

Women In Hard Hats.

*Challenges faced by women in the Fire Brigades*

By Station Officer Sue Collins, NSW Fire Brigades.

Nine or so years ago, when I was a junior firefighter working at the City of Sydney Fire Station in Castlereagh Street, a female colleague of mine was showing a woman around the station. The woman was in the process of applying to join the Brigades as a firefighter. She was fit and seemed to rather enjoy the prospect of working with a bunch of blokes. My colleague was not so optimistic. City of Sydney has the largest concentration of testosterone on one shift.

The woman confidently declared that she liked working with men because she worked for the National Rugby League and got on well with all the players.

"Yes, that's all very well", said my colleague, "but you don't want to play rugby league, do you?"

This story, more than any other, sums up for me the position of women in firefighting. We don't want to be spectators or supporters, cheering the brave menfolk from the sidelines. We want to be players in this game.

In 1985 the first two women stepped across the threshold at the State Training College. And it's not as if the flood gates have opened since.

Currently only 46 of the state's 3134 professional firefighters are women. In addition to this there are 3000 or so part-time or retained firefighters serving in mainly country locations. Of those 134 are women. Given that this is a challenging and dynamic career, which

offers excellent hours, a varied and interesting work environment, and good promotional opportunities, I personally don't understand why women wouldn't be applying in droves. The retention rate is one of the highest in any industry. Those first two women are still here after 18 years in the job. In addition, the NSWFB is one of the few employers in this state, perhaps the only employer that, duty for duty, rank for rank, pays women more than men.

I could talk to you about the instances of gender-based harassment and discrimination I've experienced, particularly in the early days, but that would detract from the fact that my experiences in this job have been largely positive. After all, I wouldn't be still here if they hadn't been.

I believe the issues facing women in the fire brigades are far more complex. I think the biggest challenge is overcoming the perceptions and stereotyping by other people - reactions based on our own expectations of the types of people we believe firefighters should be.

Men are not immune to these pressures either. A colleague once told me that he was initially horrified to discover on having their first child that their mid-wife was a man. His initial reaction was "What would he know about breast-feeding and Post-natal depression?" He admitted he wouldn't have questioned the credentials of a childless female mid-wife. He did say, however, that this man turned out to be very competent and one of the best mid-wives they had over the years.

I would ask you now to have a quick think about your own images and stereotypes of the quintessential firefighter. What qualities, words or images instantly come to mind?

- Courageous?
- Tough?
- Big?
- Tall?
- Strong?
- A big man with an axe running fearlessly into a burning building?

I can guarantee that I, at 158cms and female, would not meet your expectations.

But it might surprise you to know that neither would most of my male colleagues. You see, most male firefighters are just ordinary family men. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some are tall, some are short like me. Most do not see themselves or what they do for a living as heroic or brave.

However, no matter how flawed, perceptions and myth are powerful and I suspect this is why women don't apply for firefighting jobs. They don't see themselves as firefighters. Perhaps this is due to a lack of role models. We are spread pretty thinly across the state. But just maybe it's because they don't believe that women in general can or should be doing the job.

I appreciate that not all women want to enter burning buildings dragging 90kgs of hose or cut people out of smashed up cars. Or wear a claustrophobic gas tight suit while cleaning up some steaming toxic gunk or live in locker room conditions, but that's only the external manifestation of a really amazing, unique and challenging career. Every day is just a little bit different. There are some days when I think in amazement "They're actually

paying me to do this". I do this because I wanted a job where I could go home at the end of the day believing that I had done something useful.

The scientific community apparently has other ideas as to why women may become firefighters. Recently on late night ABC radio they were talking about emergency workers and firefighting. Inevitably, the subject of women's suitability came up and a woman academic stated that tests proved that women who enter careers such as firefighting have a higher level of testosterone than women in the general population. I am eagerly awaiting the results of genetic testing on men in female dominated industries to see if they have any Y chromosomes.

I believe that we, as a society, even in 2003, have great difficulty with the idea that women could be placed in a position of danger. Even if they choose to be there.

When British firefighter Fleur Lombard was killed in a supermarket fire in 1994, the London press, not known for it's restraint at the best of times, trumpeted that it was a mistake to allow such a "slip of a girl" to do a man's job. As if fire respects gender. Believe me, at 800deg C gender doesn't matter. It makes me angry not only that they were implying that Ms. Lombard wasn't up to the task, but that it's okay to send men to their deaths.

The wife of one Queensland firefighter told a colleague of mine that she didn't want her husband working with women because he would feel compelled to protect her in an emergency and the wife didn't want him risking his life to protect a woman.

This is odd, because I'm assuming she would want other

firefighters to help her husband if he got into trouble. After all that is what firies do. You watch each other's backs.

In most cases where a man has refused to work with a woman firefighter the objection can be traced back to pressure from home.

They are some of the big picture issues women in fire services deal with on a daily basis. I'm going to outline some of the specific challenges I have dealt with and continue to deal with. Each woman in this job faces her own unique set of challenges based on her own attitude, how she relates to her colleagues, her past experiences and her reaction to the job in general. I cannot and do not speak for all women in the job and the following observations are based on my own experience.

From my observations I have come to the conclusion that men are largely automatically accepted as good firefighters until proven otherwise while women are regarded as somewhat suspect until they prove themselves to be good firefighters. And it's not just the once. This is a process that often must be repeated at every new station. It wears you down.

While the first two women joined in 1985, a woman first actually applied to join in 1982, but withdrew her application prior to testing. I can only imagine the terrible panic that gripped the rank and file when they realised that IT was inevitable.

When met with the news that a woman is coming to their station blokes have one of three reactions:

- Acceptance - either "whatever" or a reluctant "I'm not too happy about it but I'll wait and see"
- Moral Panic - this usually takes the form of a prayer-like lament - "what have we done to deserve this?" or "Why us?"
- Refusal - "I'm not working with a woman!"
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As I said earlier, this last response is usually prompted by pressure from the home front for whatever reason.

Now to the second response - The Lament. I was stationed at Eastwood for six years. You would think that in that time they would have gotten used to having a woman around - that the whole experience would have been demystified. But apparently not so. When a second woman was about to come onto the shift you would have thought it was the end of life as we know it. "But we've already got one. Why can't she go on another shift?" "Why are they sending them all here. It's not right." This went on for several shifts from one particular gentleman until his wife told him to "get over it". Interestingly he became very good mates with the new woman and they are friends to his day. One of the concerns men have about working with women is the issue of strength and ability.

"You couldn't get me out if I collapsed." If I had a even 20c for every time I've heard that I could retire.

"You're too short". "I don't think you're strong enough."

"Standards are dropping!" is one of my very favourites.

What standards? Before 1982 there was no Physical Aptitude Test. It was assumed that all men were suitable and that all women were not. Physical testing was only

introduced to ensure women met the 'standards'.

So how strong is strong enough? How tall is tall enough? Who sets the standards? Well, the brigades do, by way of the PAT. But around the mess room table the standards are always set by the person doing the complaining. What they don't realise that there will always be someone bigger, taller, stronger than they are. I find it strange that no man ever says that another man is not strong enough.

Of course, we all know that minorities in any job get all the privileges; that women somehow get privileges that men don't. When women sit for promotional exams or tests there is always the cry of foul play. In the minds of some men they will inevitably pass, not through their own efforts but because they're being "fast-tracked".

In the eyes of some firefighters, every change, no matter how relevant or logical, is decried as only happening to make the job easier for women. Unfortunately they fail to consider that what makes the job safer and easier for women makes it safe and easier for everyone.

Now as I mentioned at the beginning, duty for duty, rank for rank, women get paid more than men. That's because there is one thing women get in this job that men don't, and that's a panty-hose allowance. All \$3.34 p/fn.

Most men don't know about this off little anomaly. Women get a panty-hose allowance because we used to be issued with culottes to wear on parade. I don't know who thought up the idea of culottes but they should be forced to wear them. They are a hideous and impractical garment and thankfully we are no longer issued with them. But we still get the panty-hose allowance. Why I do not know, but I'm not complaining.

Isolation is another issue for me. Depends on where you work you may never see another woman at work. When I joined the Brigades I was placed in a recruit class with another woman. This is Brigade policy now. This pairing resulted in a career long friendship with that other woman. We have helped each other and studied together through every promotional exam. We ring each other up if we've had a bad day and just talk about it. I can truly say that her friendship has been invaluable to me.

I cannot over emphasise the importance of strong networks and friendships with other women in the industry. Isolation, either real or perceived, is a crushing and debilitating problem. Like the men you tend to put on a brave face. There have been times where this job has driven me to tears. Just because of the attitudes of some of my coworkers.

In saying that I must emphasise that not all members of that support network need be women. Two of my best friends in the job are men I have worked with and with whom I have often discussed personal concerns.

But possibly the greatest support and certainly my major role model is not another woman but the man who said "Over my dead body will any woman join this brigade!" My father went on to become a great advocate and supporter of women firefighters when he realised that:

- a) the sky didn't fall
- b) they could hold their own
- c) they offered a very different perspective on how things could be done, and
- d) they were very competent

He helped found the organisation Women of the CFS and was a strong advocate for women's issues in the VFBA.

Is it getting easier? Are women generally more accepted? I believe the answer is yes. Men's attitudes are changing. Their own daughters are looking at what their fathers do and saying "you know, I might give that a go."

Being a Station Officer brings with it a whole new set of challenges. I am no longer "one of the boys" but their boss. Interestingly, I've only come across one man who seemed intent on challenging me. For the most part, blokes don't really care whose in charge as long as that person is supportive and is willing to make a decision. I look back at all the qualities I wanted in a boss and that's the boss I try to be.

If women are to be recruited and retained in any industry a supportive management is essential. This job has undergone some major organisational and cultural shifts in the last 10 years. This has been largely due to the leadership of the recently retired Commissioner, Ian MacDougall. Under his leadership the number of women firefighters quadrupled. I know the new commissioner, Greg Mullins, is equally supportive of women's achievement and of progressive and positive change.

In closing, I would like to emphasise that, when all is said and done, I have little to complain about. The men I work with on a regular basis are not only supportive and competent but good fun to be with as well. Personally, I believe I have the best job in the world.