

National Water Safety Conference 2025

GENDER MATTERS: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF GENDER IN DROWNING PREVENTION STRATEGIES

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Led by Bournemouth University



The Facilitators



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Making waves: youth voices on safe access to blue spaces
(SRG24\240539):



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The Panel

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Blue spaces: The academic context

- Community resources for supporting health and wellbeing
- sites of risk, exclusive practices, and environmental degradation



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Risk to safety in drowning,

Gender in Leisure: The academic context

- Leisure spaces as an arena for gender performance
- The bodies' relationship to objects in the physical environment (re)creates masculinity and femininity
- Gender performance in public space becomes a cultural survival strategy within a compelling system that regularly punishes those who do not perform their gender correctly (Butler, 1993 cited in Book & Högdahl 2022)



Leisure spaces become an arena for gender performance

Both bodies and physical activities must be understood through 'the historical weight and orientation of social norms that align the intersection of classed, aged, racialised, gendered, and sexualised bodies with space' (Waite and Stanes, 2015)

By constantly repeating these behaviours, young people also reinforce and legitimise their gender in front of each other, themselves, and society..

Men and boys in leisure space

Territoriality and social order

- Interests of young men set the agenda for what, when and how things should be done (Book & Högdahl 2022)

Edgework, risk and masculinities

- Edgeworkers negotiate edges or boundaries 'between sanity and insanity, consciousness and unconsciousness, and ... life and death' (Lyng, 2005)
- Risk taking as a part of (white, male, able bodied) masculinity

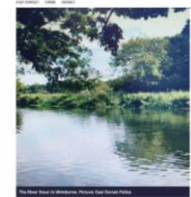
Fear and exclusion

- Young people are considered a 'polluting' presence in their use of public spaces (O'Connor et al., 2023)
- Young black men feel highly visible and intensely surveyed in their use of coastal blue spaces (Phoenix et al., 2021)
- Older men fear intimidation by young men in blue spaces (Pitt, 2019)

Dorset Police to patrol Christchurch river after railway line jumping



Swearing and spitting youths are banned from area by River Stour



different groups of boys and young men could occupy a site, colonise it, and make it their own. Although this was not intentional, their ideas and interests set the agenda for what could or could not be done, when it should be done, and in what way. Consequently, the interests of the dominant group governed all the others, who ended up outside of this inner circle.

Women and girls in leisure space

Attention on marginalised voices

- Girls tend to be underrepresented at public sport places (Book & Högdahl 2022)
- Understanding barriers to participation

Blue spaces as restorative: landscapes of care

- Feminist theories on caring for both human and non-human existences (Buser et al. 2018)

Inclusivity and accessibility

- Girls can feel excluded and insecure about whether they lived up to the conditions governing the place.

**MAKE
SPACE
FOR
GIRLS**

Study calls for safer wild swimming for women



Charlotte Andrews & PA Media

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The Juxtaposition of Blue Spaces



Being in the water triggers parasympathetic nervous system which is responsible for the body's rest and digest response



Your heart rate and blood pressure lowers and your body relaxes



Most people love the water, instinctively we feel better in or around the water



We are drawn to the water and water represents and symbolizes 'freedom'



Which is why it is difficult and challenging to get across water message safety / warning / dangers because it "feels" against our freedom



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The allure of water, a ubiquitous element in human experience, evokes a profound physiological response deeply ingrained in our biology. As many have observed, proximity to water often triggers a parasympathetic response, signalling the body to enter a state of rest and digest. This phenomenon is characterized by a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure, accompanied by a sense of relaxation and tranquility (Nichols, 2018). It is no wonder that individuals who frequently engage in water-related activities find solace and joy in these aquatic environments, where the very presence of water symbolizes freedom and liberation (Nichols, 2018). However, despite the allure of the water and what is seemingly good for us, the water can also be a dangerous

place, which makes it harder to warn of dangers -i.e. it looks calm, I'll be safe walking next to the water, I'm only running along this path because of the views of the water _i'll be safe>

What we know

Men's instincts are different to women's

Men view risk differently to women

Men will show off heroism while women exhibit greater inclination towards safety and risk avoidance

"Underestimating the risk and overestimating the ability to cope may partially explain the high drowning rate in males." (Croft & Button, 2015)



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Theoretical perspectives on instinctual differences between men and women have also been explored within evolutionary psychology and socio-biology. Evolutionary psychologists argue that gender-specific instincts evolved as adaptive responses to ancestral environments, shaping behavioural tendencies related to mating, parental investment, and resource acquisition (Buss, 1995; Eagly & Wood, 1999). Sociobiological perspectives, as exemplified by Trivers (1972) and Wilson (1975), suggest that biological imperatives shape gender-specific instincts, leading to divergent reproductive strategies influenced by evolutionary pressures. These frameworks provide insights into the origins of gender-specific instincts and their implications for human behaviour and

decision-making. While research on instinctual patterns in water-related activities based on gender is limited, broader findings, such as men being more likely to drown than women, (WHO, 2014) hint at potential gender differences in instinctual behaviours even in such contexts.

Evolutionary psychology posits that gender-specific behavioural tendencies, shaped by evolutionary pressures, may influence individuals' actions in water-related scenarios. For instance, men's predisposition towards risk-taking behaviour can be attributed to their ancestral roles as hunters and protectors (Geary, 2010). Conversely, women, historically responsible for childcare and nurturing, may prioritize precautionary measures in such contexts. This division of labour is believed to have originated from the differing reproductive strategies of our ancestors (Trivers, 1972), where men typically competed for mates while women invested more in offspring care (Buss, 2016). Thus, these evolved behavioural inclinations could manifest in contemporary scenarios such as swimming, with men often displaying more adventurous tendencies showing off their heroism, while women exhibit a greater inclination towards safety and risk avoidance.

Croft JL, Button C. Interacting Factors Associated with Adult Male Drowning in New Zealand. *PLoS One*. 2015 Jun 17;10(6):e0130545. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0130545. PMID: 26083689; PMCID: PMC4471112.

What is the data telling us?



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We'll look at the last 3 years of data from WAID – note there has been an interactive databook update recently but these are the common patterns we see emerging.

WAID, 2021 Report UNITED KINGDOM

Gender/Age UK*	Female	Male	2021
Under 10	3	3	6
10 to 14	1	11	12
15 to 19	1	19	20
20 to 24	2	17	19
25 to 29	4	10	14
30 to 34	1	23	24
35 to 39	2	13	15
40 to 44	3	14	17
45 to 49	2	15	17
50 to 54	3	12	15
55 to 59	1	20	21
60 to 64	10	16	26
65 to 69	0	12	12
70 to 74	3	8	11
75 to 79	6	3	9
80 to 84	1	8	9
85 to 89	1	3	4



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WAID, 2022 Report UNITED KINGDOM

Gender/Age UK*	Female	Male	2022
Under 10	3	8	11
10 to 14	4	11	15
15 to 19	0	11	11
20 to 24	5	16	21
25 to 29	2	9	11
30 to 34	1	13	14
35 to 39	3	10	13
40 to 44	3	9	12
45 to 49	1	13	14
50 to 54	2	11	13
55 to 59	2	16	18
60 to 64	2	9	11
65 to 69	2	5	7
70 to 74	3	4	7
75 to 79	2	1	3
80 to 84	1	5	6
85 to 89		1	1
90 plus		2	2



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WAID, 2023 Report UNITED KINGDOM

Sex/Age UK*	Female	Male	2023
Under 10	1	4	5
10-14	1	4	5
15-19	5	18	23
20-24		9	9
25-29	1	13	14
30-34	1	10	11
35-39	3	9	12
40-44	1	8	9
45-49	1	6	7
50-54	5	5	10
55-59	5	8	13
60-64	1	21	22
65-69		12	12
70-74	2	17	19
75-79	3	7	10
80-84	2	7	9
85-89		4	4
90 plus	1		1



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Questions to the panel



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Why are men most vulnerable?



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Older, and younger

What works in preventing drowning in men and boys?



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What is the role of women and girls?



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**What don't we know? What questions
do we need to ask about this?**



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What can we learn from gendered communication campaigns or gendered interventions in other contexts? (i.e. road safety, drink driving etc)



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Ideas for gendered interventions (both campaigns and non-campaigns)



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We may run a mentimeter to ask the audience too?

Ideas for future research that would be most valuable?



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We may run a mentimeter to ask the audience too

Questions from the audience?



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