as saying "Now's the time to go if you're going….If you leave it any longer it's going to be too late." He said this to his wife immediately after seeing the flames coming down the hill. He said that he thought his wife (who was not present for most of the interview) didn't believe staying with the house "was a very smart idea at the time…..[but] I was reasonably certain if we stayed with the house we would be OK". He also said that "if I'd gone, she would have gone….I don't think she would have gone on her own." Knowing that her husband was staying and had experience with fires, despite her strong desire to leave, she stayed. "I had faith in him" and knew that leaving "was not the right thing to do." This woman described being anxious most of the fire season. "I've always been scared…There's always the chance of a stubble fire, …or a burn off getting out of control. ..I've always said to my husband…make sure that water cart's full".

The second account was given by a woman who said that she "might have considered" going but was "more interested in being on the phone," by which

she said she meant telephoning neighbours. This interviewee played a key role in alerting neighbours in the local area of the impending bushfire: “I was ringing everyone.” Her husband, who also contacted neighbours, then spent considerable time outside putting in fire breaks. She and her daughter carried out a range of household tasks, including making food for those working nearby. She said ‘it really did settle us’ seeing her husband working the grader putting in the breaks. Had the fire burned beyond the fire breaks this interviewee said she might have considered leaving the property.

The third account was given by the oldest person we interviewed, being a widow in her late 70’s, or early 80’s. She was resolute about her stance. “I wasn’t afraid; I had no intention of leaving. I decided I was going to stay.” She drove a heavy farm vehicle while a neighbour, who was at the property as he could not get back to his farm, operated the pump. This woman spent most of her days out at the farm on which she had spent her married life, which was now farmed by her son. She watched the weather map every night and was fully aware when she went to the farm on the Tuesday morning, that it would be a ‘risky’ day. Her determination to stay was clear and unambiguous: “I wasn’t going to turn my back on everything we had worked for”.

Reporting that she drew strength from her husband’s experience as a volunteer fire fighter, the fourth woman (C11) said that she “didn’t think twice about heading off.” If her husband had said ‘we’re leaving’ she would have left with him. “I actually wasn’t all that worried. I just had confidence in him that he knew what he was doing so….I didn’t feel panicked….If he thinks we’re quite safe here, we’ll stay here and do something about it…” She added: “you just had to get on and do what had to be done…..we just concentrated on what we had to do.”

The woman in the fifth case in this group had made a decision with her husband a long time ago, that they would stay together. They had made careful plans and had brought with them experience from a previous residence, where they were in positions of responsibility for others in a high fire risk area. She reported her resolve wavered when someone came to their property and tried to convince them to leave, saying “you’re going to die.” “I could feel myself doubting my own courage.” She stayed, although she reported subsequently

experiencing panic attacks at the sound of the Emergency Warning System on the radio.

The sixth and final case in this group (C16) drove with her husband through road blocks to get to her father's home (from their home in town which was not directly threatened) and stayed there with him to defend the father's home and help manage livestock (on a property on which she also had a business interest). The authority relationship in this case seemed to be between the father and daughter. The daughter said she was "more scared driving here through the fire. That was when I thought I was going to die." She found the task of assisting her father to defend the house when under ember and direct flame attack, was relatively straightforward. "We had a task and we just did it, come what may." Her father, also present at the interview, said "everybody just instinctively did what was obvious." This young woman said that "every now and then, if someone went out of sight, I reckon I took the role of making sure that nobody succumbed to smoke when we weren't looking".

## *Discussion*

While there was a range of responses to the threat of fire from in this study, the two common threads identified are the men's burden of responsibility, including the potential for the wrong decision to be made, and issues of dependency in relation to women's roles. By this we mean that in the main they were dependent in large part, on their husbands' decision making in this sample of households.

Some women from farming families were in safer environments. But to illustrate the point that it is inappropriate to stereotype situations, there were two women from farming families who left their properties (while the men stayed behind), one narrowly escaping injury or death, suggested that the context of 'farming' was not enough protection or reason to be included in the home and property defence. Nor was being from a household where the husband who may not have been a farmer but who none the less had 'fire experience', enough to be included in the response of other (again male) family members, who stayed with the property and actively defended themselves and it.

Several women spoke strongly about their lack of experience and some seemed somewhat dejected at their lack of confidence and skill to do what needed to be done. It is also quite likely that some of the women reporting these responses, with a different set of instructions and a different context of encouragement, could have played a valuable role in defending themselves and their properties. It was also noteworthy that while some of these women reporting feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence, these were also some of the ones who reported that they felt constantly anxious about fire during the fire season. So while 'awareness' of the possibility of the threat of fire is a basic platform for action, awareness is not enough. In fact, 'voiced awareness' may, as in the case of one woman, act to attract attributions of 'paranoia' from others.

Several of the women who stayed with their husbands, reported relying, in varying degrees, on the greater knowledge and skill held by their husbands when it came to an ability to respond to the threat of the fire. Several of the men and women implied that they stayed and worked together because the husband was at home and able to take the lead. There were clear examples of partnerships working well together, with one party in 'charge' and the other party being willing to follow instructions. The women were less vulnerable in these households, though as noted above, this reduced vulnerability was contingent on the presence of their husbands.

There is a case to look at certain aspects of women's issues separately, and various programs recognize this, such as the "Fiery Women" project in South Australia (see Delaine et al, 2008), which is based on the presumption that when learning skills that are usually in the male domain, women prefer to do this with other women (Long & Honner, 2007). Men too may need their own 'space' where their own needs for learning and well being can be explored, as exemplified in the 'men's sheds' phenomena at a community level (Golding et al, 2008). We would argue for the development of a policy direction which also accommodated and encouraged a future *unifying* potential of the perspectives, skills, knowledge, and attributes of men and women together, in a world of increasing complexity and sometimes competing identities, and significant tensions (Nussbaum, 2004). The question of how to *support* the learning needs of family members holistically, is a serious question. We emphasise *support*, which leaves the focus on the needs of families and communities at this level,

at the community level. Government policy has pushed much community based learning toward vocational outcomes, and in so doing, has shifted the focus away from opportunities for communities to come together as communities (Golding et al, 2008)). This research provides a glimpse of the nature of the hidden burden for men in this domain of community safety and it is not one which fits the hyper masculine paradigm, a paradigm which itself holds pressures for men (Connell 1995).

## Conclusion

This article seeks to shift the focus of much of the debate about community safety, to a deeper level, to a level which, hopefully respectfully, throws light on some of the more hidden vulnerabilities faced by both men and women as they respond to a severe life threatening event. Some of those vulnerabilities arise because of the roles undertaken when faced with such a threat are embedded in gendered relationships. The burdens of decision making can be seen then as somewhat differently constituted. This suggests that we do need to look at gender differences, but in examining difference, we do so in a way that is inclusive of both genders.

The contradictions in concepts of masculinity, particularly in relation to responding to the threat of fire, require open exploration in a supportive environment. So too do the repercussions for women of the gendered dimensions of responding to fire, particularly the flow on effects of the societally ascribed role of ‘carer’ of children and others with dependent needs; this needs ongoing and open exploration. It is essential to aim for a holistic approach to well being at a community level, that both men and women together need to be supported to create opportunities to explore more fulfilling roles – where burdens are more equally shared, where role expectations can be questioned and possible alternatives thought about, and the skills, knowledge, awareness, relationships, and partnerships required for harmonious living in an increasingly bushfire prone environment, can be recognized, further developed, shared and sustained.. These explorations are required particularly at the household and community levels, with their results fed into and informing those programs which seek to support communities at their local level. Perhaps then we should talk of ‘*agency engagement*’ alongside? ‘*community engagement*’; to work toward the day when communities can be supported to articulate their own needs and requirements, so that they can then engage agencies in assisting them to support those needs.

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