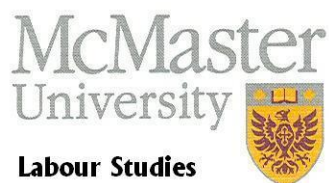


Insights from the Inside: A window into the experience of female firefighters in Ontario¹

Suzanne Mills, School of Labour Studies, McMaster University
Wayne Lewchuk, School of Labour Studies McMaster University
Morgan Jaques, School of Labour Studies McMaster University

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Section One

1.0 Introduction

Despite recent efforts to employ more women, firefighting remains an overwhelmingly male dominated occupation (Hulett et.al. 2008a; Schermerhorn-Collins 2017). In Ontario in 2015, women represented just over five percent of all firefighters and just under seven percent of senior firefighting leadership. The integration of women into the fire service lags behind their inclusion into police forces where women represented nearly one-quarter of non-commissioned officers in Ontario and over twenty percent of commissioned police officers.² **Insights from the Inside** uses surveys and interviews with firefighters to explore the barriers to employing more women firefighters. It documents the stories and experiences of women firefighters from across Ontario using quantitative and qualitative data. These are stories that many women suggested were not always taken seriously by their co-workers.

The goal of increasing the number of women firefighters is not just tokenism, which aims to include women to serve the image of the fire service. There are important reasons why everyone involved in the fire service should favour increasing the participation of women in the fire service. An obvious reason is to give more women access to a rewarding and well-paying profession. Less obvious is how increasing the number of women in firefighting can improve service delivery to those in crisis situations and improve workplace well-being. In studying how increasing the number of women in firefighting might change service delivery Olsson (2013) argued:

An emergency service organization that is both inclusive and diverse will be more agile, resilient, healthier, safer, cost-effective, creative, open to innovative ideas and perspectives and able to put them to work on behalf of the mission. (Olsson 2013: 8)

Often the challenge of increasing the number of women working in the fire service is presented as a problem of labour supply: women are not interested in becoming firefighters because they are not interested in work that requires physical strength, working outdoors, and that is high risk (Schermerhorn-Collins 2017). Underpinning this focus on labour supply is the assumption that men are biologically predisposed to participate in this type of work and that women are not.

² 2016 Canadian census. Tables can be found at <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/index-eng.cfm>. For a U.S. study examining the lack of women firefighters compared to women police officers see (Contursi: 2019).

Others also see the problem of attracting women into the fire service as one of labour supply but see the main impediment to women joining the fire service as one of society rather than biology (See Hulett et.al. 2008a). From this perspective, women are entering the fire service in fewer numbers because they are not socialized to see firefighting as a career that is available to them. In short, the main problem is one of representation: firefighters are represented as men and associated with forms of masculinity that are unavailable to women. For both explanations, the main remedy presented to increase the number of women firefighters is more aggressive recruitment campaigns.³

There is an element of truth in both supply side explanations. Firefighting is not a job that is suitable for everyone, male or female. It is a physically demanding job with inherent risks. **Insights from the Inside** provides evidence that it is not the physicality of the job that creates the greatest challenge for women firefighters.⁴

Women firefighters were virtually unanimous regarding the ability of women to do the job.⁵ Over ninety percent would recommend firefighting as a career for women and less than three percent felt the physical demands would lead them to discourage women from pursuing firefighting. Men were almost equally supportive of the ability of women to do the job. Some male firefighters went even further arguing it was a myth that you needed to be a "rugged, big mustached, smoke eating kind of guy" to be a firefighter. Nearly eighty percent of male firefighters in suppression would recommend firefighting as a career for women. Only a small percentage of men, less than twenty percent, reported that the physical demands of the job would prevent them from recommending firefighting to women. There was also general support for women from senior leadership.⁶ Over ninety percent of senior leadership reported they would recommend firefighting as a career for women.

Other researchers have examined whether supply side explanations are the main barrier to increasing the number of women firefighters. Hulett et.al. (2008a) estimated that the gap between the number of women firefighters in the United States and the number one would expect given the percentage of women in other physical and dirty occupations like firefighting. In 2000, women represented 3.7 percent of firefighters but seventeen percent of jobs in the economy as a whole with attributes similar to

³ The subject of how women are represented in the fire service was the subject of a recent video titled Where There is Smoke by Red Dress Productions <https://vimeo.com/reddressproductions>.

⁴ Male is defined as male cisgender and straight or gay/queer, bisexual or asexual. Female is defined as female cisgender and straight or lesbian/queer, bisexual or asexual.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, references to male or female firefighters refers to firefighters working in suppression. References to firefighters not in suppression or those in senior management positions will be indicated in the text.

⁶ Senior leadership is defined in this report as firefighters holding the rank of District /Battalion chief or higher or chief officer.

firefighting. Their results suggest that there exists a large untapped supply of women who want to be firefighters. Factors other than biology must be playing a major role in preventing more women from becoming firefighters.

Social norms that firefighting is a masculine profession better suited to men persist despite the progress that has been made in this area thanks to outreach programs provided by various firefighting associations and by groups such as FSWO. The women firefighters interviewed for **Insights from the Inside** were attracted to the profession for many of the same reasons as men. These are good paying jobs that appeal to a desire to provide an essential public service. Women are attracted by the same physical challenges of the job as men. They are as likely as men to report being drawn to firefighting by family members who were firefighters or had a friend recommend firefighting to them. Women's interest in firefighting is further supported by their higher representation at the volunteer level where nearly one in three paid volunteers in our study were women compared to less than fifteen percent of full-time firefighters.

Insights from the Inside shows that, to understand fully the lack of women in firefighting, it is important to examine the workplace itself, a workplace where women experience harassment, discrimination and exclusion that makes them not feel welcome (See Wilcox 2018). **Insights from the Inside** is not the first study to make this claim. In her research on the caring economy, Braedley argued that:

Even when women do firefighting, fire services work remains highly masculinized, in that the norms, values, culture, buildings, vehicles, equipment, training and standards involved in the occupation are organized for male bodies and for those socialized as men, including an assumption of masculine dominance. (Braedley 2015: 266)

Insights from the Inside makes the case that attracting and retaining women firefighters requires both providing support for women who are firefighters and initiating a widespread cultural shift to end the normalization of discrimination, harassment and exclusion that women firefighters face. **Insights from the Inside** provides the first province-wide in-depth study of women and firefighting in Ontario based on both surveys and interviews with firefighters.⁷

⁷ A fuller discussion of the research methods can be found in Appendix B. For a study based on surveys of firefighters in the United States see, Hulett et.al. 2008a & 2008b.

Section Two: Pathways to becoming a firefighter

2.0 Introduction

This section examines the factors that led women to become firefighters. Using survey data and in-depth interviews, it describes what motivates women to pursue a career as a firefighter, their backgrounds, and their experiences as they navigate the extensive testing procedures required of all new firefighters.⁸ Findings suggest that women are motivated to become firefighters by many of the same factors as men. While there are challenges associated with the testing process and recruit training process, these are not insurmountable barriers to women wanting to become firefighters. Kendra,⁹ a recent hire told us how she came to realize that she was born to be a firefighter after starting as a volunteer. She recalled:

The moment I realized I wanted to be a firefighter, we were doing one of our fire practice nights, we were doing a walk-through of an elementary school. ... I had all my bunker gear on, and I just had this feeling come over me, this revelation, like it was God talking to me saying, You're meant to be here, but here in this uniform and not at the front of the class during daytime hours as a teacher.

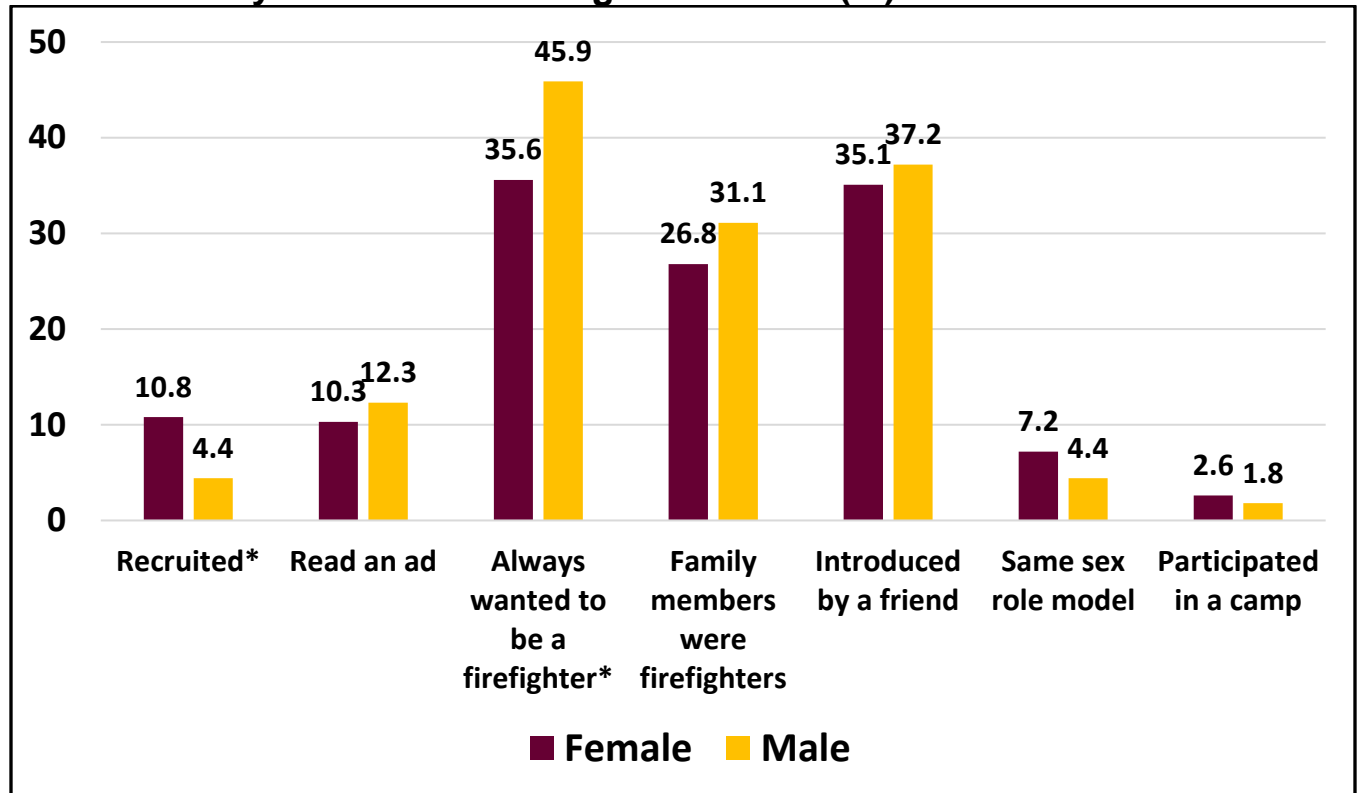
2.1 How are women and men introduced to firefighting as a career?

Chart 2.1 summarizes findings from survey questions asking women and men how they were introduced to firefighting as a career. The three most common routes to becoming a firefighter for both women and men in order of importance were: always wanting to be a firefighter, being introduced by a friend, and having family members who were firefighters. Always wanting to be a firefighter was more significant for men than women, while women were more likely to have been actively recruited. All the other factors were equally important to women and men. The importance for both women and men of having a family connection to firefighting or being introduced to firefighting by a friend speaks to the importance of targeting friends and family as agents in future recruitment campaigns. The findings suggest that how women are introduced to firefighting are not all that different to how men are introduced.

⁸ For a detailed study of the testing and screening process in Ontario and how it creates barriers for women firefighters see Wilcox (2018).

⁹ All names used in the report are pseudonyms.

Chart 2.1: Why I Joined the Firefighter Service (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Nancy, a firefighter with thirteen years on the job recalled the role of family members in steering her towards firefighting. She remembers:

I was initially going to be a police officer. My dad's an officer, my uncles, my cousins... from early on I just lived in an emergency services family, basically.

For many women, seeing an ad in a local paper for a recruiting information session, or a poster on the wall of a gym, was a lightbulb moment. Recruiting ads and posters showed these women that firefighting was a career that was open to women. Three of the women interviewed discovered that firefighting was a possible path for them after attending an information and recruiting session geared to women. Katherine, who has been a firefighter for seventeen years, recalled:

I went to a women-only info session... and I remember [the recruiter] talked in the session about when she was doing the physical and she was a single mom and her training was going up to her third story carrying her toddlers... so that made me think, Ok you know what? I was involved in sports... maybe I can do this.

2.2 Why are women and men attracted to firefighting as a career?

Interviews with women firefighters indicate that women are attracted to firefighting for many of the same reasons as men, although women may need a bit of a nudge to realize firefighting careers are open to them and that they are physically able to do the job. Firefighting is a secure job with benefits. It provides the chance to combine physically active work with helping others in the community while working in a team environment. Some are even attracted by the risks related to firefighting. Stacey, with a year and a half of volunteer firefighting experience, recalled:

A posting just came up when we moved here. And it was always something I kind of wanted to do but never thought I could do it. So, my previous job, I had some hazmat training, and I loved it. ... So, I applied, and I ended up getting in. I wanted to help. I wanted to use my skills to help the community. And I knew I could. Like I'm not the average-sized female either, right, so I knew I had to do something.

Several of the women interviewed were attracted to firefighting from a young age but assumed they would not meet the job's qualifications. Paula, a volunteer firefighter for seven years, reported:

I had wanted to since I was a kid, but I never thought I could until I was in my 30s. It had always seemed like something for big, cool, tough men to do. And I didn't have the confidence that it was something I could do. And it wasn't until I saw an ad in my local paper that they were looking for volunteer firefighters, and the qualifications that they were looking for was everything I had already, and I just thought, "Why wouldn't I do this? Why am I not doing this?"

Chris, a male firefighter with seven years on the job, explained:

I saw a career that... can be physically active. There's a lot of comradery. There's the sisterhood and brotherhood and I think for me I wanted a job where I could commit myself to service and serving others in a meaningful way. It meant a lot to me.

Mirroring closely the motivations of Chris, Caroline, a female firefighter with thirteen years on the job told us:

I wanted to do a job that was useful and not nine to five. I didn't want to sit at a desk, I wanted to do something physical. I had worked in the non-profit sector for a little while, and was an academic for a while, and I felt those things were... so distant from hands on, from being a sort of useful helpful person. So [firefighting] encompassed all of the things that I felt would give me job satisfaction.

For many of the women we interviewed, the physical aspects of the job were an important draw. Beth expressed an interest in doing something physical. She indicated:

I had a lot of friends who were firefighters, and I was always intrigued, I was always asking them, like, what do you do? How does it work? What kind of stuff do you see? And I was an athlete in my youth . . . so I spent a lot of time training, so I think that's why it appealed to me.

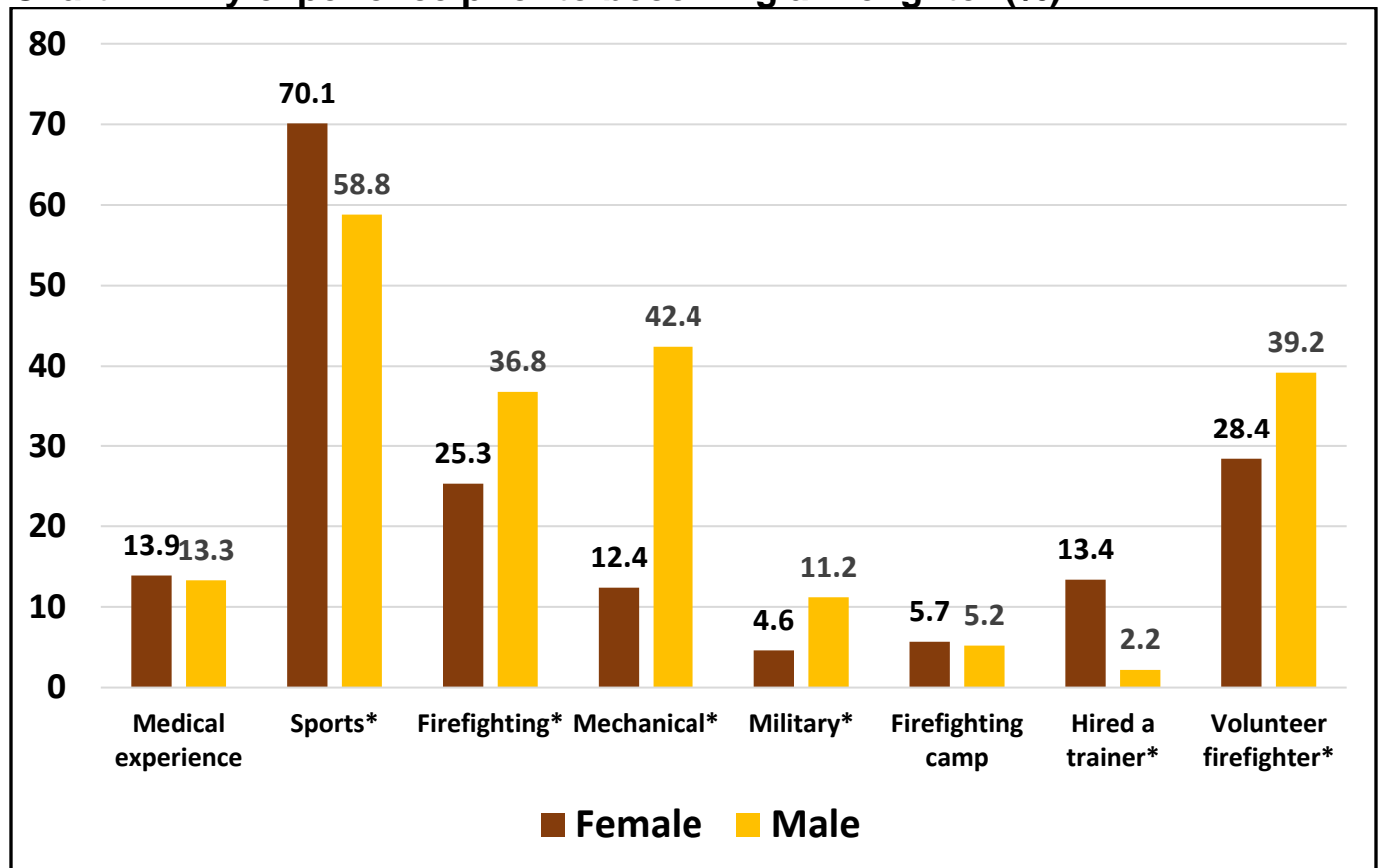
Surveys and interviews indicate that the women and men who become firefighters are not all that different. They are looking to give back to their communities, enjoy the physical challenges of the job and want to be part of an engaged workplace community. Grace, a new recruit completing her first year as a firefighter summarized what many women said during interviews:

I wanted to help people, I wanted to be physically active. I wanted to work on a team. And I wanted to do something that I felt like mattered in a very tangible way.

2.3 The backgrounds of female and male recruits

Chart 2.2 sheds light on the backgrounds of women and men who become firefighters. There are important similarities, but also differences. Most female survey respondents, like male respondents, had experience in sports and athletics. Prior experience fighting fires and volunteer firefighting were relatively important pathways for both women and men despite being somewhat more important for men. Men were far more likely to come to firefighting with mechanical experience either in a job or a hobby. Women were more likely to have engaged with a trainer in anticipation of the physical challenges associated with the testing procedure.

Chart 2.2: My experience prior to becoming a firefighter (%)

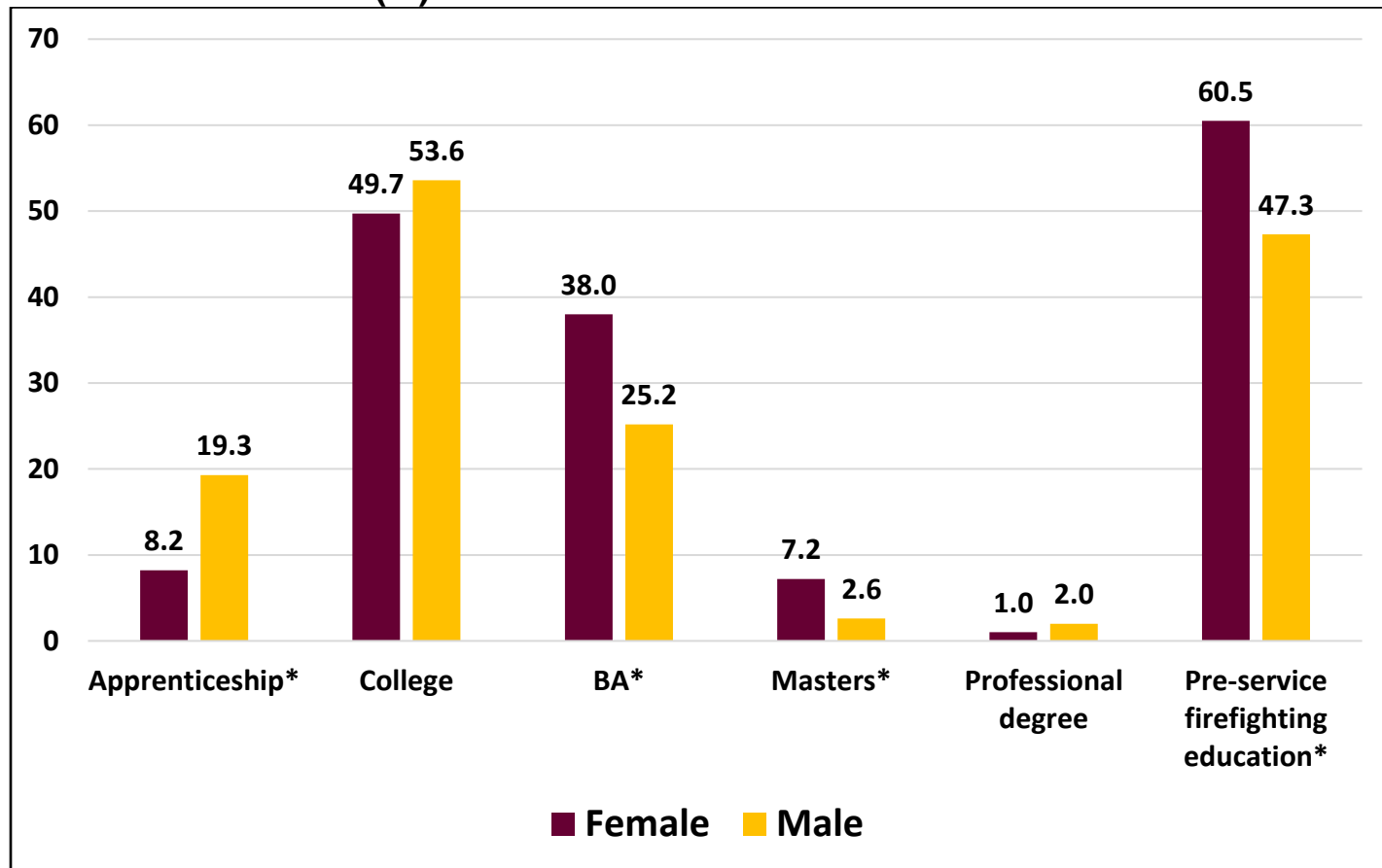


* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

2.4 Educational background

Most firefighters had at least a secondary school diploma or a college degree. Beyond this, there were significant differences in the educational backgrounds of female and male firefighters. Male firefighters were more likely to have completed an apprenticeship while female firefighters were more likely to have completed pre-service firefighting education and more likely to have either a BA or a graduate degree. The latter may reflect women continuing along more traditional educational paths until later in life, including attending university, before seeing firefighting as a career option.

Chart 2.3: Education (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

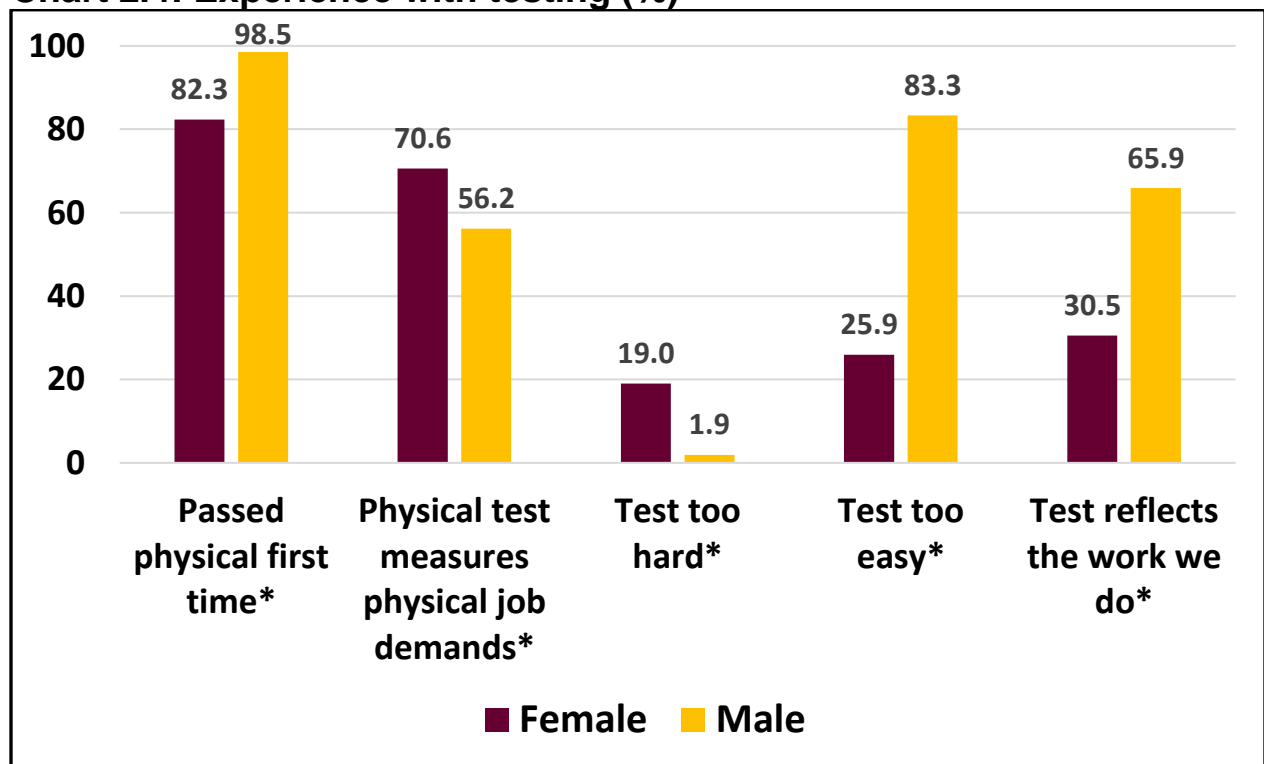
2.5 Experiences with testing

Having decided to be a firefighter, the next step was passing a physical test before entering recruit training. Wilcox (2018) assessed the barriers women firefighters face navigating the testing process. She pointed to the lack of standardization of tests across the province and how the standards and norms for these tests are based on populations where women are underrepresented resulting in tests that reflect male physical norms

rather than the physical requirements of the job. Chart 2.4 summarizes survey findings related to firefighters' experiences with testing to qualify as a new recruit. It includes data for anyone in the fire service, including those no longer in suppression and who went through recruit training. Most women who participated in the study had positive experiences with physical testing. Over eighty percent passed the physical test the first time. Of those who took the test but felt it did not accurately measure the physical demands of the job, men were three times as likely as women to report the physical test was too easy while just under twenty percent of women thought it was too hard.

Women and men had very different views on whether the test reflected the work firefighters do. Women were half as likely as men to report it reflected the work they did as firefighters. There is evidence from other research that some candidate evaluation programs include criteria that have little bearing on the ability of a candidate to do a job, but which make it more difficult for women to qualify. For instance, minimum height criteria for a job where height is irrelevant to performing the job in question, or VO2 max criteria or hip to waist ratios that discriminate against women. More research is needed to assess whether this is the case for firefighters

Chart 2.4: Experience with testing (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Includes surveys from anyone in the fire service who went through recruit training.

Interviews provided a more detailed description of women's experience with the physical testing process. Most reported that they were treated equally during the testing process and felt supported by the men who were also taking the test. Kendra, a mid-career firefighter recalled:

As a woman I didn't feel any different, really, than any of the guys. Fitness has always been a strength of mine... just because I come from a background of heavy athletics, so I didn't really have any issues being a female and getting through a lot of the testing.

Stacey, who works as a volunteer in a rural firehall reported:

Everyone was very encouraging, and no issues during the testing, all the guys were cheering you on. And even for the female that didn't pass, they tried, like really tried to encourage her and stuff, and she just, she couldn't do it. It happens, it's normal. It's not easy but it's doable. ... They don't make it impossible, it's just hard.

A minority of women interviewees described challenges with the physical testing process. They described two ways that the testing disadvantaged women: ill-fitting equipment and the allocation of points related to body dimensions. Jamie, for example described how ill-fitting equipment made passing the test more difficult:

I remember the equipment being really ill-fitted, it was like an extra-large size, weight vest that we had to wear. I didn't pass it the first time I did the physical test.

Two other firefighters described losing points in the test because of body dimension requirements that they felt did not account for the differences between female and male bodies and for the natural variation in body proportions among women. Leah and Caroline, two senior firefighters recalled:

They told me I lost marks on body fat percentage. ... I'm pretty lean, so I asked them where did they get that standard from? Cause... if I was any thinner, I wouldn't get my period anymore. So, I don't know where these results come from... but the standards were not appropriate for women. Especially older women.

I passed and everything was fine, but... one of the other tests they do is the hip to waist ratio, and they said... the only spot you could really improve on is your hip to waist ratio. I don't know the science behind all of that, but I feel like it's an absurd indicator of fitness. ... I don't know what their standard was for women, if that even accounted for a female body. ... I know that I passed the test just fine, so I remember getting very frustrated, and just feeling that that was sort of strange.

While the experience was mostly positive, the lack of women involved in recruit training created a degree of stress. Paula, who worked as a volunteer firefighter recalled:

They made me feel welcome. But I was like, one of two or three women and there were maybe fifty or sixty men. Like, I walk into a room full of men and it was intimidating. ... For

someone like me... I didn't have much confidence initially, and so, it was intimidating to walk into a room full of men and not see many women.

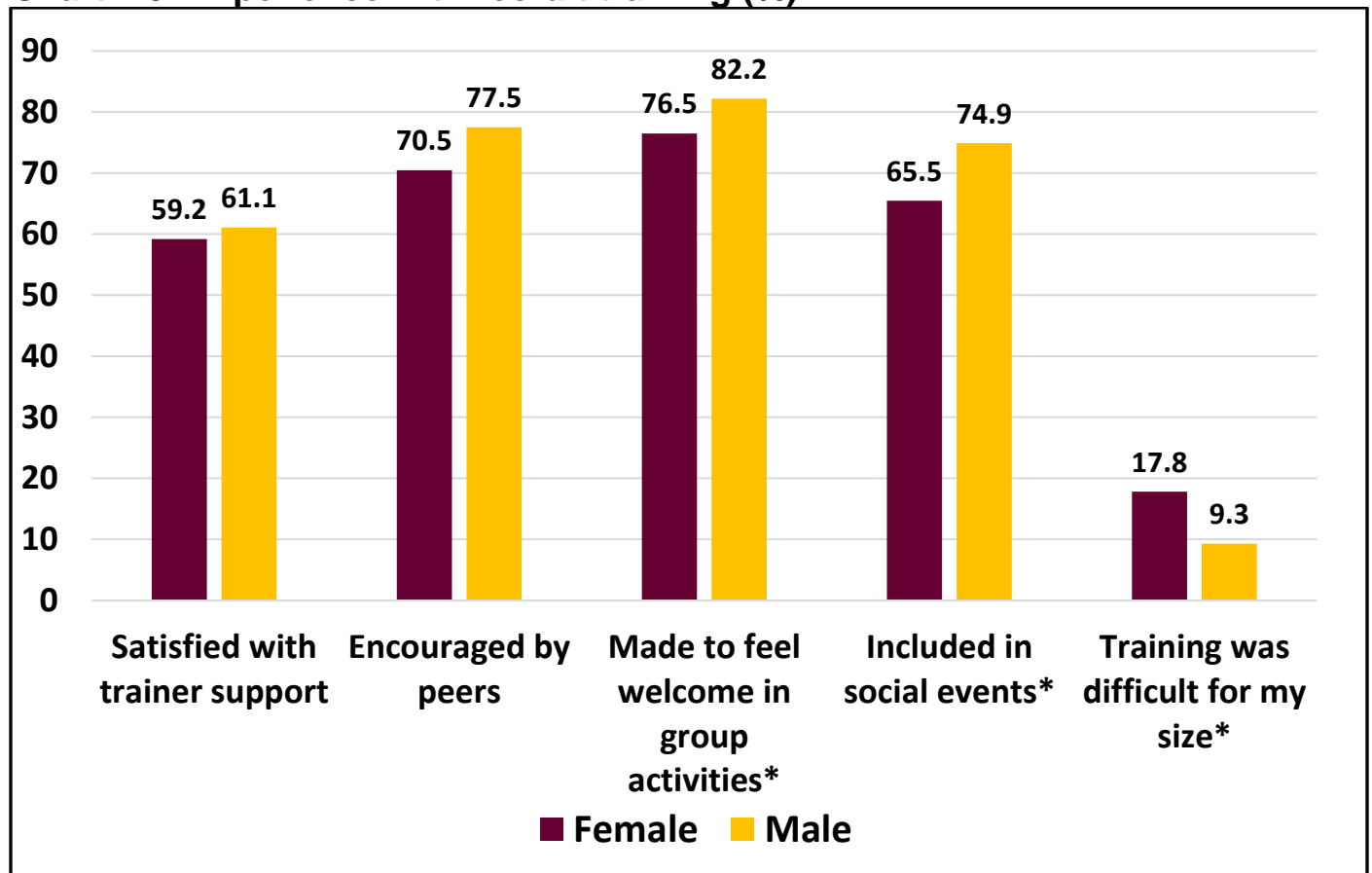
2.6 Firefighting training

Having passed the physical tests to become a firefighter, women and men then go through an extensive period of new-recruit training prior to being allocated to a firehall to continue the training process. Women's experiences with new recruit training were generally positive but they had more mixed experiences once allocated to a hall to complete their preparations.

2.6.1 New recruit training

Experiences with new recruit training reported in Chart 2.5 were mostly positive although somewhat less so for women than for men. Women and men were equally likely to report being satisfied with trainer support and being encouraged by their peers. Women were less likely to be made to feel welcome in group activities or included in social events. This early indicator of social exclusion during new recruit training points to what becomes the much larger issue of how women and men interact in firehalls. A small number of women reported that they found some aspects of skills training not appropriate for their body size. At least one female firefighter suggested that part of the problem was that trainers often demonstrated techniques that relied on arm strength, rather than techniques that used leg and full body strength which are more appropriate for smaller body types and safer for both women and men.

Chart 2.5: Experience with recruit training (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.

Includes surveys from anyone in the fire service who went through recruit training.

Several women interviewees described how participating in training helped them feel competent and that they belonged in the profession. Carla, for example, described:

Everybody, most of the guys that I was training with, as far as I know, were fine with me there. If they weren't, I didn't really know it. And I also learned that I was just as strong, or stronger, than some of the guys that were there, both academically and physically.

For other women, the training process was less than ideal as a learning experience. Jane, who was in a class of twenty male and two female recruits, described how she felt that the style of training was not conducive to learning:

I felt like the training environment was very much focused on intimidation, on testing you until you failed, and then challenging you in not the most productive ways to get back at it. There's lots of yelling. There was lots of intensity just to sort of humiliate, and ridicule. Lots of hazing style activities.

Not being supported by their peers and being excluded from social activities was a theme in several of our interviews. For several women, new recruit training was the first time that their presence was questioned or their competence undermined. Beth recalled:

The first day I showed up at drill school, the first words from my peers' mouths were, "You stole my friend's job." That's how I started the fire service. You stole my friend's job.

Stacey reported a similar experience:

Through my recruit training... there was a couple guys that you could tell, they didn't want me there, they were uncomfortable. They would make comments, like, Women should stay behind in the kitchen and the men should go to the fire. That's okay, I beat them on the next stage. But you could tell, it was like, oh, you're here because you're a girl. I was like, No actually, I'm here because I'm more qualified than you, but it's ok.

In contrast, Ryan a male recruit described how during training he experienced incredible feelings of belonging and inclusion:

It was just positive. ... Everyone took me in, like I was the youngest guy in my class they all treated me very well, really helped me out. I had never been in such a strong team environment and I played hockey most of my life. There's nothing like this.

2.6.2 Hall rotation/on the job training

Once women moved beyond physical testing and new recruit training they moved into firehalls to continue the process of becoming a firefighter. While women's experience with physical testing and with new recruit training were generally positive, more problems emerged when they started being integrated into the work of the firehalls. Sandra told us how her experience soured during that first year and how a chief who was aware she was being sent to a hall where she would be less welcome, called to warn her. She recalled:

I had a great chief with a wicked sense of humour. ... It was almost my one-year anniversary, and I got a call from my chief at home, and he said, he was choked up, like literally choked up. I had been transferred overnight to another shift. Without notice ... and he was so sorry, and that was it, and he hung up. I was devastated. And I know he was crying. He was upset for me. And that new shift treated me like shit.

Having to prove yourself was a major challenge for many of the women interviewed. Erica described how all new recruits, whether they are men or women, are treated differently and need to prove themselves but how women have to contend with discriminatory attitudes in addition:

So you're brand new everywhere you go, plus you're the probationary rookie, so that carries its own label. So until you're stationed at a station, you are the new person and the

girl, everywhere you go. Which is tough. And not to mention even something as silly, you would think, as getting called for overtime, I have to consider, Oh, the captain at this station will not work with females, turn down overtime at this station.

Several of the women interviewed described how as new firefighters, they had a lot of anxiety. Jaime, for example, described how she felt that she had to prove that she was competent, an experience that she felt was heightend for women:

Being [many] years on, I feel a lot more confident in general. At the hall, in calls, I'm not paranoid as much all the time of whether people are seeing me as a good firefighter. I think the not being new is huge, for sure, because everything is very chain of command, here, so I think the men probably, this is an assumption, become more comfortable a lot sooner, like some of them have probably never had the thoughts that I have, about whether or not I belong here. Having more time on makes a huge difference in this job.

One woman used the analogy of a bag of marbles, to describe the difference between how women and men were treated during recruit training. Newly recruited men were assumed to be competent workers and have a full bag of marbles. They would lose the respect of their peers, and marbles, only when they demonstrated incompetence. In contrast Katherine suggested:

When a woman gets hired in the fire service, she gets an empty bag and she has to earn every marble. ... So if you're a woman starting out you just got the empty bag, and now if you do something like that, there's no marble to lose, right, like you've just got the empty bag.

Haley, a mid-career firefighter expressed a similar sentiment describing how:

As long as you play hockey, or play golf, or, you know they [men] can walk into a room and immediately be accepted. ... Most men walk in with legitimacy, whereas women start down here and then you have to work your way up. ... I'm not saying that men don't have similar challenges because even when a man is different, if they don't present as a typical firefighter they also have challenges, but they also can walk into a room with a certain amount of legitimacy that you [women firefighters] don't have.

2.7 Conclusions

This section explored the pathways women and men take to becoming firefighters. The conclusion is that there were more similarities than differences in their backgrounds and the reasons they choose firefighting as a career. Women were marginally more challenged by the physical testing process and new-recruit training but overall, their experiences were not that different than men. However, there were already signs during new-recruit training of challenges to come. It is only when women were introduced into hall rotations that they began to experience that they were not fully welcome. For some, that first year was a challenging time. For almost all women, there was a sense they

were being held to a higher standard than their male colleagues. These challenges are explored in more detail in Section Three.

Section 3: The work experience

3.0 Introduction

Section Two explored how and why women come to firefighting and the process of being trained once selected. This section explores in detail the experience of women once they have completed their training and are working as firefighters in firehalls. Firehalls are unique workplaces where crews live together for extended periods of time in close quarters. It is also a workplace that is modeled on a chain of command and a culture which defines each firefighter's roles and responsibilities including, on the trucks, at a call, who carries the groceries and who cleans the toilets. One study described it as follows:

The culture impacts how the firefighters interact with each other, from where a firefighter or officer sits at the dinner table, which seat they can occupy in the TV room and when they may sit down, where they sit on emergency apparatus and what their roles at emergency scenes will be, to how they may interact with other members of the company. (International Association of Fire Chiefs: 7)

Many of the women interviewed described loving their jobs and feeling supported by their male co-workers most of the time. Overall, however, women survey respondents were statistically more likely to have negative experiences at work than male survey respondents and almost all the women who were interviewed described experiencing discrimination on the job related to their sex. For some, discrimination became sexual harassment and violence. This section describes some of the subtle and overt ways that the intended and unintended actions of the fire service, as well as co-workers and leadership, affect the work experiences of women firefighters. The experience of women on the job gives the impression they are not fully welcome creating a significant barrier to recruiting more women into the fire service.

3.1 Workplace culture

Many of the challenges women expressed working in firehalls were related to the perceptions of a masculine firefighting culture.¹⁰ Working in such an environment can make women firefighters feel othered. On senior firefighter working as a captain suggested:

I just told you how much I love the guys I work with, and I know they love me, and you know it's every day I'm reminded that I'm not the same as them. Every single day. And it's

¹⁰ For a detailed study of fire service culture in the United Kingdom see, Thurnell-Read & Parker (2008).

so tiring. ... It separates me, and I can see why some women have isolation issues, you know cause they're different. They're the other. It's exhausting.

Several interview participants described it as a "boys club." Some suggested this was changing but stressed that change was slow. Efforts by women to change this culture can lead to push-back by male colleagues. As one female firefighter put it, "It's a fine balance of have a happy career or stand up for what you believe in." Another female firefighter stressed that the goal of a firefighter is to build a reputation. You don't want to be the "fun governor." Standing up for someone or something is not one of the boxes to tick. "Every time that you stand up for something, your reputation takes a hit." Matthew, a male senior level firefighter, described a culture where one must fit in. He indicated:

[Change is] very slow moving, very much you have to fit into our culture. Very much what you would have thought would have been out of the fire service years ago. You've got to be one of the boys and you've got to deal with our jokes, and you've got to deal with our comments if you want to fit in and it's still very much like that.

In response to a question about what needs to change in the fire service, a female captain writing on her survey, emphasized that education would help shift the mindset of people in the fire service and the broader public:

Get rid of the old boys club mentality. The public needs to be educated that females can do this job and do it very well. Hearing the same old argument about a female not being able to carry out a 250lb man from a fire is getting tiresome. ... This is not a social club; it is a place of employment and should be treated that way.

This respondent felt that the notion that women were not strong enough to be capable firefighters was at the core of both the exclusion of women and the masculine culture of the profession. Jamie lamented that any change that had taken place was at best surface deep. She told us:

It's so deep for these men that we don't fully belong. ... I feel like it's going to be like my daughters' generation it will change for. I'm hopeful because I know things have changed in ten years, but then I'm like, but have they? I don't know if they have that much actually. There are more women, and guys know you can't say that shit is what they know. But they don't feel it. They might know you can get fired for saying something, but no one has been fired for saying anything.

This respondent felt that to address the exclusion of women, the core belief that women were not strong enough to be firefighters needed to be addressed. Erica also expressed frustration at the behaviour of many male firefighters while on the job. She described this aspect of the fire service as backward and stuck in the past.

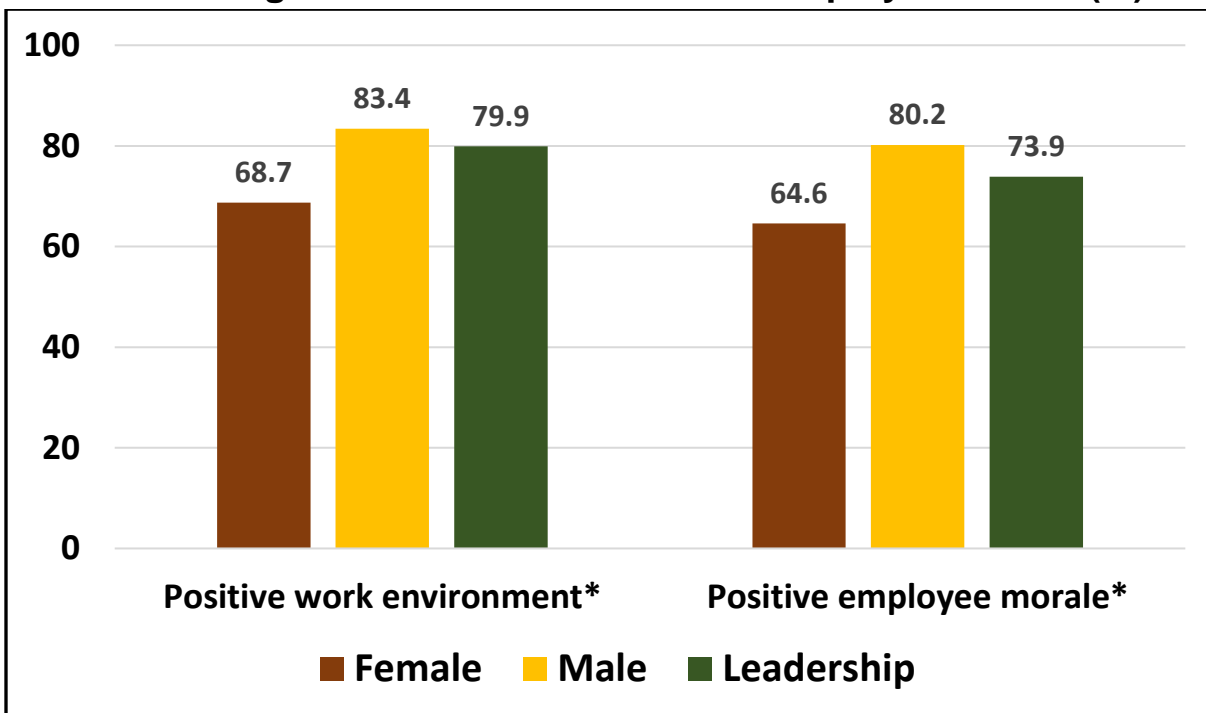
I get what you're saying, yes, it's fun when you get to come to work and be complete pigs and disgusting and stuff... but we're not there anymore. We're not in the seventies, like get over it, you know? But there's no desire to try to make that change whatsoever.

A study of US firefighters described how firefighting culture can make women unwelcome. They concluded:

To their male peers, women firefighters represent more than competitors for positions they want and constraints on the free-wheeling aspects of firehouse life. They also silently challenge the self-esteem male firefighters derive from perceiving themselves as doing a job for which only a select few have the "right stuff. (Hulett et.al. 2008b: 11)

One result of a workplace culture that was not always welcoming to women was women having a generally less positive view of their work environment than men. Chart 3.1 summarizes survey questions related to the work environment and employee morale. Women were less likely to say that their work environment was positive or that employee morale was positive. Senior leadership's views of the work environment were like that of male firefighters. Similar questions were asked of non-suppression fire service staff. They were significantly less likely to report a positive work environment or positive employee morale.

Chart 3.1: Rating the work environment and employee morale (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Given the importance of working as a unit in firehalls, we used advance statistical techniques to simultaneously assess how individual characteristics (gender, age, seniority), workplace characteristics (size of firehall, number of women you work with), and social factors (support at work, having co-workers who would defend you if harassed, having leadership committed to making the workplace safe for all, having been harassed by co-workers) were associated with reporting positive employee morale. Neither individual characteristics, nor workplace characteristics had a statistically significant association with rating employee morale positively. Social factors were highly relevant. Having the support of your co-workers, having workers who would defend you if harassed and having leadership committed to making the workplace safe for all were statistically associated with an increased likelihood of reporting employee morale was positive. Some of these factors more than doubled the probability of viewing employee morale positively. Having been harassed by your co-workers almost halved the probability of reporting positive employee morale.¹¹

3.2 Material and physical infrastructure

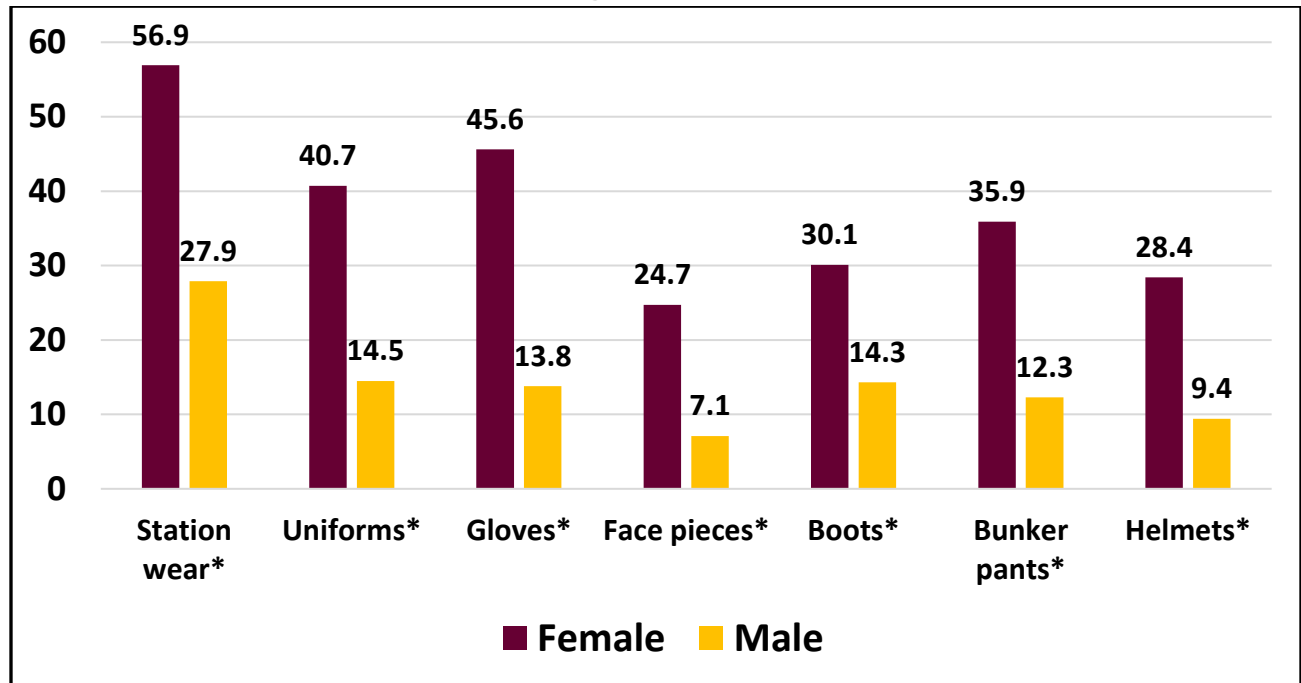
Other researchers have shown that the persistence of a masculine culture at work is reinforced by the material and physical infrastructure of the job. Together, the infrastructure and the culture of firefighting communicate a message to women that they do not belong, are not competent or are not welcome in the job (Braedley 2009: 137; Braedley 2015: 266). Others point to the importance of women having both a physical space in firehalls and a psychological space thereby "acknowledging that they are full, permanent members of the work team by accommodating their needs and preferences." (Hulett et.al. 2008b: 8)

3.2.1 Uniforms and equipment

Both survey and interview results emphasized the importance of uniforms and equipment to worker well-being, health and safety, physical comfort, and sense of belonging. Chart 3.2 reveals stark differences regarding the views of women and men on ill-fitting equipment. Women were two to three times as likely to report the equipment they were provided did not fit properly. Reports of helmets impeding use of other issued equipment, gloves being too large and bunker pants not fitting properly were common. These were serious concerns making it difficult for some women to do their job effectively. Issues around station wear and uniforms were common. Asking women to wear clothes designed for men, reinforced the idea that they really do not belong. For many women this was especially true regarding dress uniforms and how they felt this diminished their professionalism to their male co-workers and to the public.

¹¹ Logistic regression analysis was used in this section. Details of the analysis are available from the authors.

Chart 3.2: Problems with ill-fitting cloths and equipment (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

For the most part, interview participants reported fewer problems when their gear was customised. Karen, a firefighter from a metropolitan fire department described “Equipment-wise I never really had much issue, our bunker gear was measured to fit so that was always okay.” However, some shorter women described having problems with their bunker gear, even after it had been customized. Two of the twenty-three women interviewed, for example, described having difficulty getting into their pockets. Dana, a new recruit, described:

Usually the pockets are kinda right above the knee, but because I’m shorter my jacket ends up covering my pockets, and then I can’t get to my pockets and there’s a weird challenge in that so it’s almost like I really gotta pull my jacket up to get to my pockets, and that could be dangerous.

In some departments, firefighters inherited at least some of their gear. In these cases, women could be required to wear bunker gear of firefighters who previously worked in their hall. Often this meant wearing gear that was designed for men.

Breathing apparatuses were a common problem among the women we interviewed since they are not customised. Leah, a more senior firefighter described:

The bunker gear again gets fitted so it should fit you, um, but any, like your BA, that's probably the biggest thing that is not made for women. The breathing apparatus is bulky, huge. There's a backpack that you can adjust to try to make it smaller but still, the straps, I have cranked down all the way, and it's still sliding all over me, right.

Another woman, Dana, described how her ill-fitting breathing apparatus caused her physical discomfort:

Our breathing apparatus, I find that it doesn't tighten up tight enough for me, so a lot of it ends up resting on my shoulders, when it's supposed to rest more on your hips than your shoulders. So sometimes I almost have to like, expand my stomach to get that tight fit, to get the feel of it, prevent it from resting on my shoulders, cause after wearing it for several hours it's hard on your shoulders, right? So you want the weight to be more on your hips.

Gloves were also a common source of frustration for women firefighters since they were seldom customized. Clara, who had worked on the job for over ten years described how many departments simply provide smaller gloves for women rather than gloves that are properly designed for a women's hands:

Women's hands are different than men's hands. Cause I was feeling that my gloves are really tight on my wrist...well that's cause our palms are proportionally longer than men's palms. So it might fit in the finger, cause that's where you want it to fit, right...so you get a medium or a small to fit your finger, but then the palm is smaller too so the glove is tight here. You have trouble getting it on and it needs to be down here. I'm sure they make women's gloves but they don't provide us with women's gloves. We just get a smaller size. That's their solution, just give 'em a smaller size.

Some women firefighters connected the problem of ill-fitting uniforms and equipment to the male culture of firefighting; in their view, if fire departments welcomed and supported female firefighters, they would provide appropriately sized uniforms and bunker gear. Haley, a firefighter with over fifteen years on the job connected ill-fitting uniform pants to a general feeling of lack of support from her department:

If you already subconsciously know that the department doesn't back you up with something as trivial as pants that fit, how do you think that the department's going to support you when shit's hitting the fan?... Just make that stuff accessible for everybody. Don't make me feel different based on the fact you don't have something to fit me.

As evident from this quote, problems with gear that does not properly fit affected the physical health and safety of women on the job. It also created a sense that women do not belong in the fire service. In this way, ill-fitting gear and uniforms reinforce women firefighters' sense of working in a culture of masculinity: the myth that men are more naturally suited to the job of firefighting is perpetuated when men do not have to

manage an air pack that sits too low on their hips, or a helmet that impedes the range of motion of their head because it is too large.

3.2.2 Firehall accommodations

Many firehalls have not been renovated in decades, since a time when the firefighter workforce was all male. These stations do not have designated washrooms, changerooms or showers for women workers. Several of the women interviewees described having to use makeshift areas for their needs, such as storage areas or bathrooms that have enough space to squeeze in one bed and must be used as a bedroom, bathroom and changeroom. In other halls, women need to share bathrooms with men. Some women found this undesirable. Erica, for example, recalled making the decision to not workout and shower because of the embarrassment of needing to announce that she would be using the washroom or shower room over the PA at her hall:

My very first station I was stationed at, my very first day on the job, there was only one washroom. ... What I have to do is go over the PA and say, Guys, I'm going to take a shower now and I had to lock the door and it had to be declared my washroom and so what ended up happening is I wouldn't work out at that station, to avoid that, and I would only do it right after a fire, like if I absolutely had to shower, then otherwise I just avoided it at all costs.

Several stations have been retrofitted to include female washrooms, changerooms and dorms. While these new spaces address problems that arise when females and males are required to share facilities, some female firefighters were worried about backlash from men who had had the size of their facilities reduced to accommodate the new female-designated facilities. Women generally welcomed having separate showers and washrooms. One female firefighter described:

Making our stations more female friendly would be helpful so that the women don't feel ostracized.... And also, when making those alterations to the stations, not taking so much away from the men that they're mad at us that we took their space away.

Women had mixed opinions about whether they preferred shared or separate dorms for sleeping. Many interview participants had experience working in stations that had designated sleeping dorms for women and stations with mixed gender dorms. Some of the interviewees preferred to have segregated sleeping, while others preferred sharing dorms because of the opportunity to bond with their crew. Beth described how sharing a dorm allowed her to connect with other members of her crew:

I was stationed downtown ... where it's a dorm. Open dorm. Not even dividers ... but I loved it. Because we'd lie there at night and talk about the fire if we came back from one, and we'd shoot the shit, and it was fun. I was part of the team. If I was in my own room I woulda missed all that. And I loved that. I was with guys that I trusted, and they trusted me.

Though this desire to share dorms with men was not universal, Beth's desire to feel part of the team was shared by all the women interviewees. The physical infrastructure of the job including dorms, washrooms, showers and equipment were important to this feeling of belonging.

3.3 Myth: Women firefighters are inherently different from male firefighters

Within the fire service, there is a myth that women are inherently less competent firefighters than men. These assumptions, about women being 'less than' or 'less tough' than male firefighters, lie at the root of much of the discrimination against women firefighters and surfaced in a number of ways: women's ability to do their job competently was often questioned; women were excluded from activities or comradery at the firehall and in non-work time; and women faced heightened levels of harassment and discrimination. Last, many women reported hearing comments that were not inclusive of gender or sexual minorities or people who were racialized as people of colour. Though we do not have evidence for the effects of racial discrimination due to study sample size limitations, we imagine that this creates levels of exclusion for women and men who also are part of other marginalized identity groups.

3.3.1 Competency

Women described needing to continuously prove that they were competent at the job. Section Two discussed how it was more of a challenge for women than men to show they were competent during new recruit training and hall rotations, however, many women described needing to prove their competency throughout their careers. Women described many incidences when their competence was challenged for no reason other than the fact that they were a woman. Kendra recounted an incident where a co-worker challenged the ability of her and another women firefighter:

I remember one shift in particular, there was another female working with me that day, and [a male colleague] looked at us both, and said, "Oh, two females on the crew today... so, what are you guys gonna do if we get a fire today?" ... It was little comments like that, where I had to earn a little bit more respect in that sense.

Carol recounted an incident where leadership seemed surprised she was competent:

One day I was walking by one of the trucks and part of the apparatus hadn't been closed properly, and I literally just walked by and turned a switch and kept on walking, you know, wasn't looking for anything, and [the captain] was standing there with the chief and he said, How did you know how to do that? I was like, Oh my god, I've been driving this truck for five years. What do you mean how do I know how to do that?

When co-workers or leaders challenged women's competency, it was often related to the belief that women were not physically strong enough to do the job, in the worst case, or not physically strong enough to do the job as well as men, in other cases. Most of the women interviewed described needing to prove that they were physically capable of doing the job at least once during their careers. As a result, many of the women interviewed went out of their way to work harder than their male colleagues to show that they were strong enough, particularly when they first started working. Jamie stated:

At a call... my mentality was I'm always gonna be the first person to pick up the heavy stuff, the first person to like volunteer to do this and that.

Matthew, a male firefighter, recounted how he observed this phenomenon while working as a trainer:

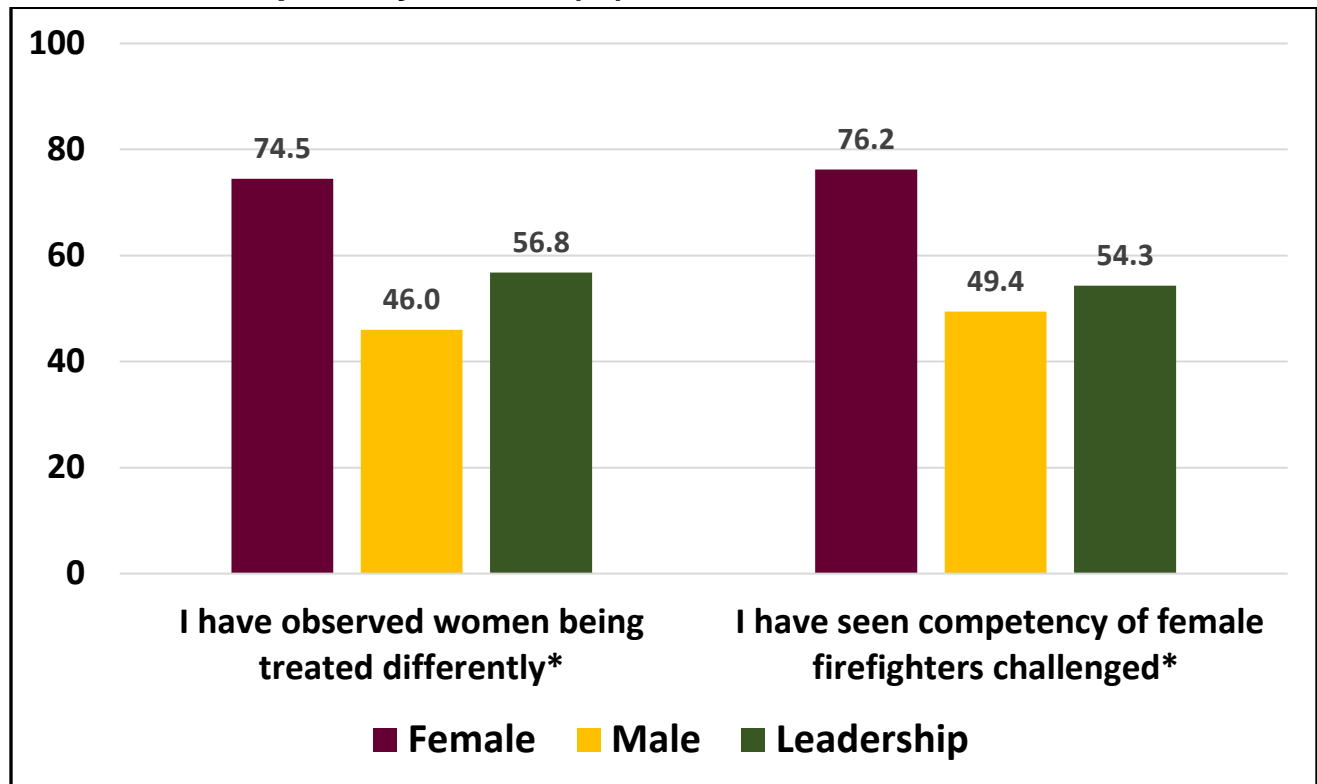
We teach... classes and every time I do it, the women work harder, they're smarter and they're way fitter than [the] guys because [the] guys take it for granted you've been playing sports you're just that fit. So many of these women have said to themselves, 'I've got to be way stronger, I've got to be way smarter, I've got to work harder.'

The need to perform at a level over and above that of their male peers was often internalized in women's psyches. Several women described the sense of being continually watched and scrutinized. For Caroline:

You can get as fat and unfit as you want, but, knowing that there are always—eyes are always on you as a woman. You're always assumed to be not physically [strong]—I assume that that's what people are assuming, and you know, a lot of it's unspoken.

The ability to 'see' whether women's competence is challenged, however, was not equally apparent to women and men. Survey results reported in Chart 3.3 showed that women were much more likely than men to have observed women being treated differently than men. Women were also more likely than men to report observing the competency of women being challenged at work. Male firefighters and senior leadership, which is mostly male, were less aware of this issue than women firefighters.

Chart 3.3: Competency at work (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

3.3.2 Exclusion Myth: women need to be treated with kid gloves

Firefighting requires that workers work as a team. Given the dangers of the job, engendering a sense of trust among co-workers is critical to being able to perform the work. Additionally, because there is a lot of downtime in the firehall, firefighters often form strong relationships with one another. These characteristics of the job heighten the effects of exclusion. Almost all the women interviewed described being treated differently from men in subtle ways by captains and co-workers. Since differential treatment was often more subtle than overt harassment it was often difficult to challenge.

In some instances, differential treatment was intentional. Several women described being shunned or not being talked to by one or more firefighters for long periods of time. Haley described:

Even twenty years later... we still have men that won't acknowledge females when they come into the room, or even if they're riding beside them on the back of the engine and

they're supposed to be partners, they won't say a word to them, won't look at them, won't make eye contact with them

The exclusion described by Haley had clear negative implications for the ability to work as a team. Leah described:

They'll bring someone in, and I've experienced over and over again certain people not talking to me for like the first twelve hours of the shift. Completely ignoring me, as if... I shouldn't be there, you know, women shouldn't be on the job.

As described in this quote, shunning women firefighters was a way that male firefighters communicated the message that women were not welcome on the job.

Other forms of differential treatment that were not intentional, also created feelings of exclusion and not-belonging among women firefighters. One woman described how men often shook hands with one another as a greeting when starting a new shift or encountering one another in the field but they did not shake hands with women. A more frequent example of differential treatment were cases when captains or trainers noted the presence of women in a hall with the implication that men would need to behave differently. Paula described how leadership, often intending to be respectful, would sometimes say things such as:

"Oh, I was gonna make a joke here but there's a woman in the room."... or ... "Oh I can't say that because [a woman's] here." ... They're trying to be sensitive but in the same respect, they're making me feel excluded.

Beth described a similar situation with a captain:

[The captain] calls everybody into the station and says, Ok, so we have a woman in the station today so I want to make sure everyone's ok with how it's going to work. And I'm just like, he thinks he's doing me a great favour, and his intentions are good, but misdirected. And I just felt like, now I stand out, now I'm the reason, that all this is happening, that we have to have this meeting.

Here, the captain's attempt to pre-empt discriminatory behaviour by calling a meeting sent the signal that having a woman in the hall was 'unusual' and that women needed to be treated differently. Such warnings did not get at the root problem of why men behave inappropriately in the first place.

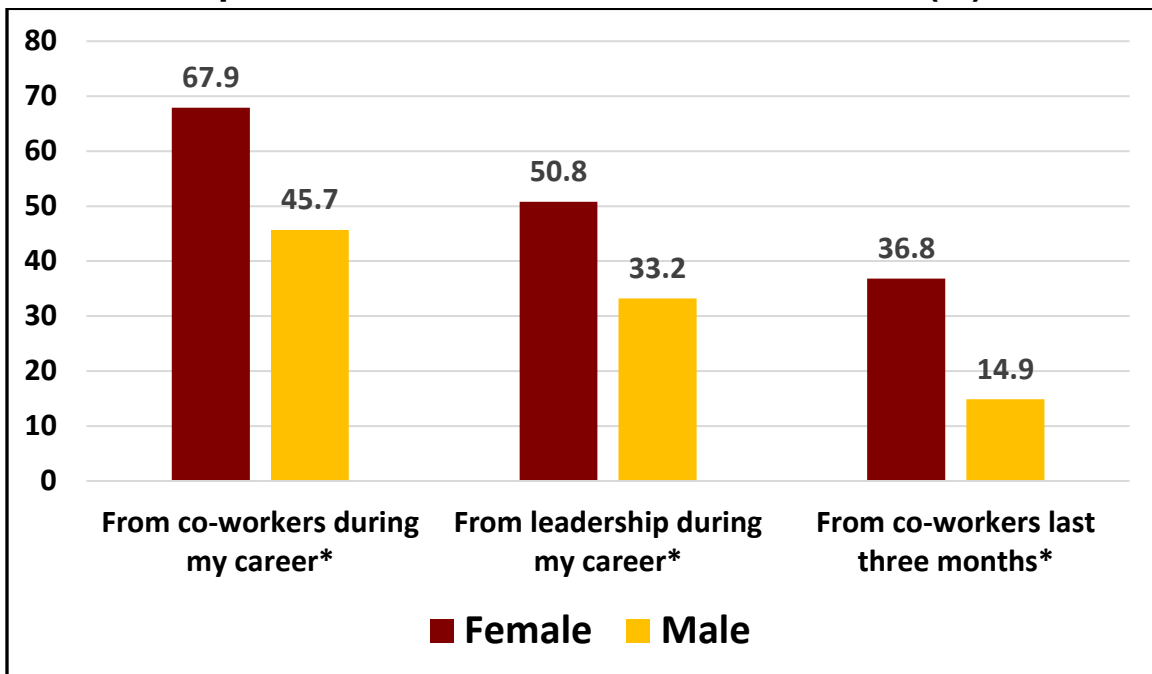
3.4 Harassment and violence

This section looks at harassment and violence that the women we interviewed faced at work from leadership and co-workers. Teasing and harassment at work are endemic to firefighting but a particular issue for women firefighters. For some women, this teasing

and harassment ends up in violence. Some women reported having their experiences of harassment and violence minimized with reference to the 'culture' of firefighting. Chart 3.4 reports the prevalence of all types of harassment and violence from shunning activity, to harassment in the hall, to sexual advances and assaults. The different types of harassment and violence are explored in more detail below. Over two-thirds of women experienced harassment and violence during their careers and over one in three continue having negative experiences. Leadership was a significant source of harassment and violence with more than half of all women reporting negative experiences with leadership.

Harassment and violence were also issues for male firefighters with over forty-five percent reporting harassment and violence during their careers and nearly fifteen percent continue having negative experiences. The sources of harassment and violence were different for male and female firefighters. Nearly one-third of violence and harassment reported by men was related to hazing activities they considered to be harassment. Women were less likely than men to experience hazing so removing hazing had less of an effect. Even after removing hazing activities, sixty percent of women firefighters and thirty percent of male firefighters reported violence or harassment during their careers. This points to a workplace where harassment and violence are tolerated and the need for a culture shift that might benefit all firefighters.

Chart 3.4: The prevalence of harassment and violence (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

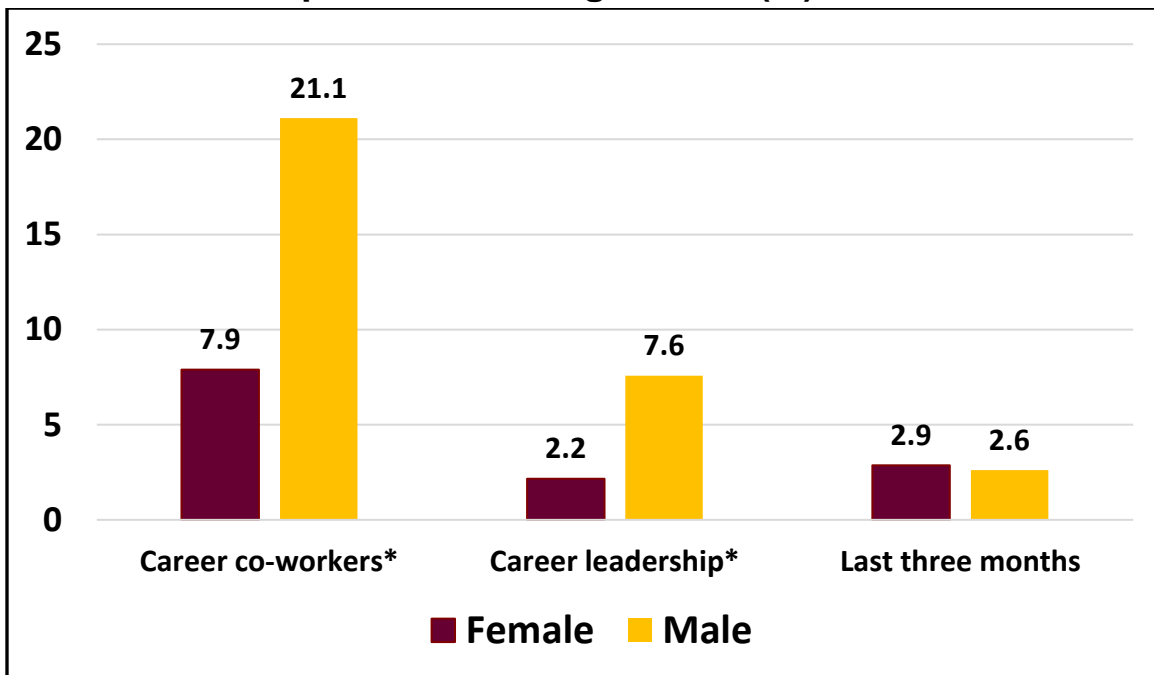
3.4.1 Teasing and Hazing

The culture of firefighting, particularly in the fire hall, often involves teasing and/or hazing. Teasing and hazing were understood by both women and men to be part of the job and a way to build comradery. One male survey respondent with over four years of experience in fire suppression described:

It is challenging to understand for people not in the industry because the firehall is not a typical workplace. It is also a residence as well as a workplace where life and death situations are normal. Some minor teasing is necessary for team bonding. Some testing of new members is required to gain trust in a life or death situation. Women are not treated the same as men in my opinion. Men tease women less than other men. They are tested less than other men. They are treated with more respect. The men fear the repercussions of teasing them.

Teasing often takes the form of hazing which, as reported in Chart 3.5, was more prevalent among men than women.

Chart 3.5: I have experienced hazing at work (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Women interviewed did not describe teasing itself as a problem. This 'every day' teasing, however, 'crossed the line' for many women when comments were sexist, racist or homophobic, or when actions were targeted and repeated in a way that undermined

the competence and well-being of women firefighters. Beth, a firefighter in her 50s, described how she decided what she was okay with:

Like, every discussion they end up talking about poo, or something, you know it's kinda gross. Sexual banter... you know like, she's hot and just fairly innocuous stuff that doesn't offend me. Now if I hear something that's—I'm trying to think of an example, I'll just be like, Hey hey, I gotta line, you're getting close, you know, and then they just shut right up. But I'm in a position to do that, whereas the rookie I had was not. And I don't know what they're like when I'm not there.

Though Beth stated that she was okay with some sexual banter, she was not okay with all discussions and felt comfortable telling her male co-workers what was and was not acceptable. Other women firefighters were not as comfortable with sexual banter, particularly if the banter was directed at them. As Beth highlights, younger or rookie women firefighters would not necessarily feel comfortable speaking up.

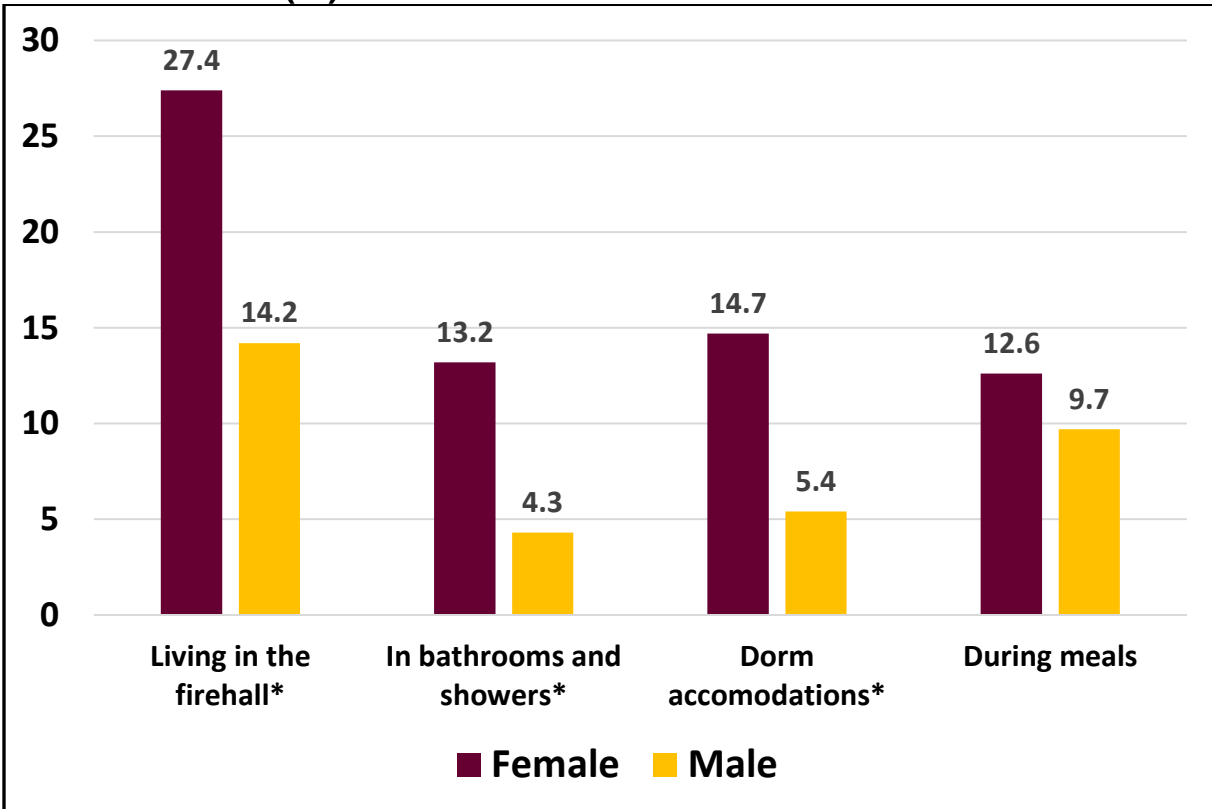
Jamie, another female firefighter, described how she felt that it would be impossible for her to address all of the comments that she found offensive since they were so prevalent and since there was a culture that allowed these comments to go unchallenged.

Every day of their lives these comments are supported because they're not challenged. ... There's no consequences, let alone another person being like, Hey man, that's not appropriate. No. You just have to move on. If I hear, five offensive things in a day, two racist things, two sexist things, and then a homophobic thing, it's like, at that point I'm not going to say anything about any one of them. Like, how can you, it's so exhausting.

3.4.2 Harassment and negative incidents while living at the firehall

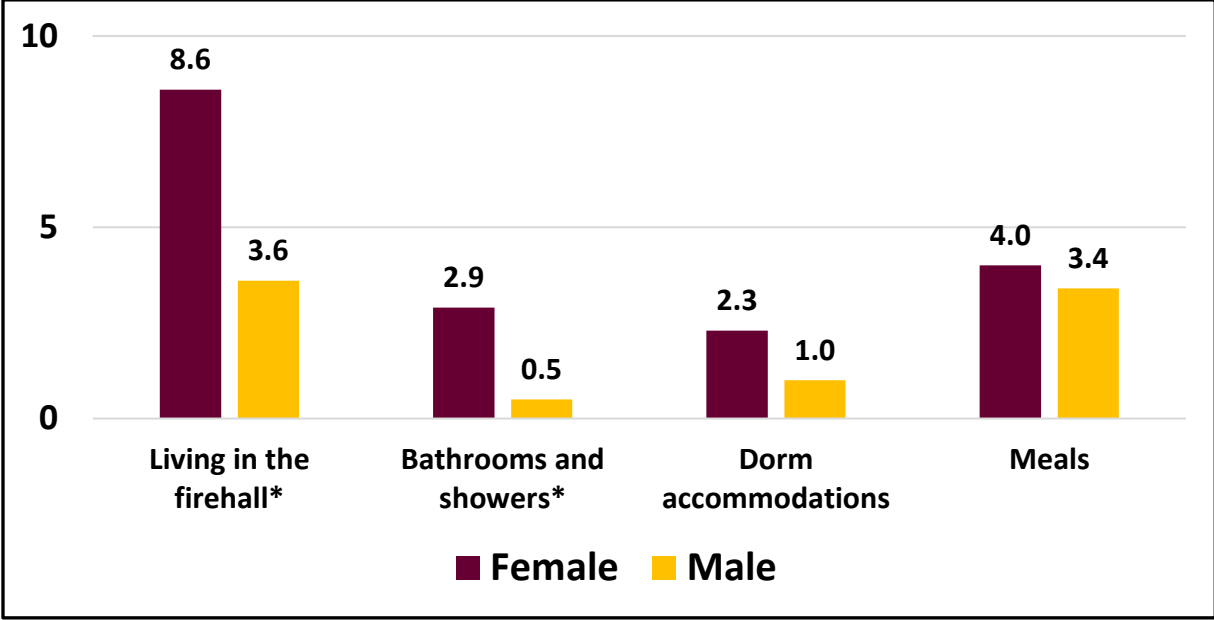
The firehall was a particularly unsafe site for women firefighters. Over one-quarter of women report experiencing negative incidents in the firehall, double that of men. Charts 3.6 and 3.7 describe the types of harassment women firefighters have experienced in their careers and more recently associated with living in firehalls.

Chart 3.6: In my fire service career, I experienced negative incidents with co-workers (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Chart 3.7: In last three months, I experienced negative incidents with co-workers (%)

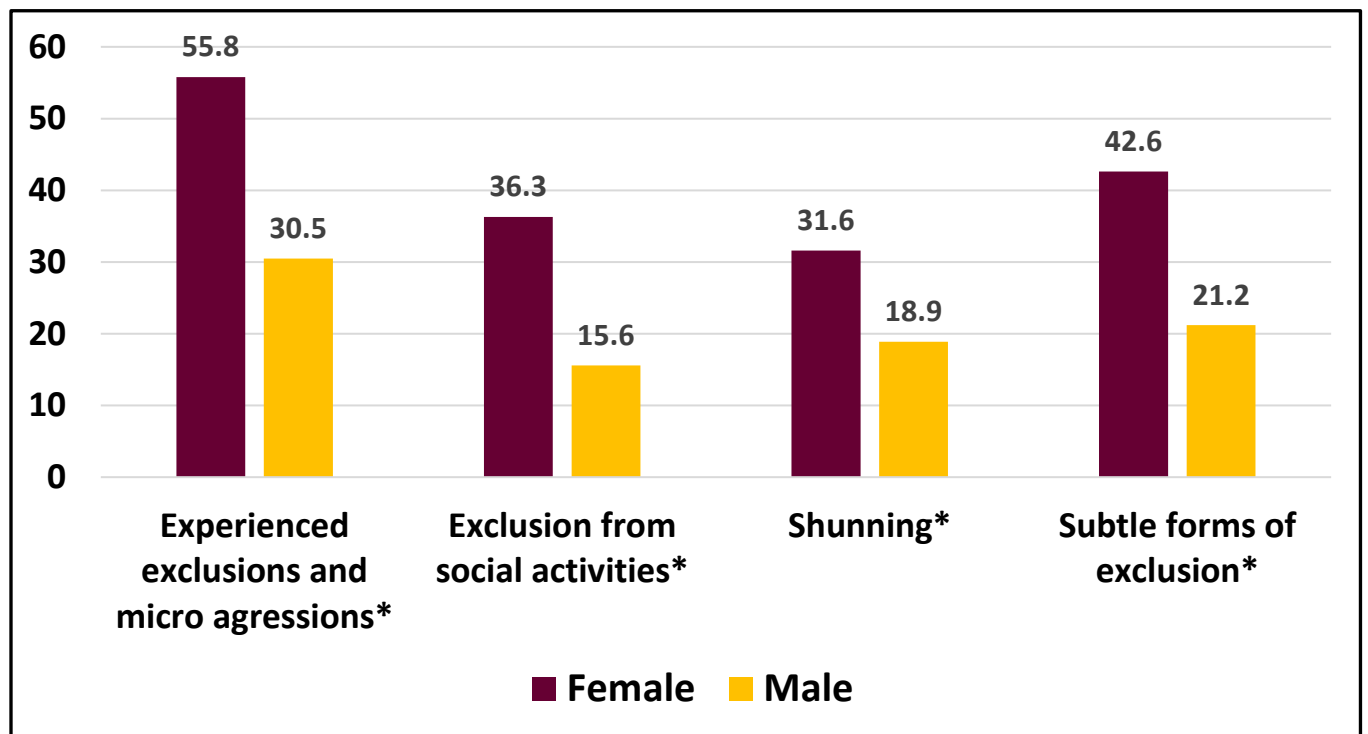


* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

3.4.3 Micro-aggressions

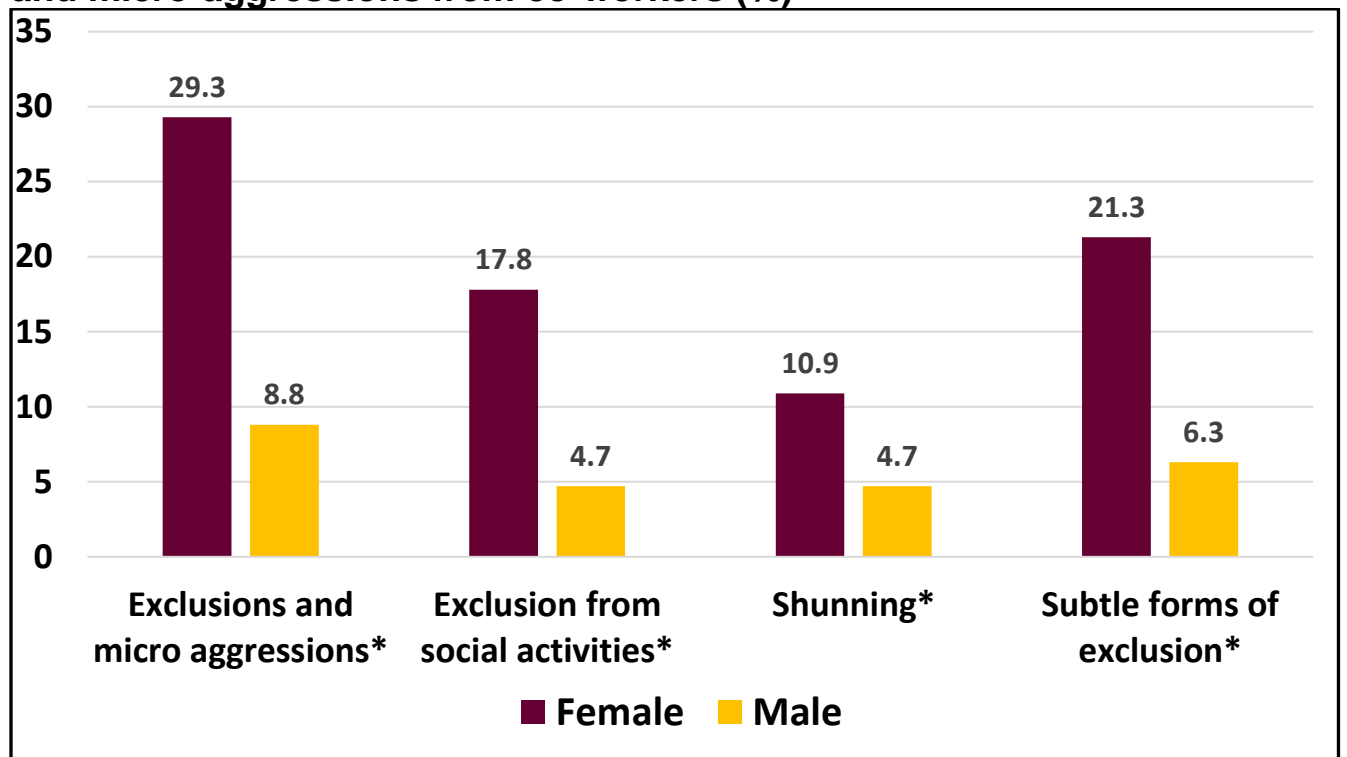
Often harassment and violence take the form of micro-aggressions, such as being shunned and excluded from social activities. Charts 3.8 and 3.9 report findings on the prevalence of micro-aggressions during a firefighter's career and in the last three months. As with harassment and violence in the firehall, women experienced more micro-aggressions than men. More than half of all women experienced micro-aggressions in their career and almost one in three reported such incidents in the last three months.

Chart 3.8: In my career, I experienced acts of exclusion and micro-aggressions from co-workers (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Chart 3.9: In the last three months, I experienced acts of exclusion and micro-aggressions from co-workers (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Experiencing harassment was common, though not universal. Just over half (twelve of twenty-three) of the women interviewed described incidents in which they were the target of harassment or violence. A good description of the situation was provided by one male captain with over twenty years in fire suppression, who wrote:

I was assigned a female recruit who has been systematically denigrated and harassed by primarily one firefighter and his friends. This abuse of females is by no means department-wide, but is not hard to find, either.

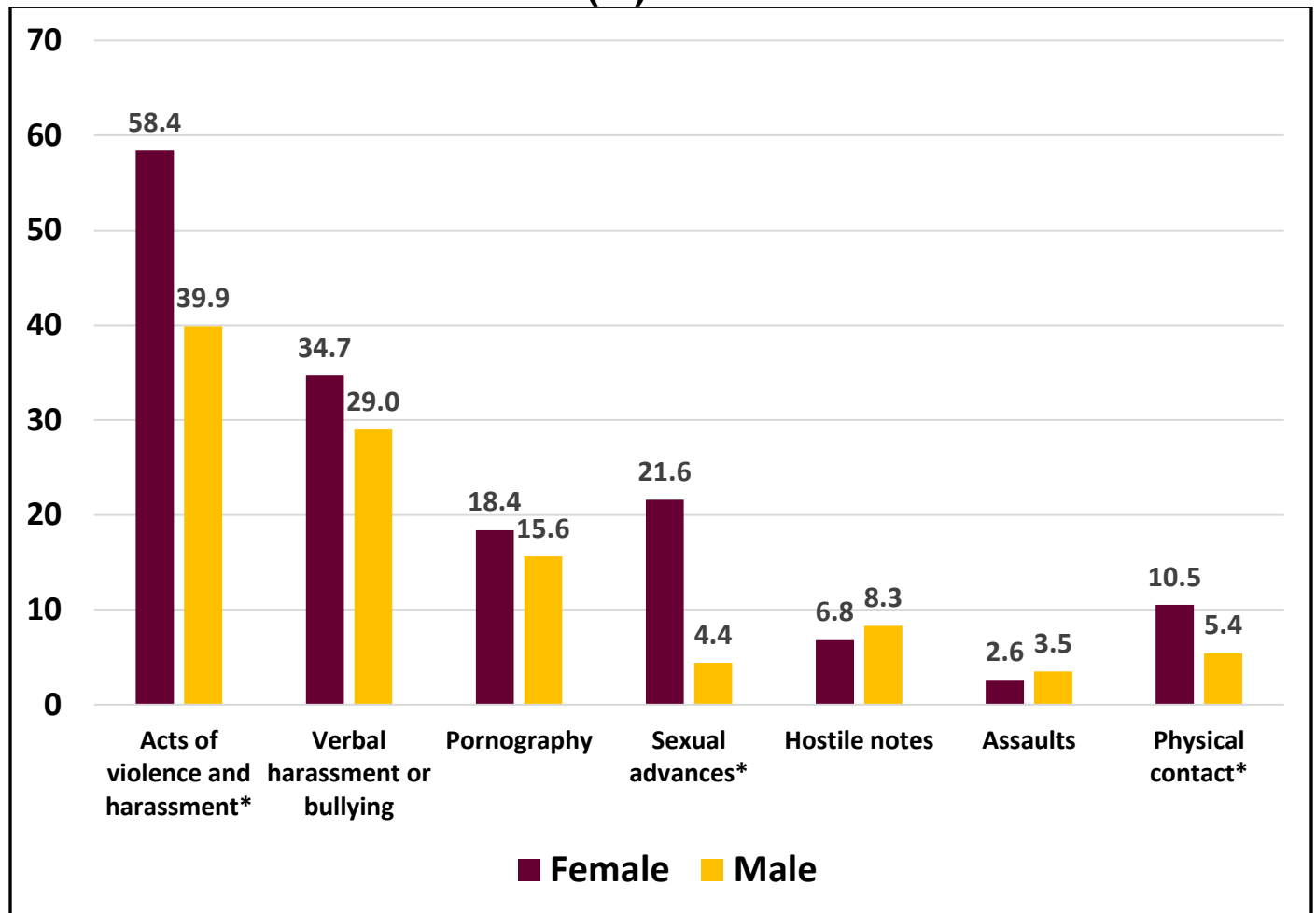
Being ignored by other firefighters was a common experience of women firefighters. For Jane, the exclusion was a product of the familiarity of the men with each other leaving her on the outside:

When I have to serve a shift in a bigger hall or we get together for training I always have this moment when I feel very awkward, when all the guys greet each other, they're like, how's this sport and how's that sport and they all shake each other's hands. And I'll like shake hands sometimes, but often people won't initiate that with me.

3.4.4 Violence and sexual assault

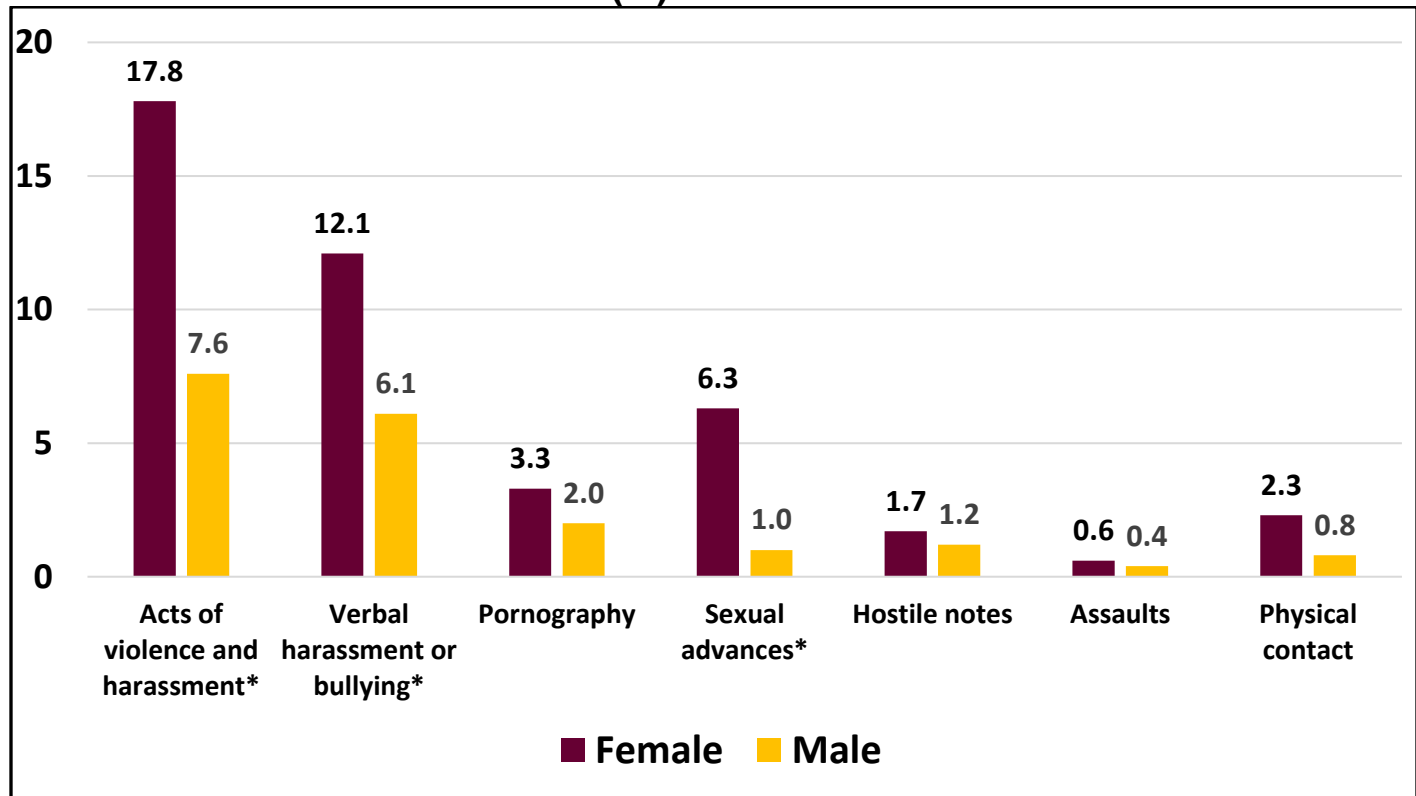
Negative incidents related to living in a firehall and micro-aggressions from co-workers can lead to more serious incidents of violence and sexual assault. Charts 3.10 and 3.11 indicate that the majority of women experienced some type of harassment or violence during their careers, and almost one in five continue to experience these negative events. Verbal harassment and bullying, and sexual assault were the two most common forms of violence.

Chart 3.10: In my career, I experienced acts of harassment and violence from co-workers (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Chart 3.11: In the last three months, I experienced acts of violence and harassment from co-workers (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Several of the individuals interviewed recounted events when teasing and harassment descended into something more. They reported sexual assaults and physical violence. In some cases, these took place in firehalls and in others at community events. Some of these women reported a reluctance by other male firefighters to come to their defense. Sandra, an experienced firefighter, described such a situation at a firehall that was observed by at least two male colleagues:

I thought he was going to kill me. And no one said anything. Not a thing. It was the most bizarre thing ever. And I didn't know what to do. I don't think I could get over the fact that no one did anything. Like, why would no one help me?

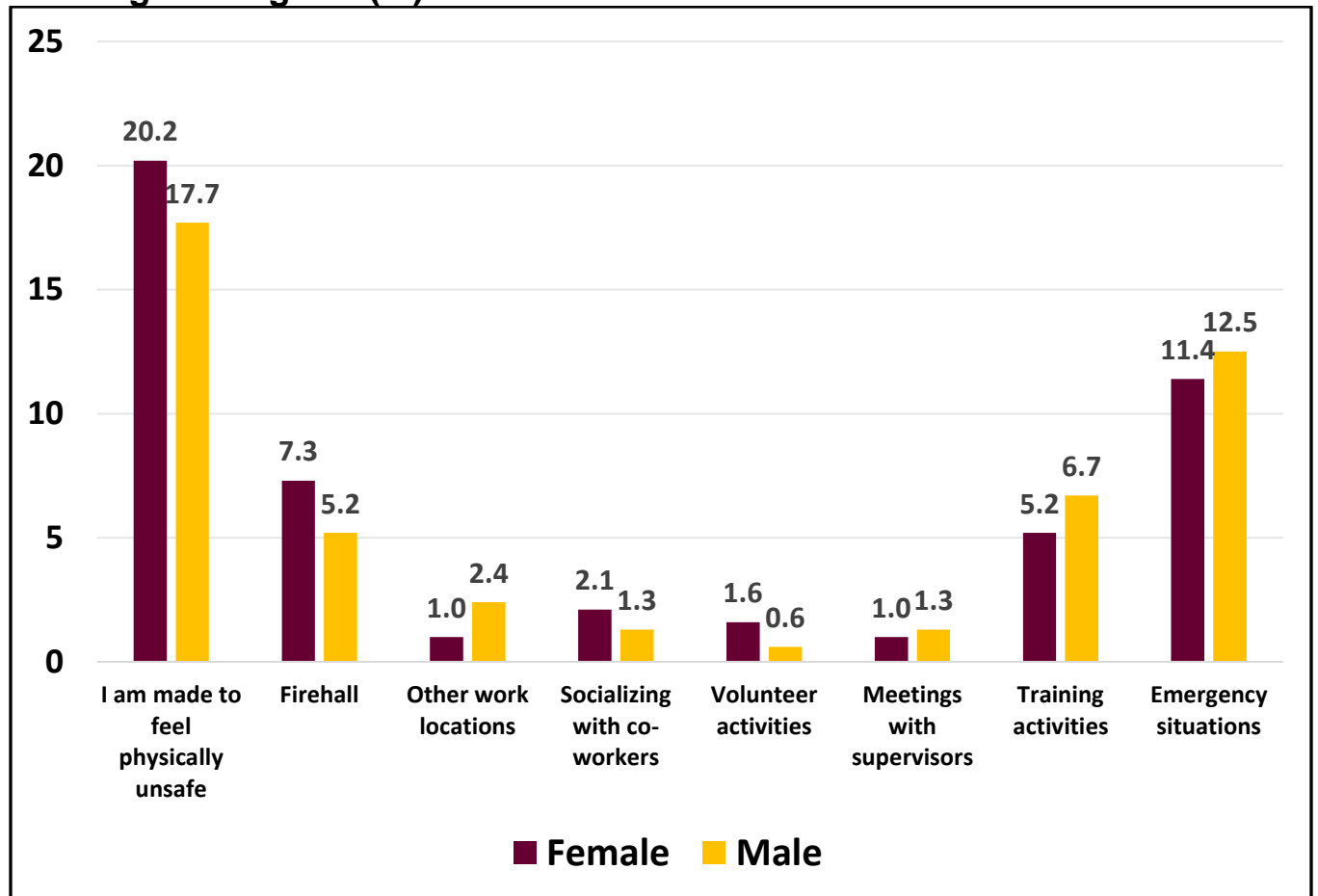
Sandra's description of bystanders not intervening and of there being little repercussion for the perpetrator was reported by several other women interviewed. Another described being asked to avoid a colleague who was sexually propositioning her. Women who were the victims of harassment were often asked to alter their behaviour to remain safe, while the perpetrator was not.

3.4.5 Physical and emotional safety

Given the prevalence of negative incidents while living in a firehall, micro-aggressions, violence and sexual assault while working, it is not surprising that many women felt physically and emotionally unsafe at work.

Chart 3.12 explores the prevalence of feeling physically unsafe. The pattern for women and men was similar. About one in five firefighters reported feeling physically unsafe at work beyond the inherent danger of being a firefighter. The firehall and emergency situations were the most common locations.

Chart 3.12 Where I feel physically unsafe other than the inherent risk of being a firefighter (%)

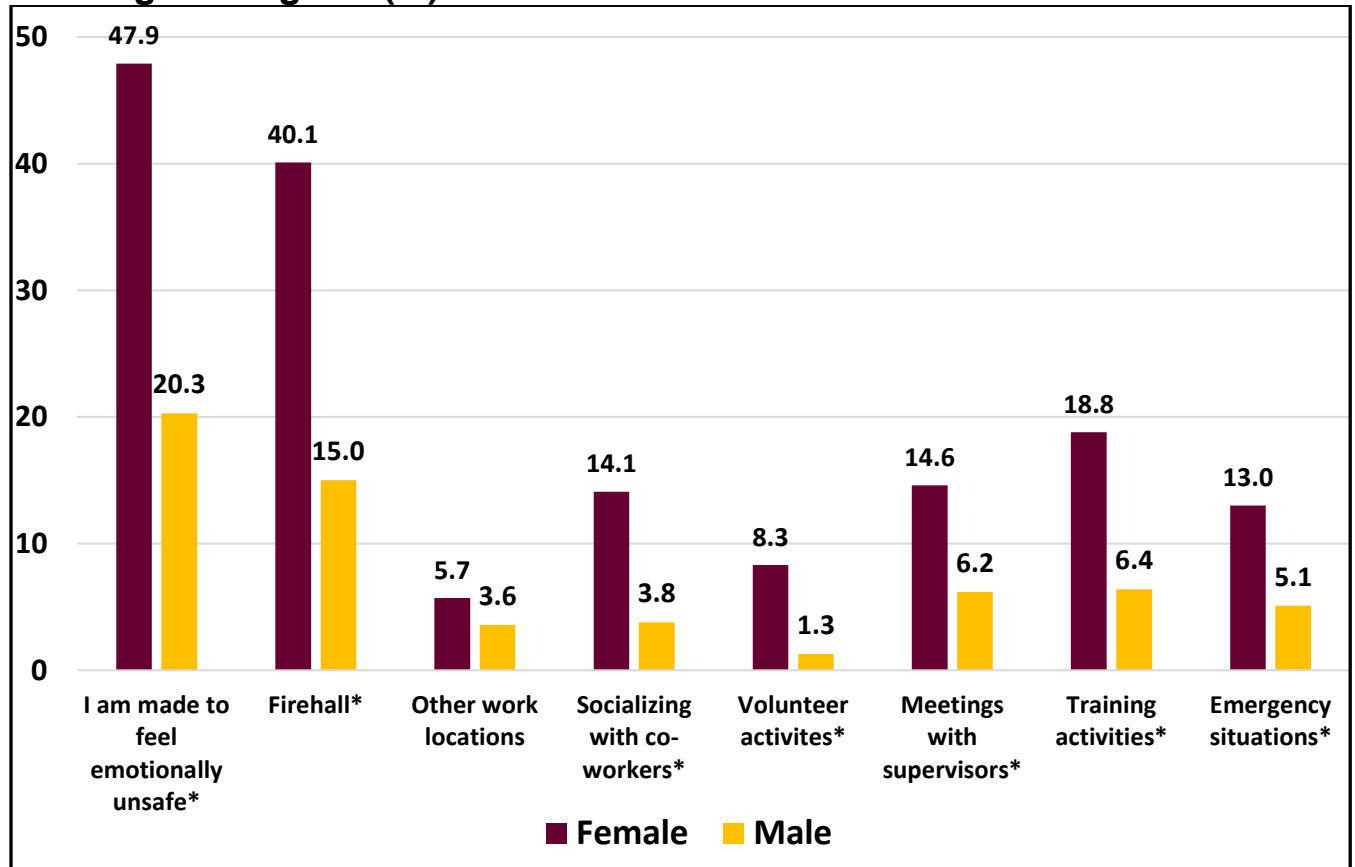


* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Chart 3.13 reveals that emotional safety is a much larger issue for women with almost half of all women reporting feeling emotionally unsafe at work. The firehall was the most common location. Women also reported feeling emotionally unsafe during training

activities, in meetings with supervisors and while socializing. In all situations, feelings of not being emotionally safe were much higher for women than for men.

Chart 3.13 Where I feel emotionally unsafe other than the inherent risk of being a firefighter (%)

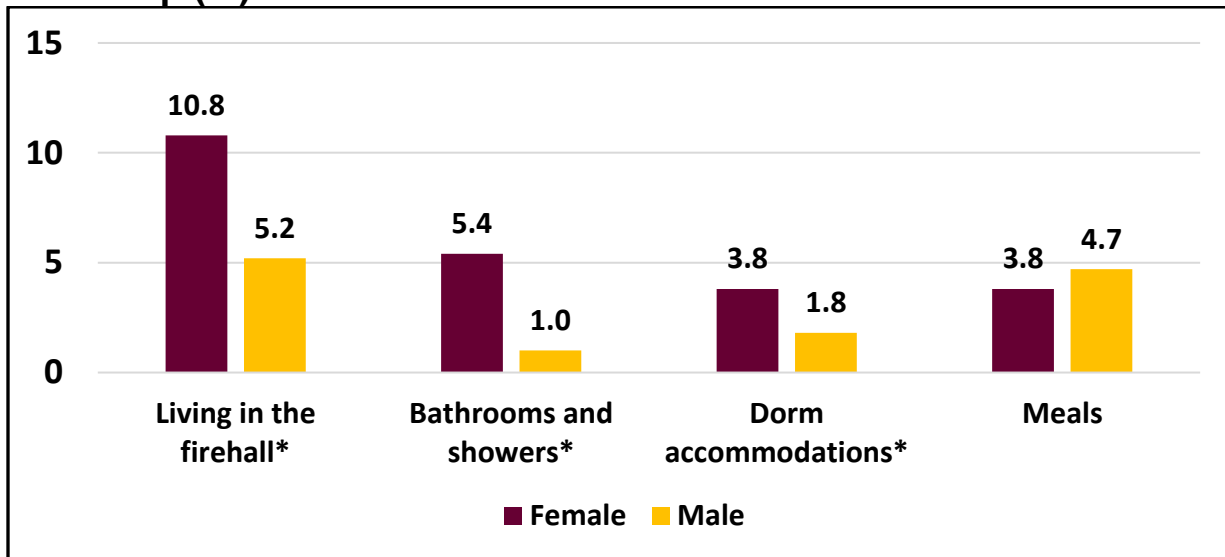


* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

3.5 Leadership and discrimination

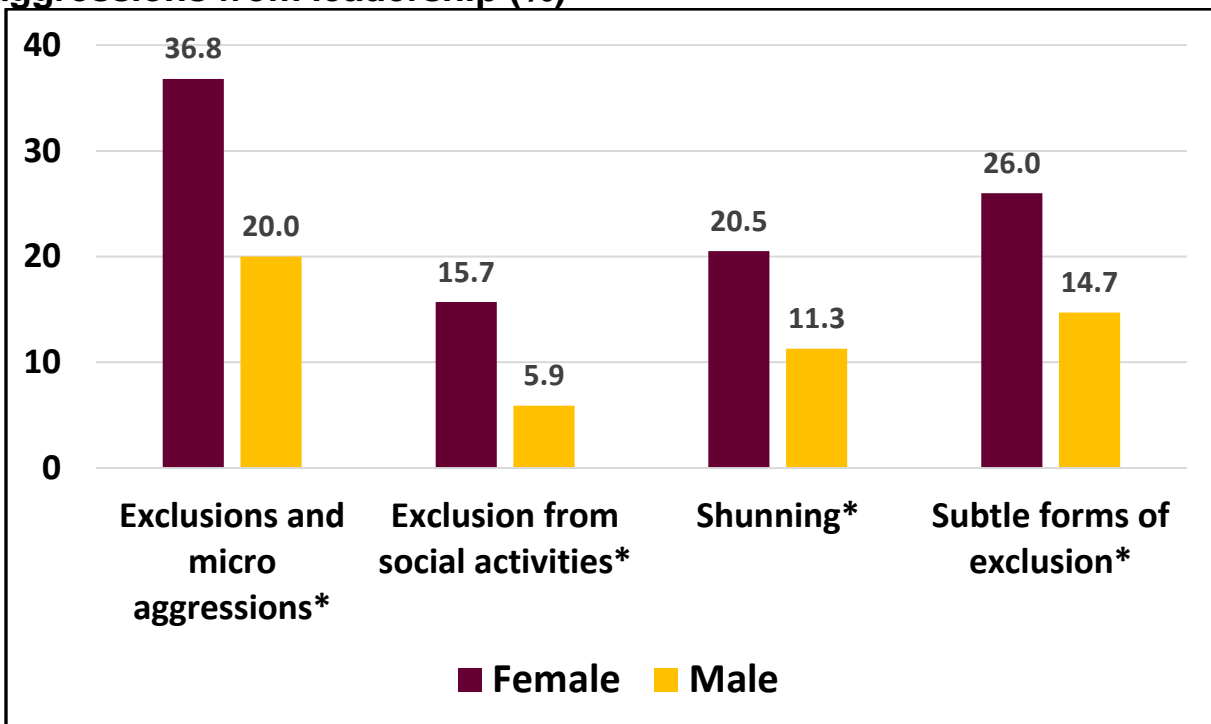
As reported above, half of all women and one-third of all men reported some form of negative interaction with leadership (Chart 3.4). Charts 3.14 through 3.16 provide details of these interactions. Approximately eleven percent of women described having experienced negative incidents with leadership while living in the firehall. Over one-third reported some form of exclusion or micro-aggression. Shunning and other subtle forms of exclusion were the most common. Almost half reported some form of harassment or violence with verbal harassment and sexual advances being the most common. Men were not immune from negative interactions with leadership. One in four men reported they had experienced verbal harassment

Chart 3.14: In my career, I experienced negative incidents with leadership (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Chart 3.15: In my career, I experienced acts of exclusion and micro aggressions from leadership (%)

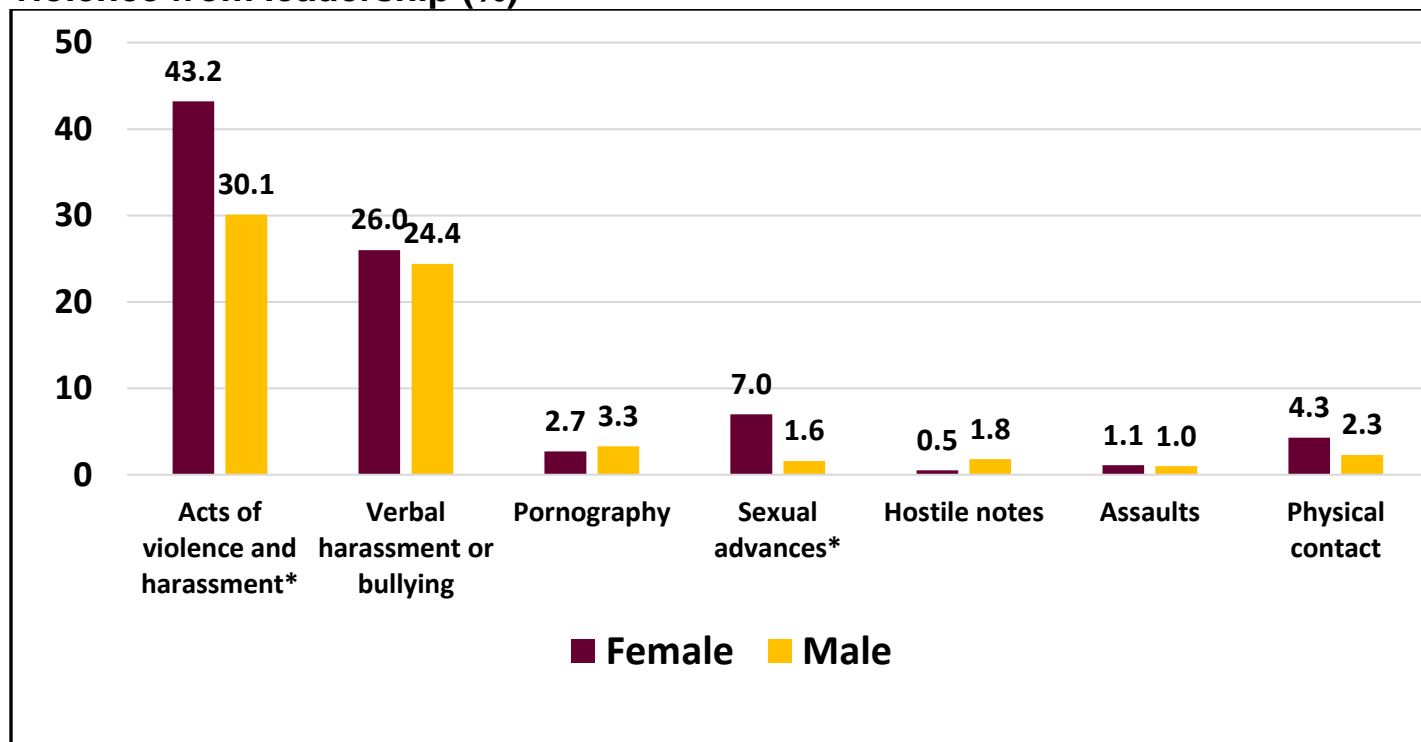


* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Sometimes the acts of exclusion or othering by leadership were unintentional. Carol recounted a situation where a captain thought he was doing her a favour:

A brand-new captain comes in. We're all standing around, there's like twenty of us, there's all these buff young kids, and there's a stack of really heavy tables... that need to go upstairs, a whole flight of stairs. And he looks at me and another girl, and says, Can you guys take all those upstairs? ... I think that's his way of showing that he's equal. I'm gonna get you girls to do this, I'm gonna show everybody that's how I treat equality. And to me that's not equality. That's not showing equality.

Chart 3.16: In my career, I experienced acts of harassment and violence from leadership (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Several participants described incidents where captains harassed women by spreading rumours about women firefighters, undermining women’s skills or making derogatory comments about women. One female survey respondent, a volunteer with over four years of service in fire suppression, wrote on her survey:

A captain I work with is obviously a misogynist. Makes many comments about how he'd never work for a female chief. Would rather go into a fire with any man over a female any day.

Though experiences of overt discrimination from leadership were less common, some women felt that they were disadvantaged in decision making, such as in hall assignments within their departments. Though this was not the case in all departments, particularly in departments where transfers followed seniority principles which guarded against differential treatment. Caroline described how in her department, she felt that:

Women were being blocked from spots from stations. ... No one ever says, "We're blocking her because she's a woman." It's just ... "Oh, we've got someone else in mind, we want this person." And so they'd sort of orchestrate this whole movement of people to keep other people out.

Caroline described how maintaining positive relationships was important to obtaining desirable hall assignments in their department, but that women were often seen as undesirable no matter their personality:

There are definitely halls that try to block the transfer, get somebody else in before she can come... They block some guys too, but when they block guys I'd say it's usually due to specific personalities, right, like we don't want that guy. Whereas when they block women, it's like, we don't wanna rock the boat, we got this good guy's club going.

In other cases, being moved to different or less desirable halls was the outcome of being the victim of harassment. Over eighteen percent of women reported they had requested a hall move because of harassment and over seven percent were moved involuntarily because of harassment. In total, over twenty-one percent of women firefighters changed halls as a result of harassment.

Several survey respondents described situations where the female victim of harassment was moved after an incident rather than the perpetrator, particularly when the perpetrator was a captain. One male firefighter wrote on his survey:

DC's will put their friends in the halls they choose, disrupting a harmonious crew. If a Captain is the problem and harassing a firefighter, they move the firefighter to a hall they don't want to be at. I was told by a platoon chief, "We don't move Captains, we move firefighters" and stand behind the Captain even if they are in the wrong.

Another survey respondent, a captain with over twenty years on the job, described a similar phenomenon:

Hall assignments should be done by city hall/HR. A lot of harassment is buried by the chiefs, and they move firefighters out of their halls, treating them like the problem when they are actually the victim.

Moving women out of halls where they are the victims of harassment sends a signal to them and to others that they are the problem, that it is not the harassment that is the problem, but rather the reporting of harassment.

3.6 Other aspects of difference

The fire service is not only gendered as male, it is also an institution that is racialized as white. In 2016, less than three percent of firefighters were identified as a visible minority.¹² As a result of the small number of non-white people working in the fire service, there were not enough racialized survey respondents to allow us to determine if the experiences of women or men who were racialized as people of colour differed from their counterparts who were racialized as white.¹³ Although several women who were interviewed identified as bisexual or lesbian, sexual orientation was seldom discussed during the interviews. Several women, regardless of their identities, however, did remark that they were uncomfortable with the frequency of racist and/or homophobic or transphobic comments. Emily, a racialized woman of colour described:

There was one incident... we were all basically just sitting around talking. The chiefs were there, and it was very casual. And [this guy's] like, You know, it was so much better when it was the good old white boys club. So much better. We could do whatever we want, we could say whatever we want. And I just sat there, and I looked around the room, like, Wow, he just said that.

This discriminatory comment about the “good old days” implied that firefighters who were not white and those who were not male were ‘degrading’ the job, and hence were unwelcome. We were told of chiefs not intervening when discriminatory comments were made. In another case, Jane, a white, bisexual woman described:

My chief came by the station and he made a homophobic joke. ... He must have been really thinking about it and apologized to me for it and said he regrets saying it. ... But then after I felt very mad. ... I mean, he should have been apologizing to the entire crew, why is it something he has to apologize to me in particular about? And obviously [he] maybe thought about how he realized or remembered that I'm gay or something, but it would have had so much more institutional value in changing the culture of the job, to be like, actually... to everybody.

¹² Statistics Canada, 2016 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-400-X2016356.

¹³ There were less than 50 racialized survey respondents.

This quote highlights how discrimination by leadership can have a particularly strong impact, either signaling that women are welcome and discriminatory comments are not acceptable, or that these comments are status-quo. In this case, the chief was attuned to how his joke affected the individual worker, but not to how it affected the work environment.

3.7 Conclusion

This section explored the experience of women at work. Having to work in a workplace culture described as a 'boys club', having equipment that does not fit properly, living in halls that have not created space for women, being harassed and excluded all add up to a work environment where women do not feel welcome. When we examined the factors that contribute to firefighters reporting positive employee morale we found it was not individual factors such as whether the firefighter was a woman, or their age or seniority, but rather how they were supported and treated at work. Lack of support and experiences of harassment and violence from co-workers all added up to a view that employee morale was poor. One conclusion is that as long as women firefighters have a sense that they are not welcome attracting more women to the profession will be a challenge, despite the fact that the majority of women firefighters love their jobs and would recommend firefighting to other women.

Section 4: Health

4.0 Introduction

This section examines the physical and mental health of firefighters. Fighting fires exposes firefighters to physical risks and to dangerous toxins.¹⁴ They are also exposed to mental stress related to trauma at accident scenes or while attending to health emergencies. Women face the added stress of harassment at work and feeling they are not welcome. The same aspects of firefighting culture that negatively affect women's health, also affect the health of all firefighters. Research has pointed to how firefighting culture, especially masculine "hero" culture, contributes to workplace injuries and illness. A report from the U.S. Fire Administration argues:

The image of the firefighter, which is the foundation of the fire and emergency service culture, was built around selfless heroism — the firefighter is always ready to face any risk and, if necessary, to make the supreme sacrifice in order to save lives and property. (U. S. Fire Administration 2015: 5)

Other research has argued that introducing more women into the fire service could improve overall health and safety by tempering the 'hypermasculine' culture of firefighting (Khan 2017).

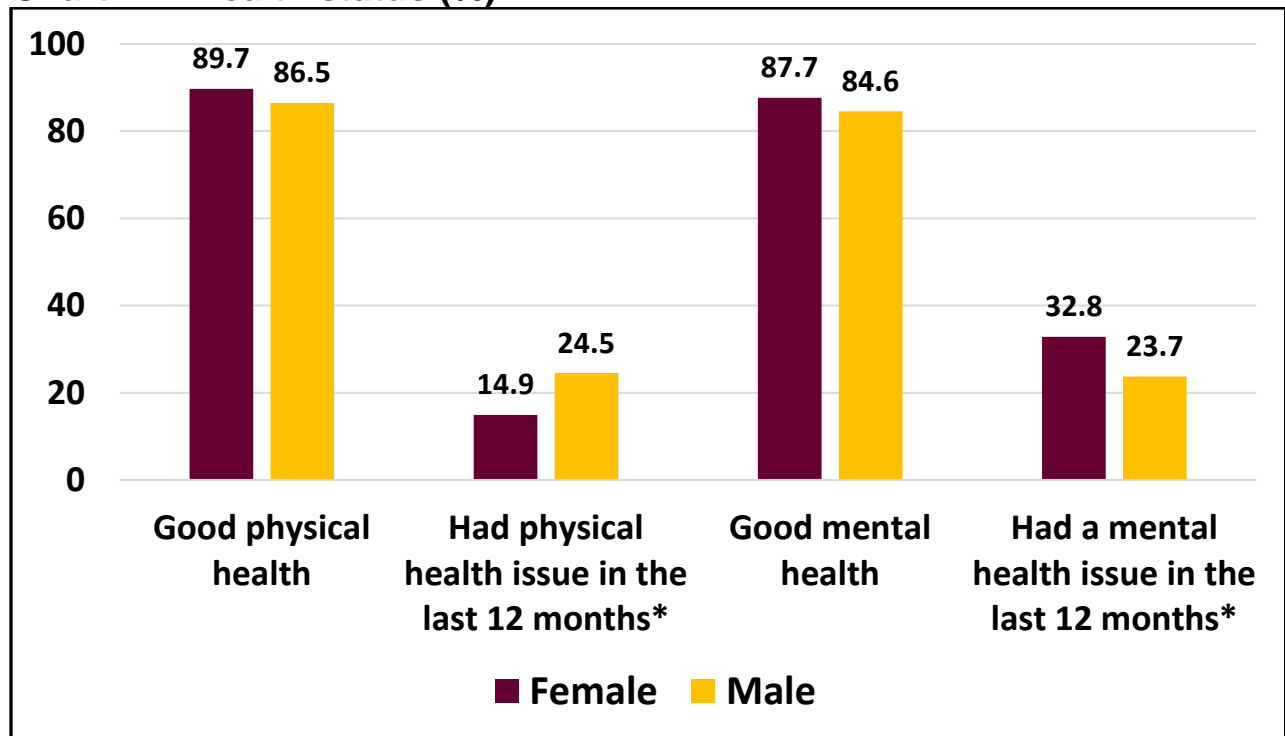
Chart 4.1 provides broad indicators of the physical and mental health of firefighters. Overall, self-reports by firefighters suggest a healthy workforce. Nearly ninety percent of firefighters reported that their physical health and mental health were good to excellent. This compares favourably with Canadians as a whole. Just under sixty percent of Canadians reported good physical health in 2016 and just over seventy percent reported good mental health.¹⁵

Despite this favorable overall health profile there is reason to suspect that not all is well regarding the health of firefighters. Numerous firefighters reported physical and mental health issues related to work in the last twelve months. Almost one in four survey respondents reported having a physical health issue in the last twelve months and over one-quarter reported a mental health issue related to work. Men were almost twice as likely to report a physical health issue in the last twelve months while women were about fifty percent more likely than men to report a mental health issue in the last twelve months. It is also possible that firefighters might be reluctant to report health concerns given the weight placed on being physically and mentally able to do the job. This is a factor that might be of relevance for women who are constantly trying to prove they belong.

¹⁴ For a detailed study of the many health risks women firefighters face see, U.S. Fire Administration 2019.

¹⁵ Health Status of Canadians 2016: A Report of The Chief Public Health Officer, Public Health Agency of Canada, Ottawa.

Chart 4.1: Health status (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

The remainder of this section looks beyond these broad descriptors of health status to look at how firefighters described their health during interviews. It explores mental health issues by documenting the prevalence of several stress indicators and how firefighters cope with issues related to health at work.

4.1 Physical health

While broad indicators of firefighter health pointed to an above average level of physical health, reports during interviews described serious physical health issues. Firefighters interviewed reported having cracked ribs, broken legs, compression fractures and burns. Others raised questions about their physical ability to continue doing the job as they grow older. Studies of firefighters have shown that the high rate of musculoskeletal disorders increase with age for men and women (Negm et.al. 2017). Coping with the physical demands of the job later in life was a concern to women who often start their firefighting careers later in life than men. Caroline who started firefighting later in life worries about her longevity in the job:

I worry a lot as a woman about whether this is a job I can continue to do physically. ... I got hired a bit late in life, I was 30. Am I going to do this, am I going to be on the back of the truck when I'm 60? Am I going to be carrying this pack?

Carol, a volunteer firefighter in the last years of her career commented on how physically draining the job can be. She told us:

Physically, it's draining. Get up at 3 o'clock in the morning and you're sound asleep, and you're bolted into the driver's seat and you're just, adrenaline's going, and then you're pulling hose off the back of the bed. It's just... you get hurt. Constantly banging something, falling, tripping, you know, it's not a good way to go to a call, when you're woken up in a shock like that.

4.2 Mental health

While the common view is that the dangers associated with firefighting are mainly physical and related to fighting fires, the interviews regularly pointed to serious mental health concerns that were only tangentially related to fighting fires. Some were related to helping people in moments of distress or tragedy. For others, the stressors were related to dealing with harassment and discrimination from co-workers and leadership. For some women, the combination of dealing with the trauma of others while themselves being subject to harassment and discrimination at work led to significant stress related outcomes. The more detailed image firefighters painted during interviews point to specific conditions that reflect less than excellent mental health. Several interview participants described how for women, the inherent stress of the job was often compounded by stressors related to social relations at the workplace.

Women and men alike, described how responding to bad calls affected their mental health. Kendra described the mental health impact of "never really going to something good. All the time, we're going to somebody's worst day. We're going to trauma." Firefighters who live in the communities they serve, are often called upon to help people they know who are in distress. Matthew, a senior male firefighter, spoke of the stress related to witnessing trauma:

Ask any firefighter they'll probably tell you clearly they remember the first person who died that they were working on, on a medical call. They remember the first car accident when they saw someone trapped in there. They remember the first time they packed up and went into a fire. If a guy tells you it was anything other than terrifying and a huge rush, he's lying to you.

It was the stress of the unknown of what they might face at the next situation that worried Jamie the most: She indicated:

It's also an awareness of like, the next call could be the worst call of your life. It could be nothing, you could just go through the shift totally fine, but that unknown is also unsettling. For a time I was finishing my shift and like, seven in the morning going to the parking lot being like, I didn't die today.

For women, the impact of coping with others' trauma can be compounded by having to prove continuously that they belong in the profession or having to cope with their own trauma associated with workplace harassment, isolation and violence. Beth highlighted how isolation at work can compound the health effects of others' trauma. She told us:

Every firefighter has the potential to suffer, but what are the differences between women and men? What else are women confronting? Not just domestic violence, but just being isolated in the station. If you don't fit in with your crew, if you're being questioned about whether you belong... it makes you question yourself.

Jane had a similar view:

I've had to take shifts off, like usually one here or one there for mental health days either from bad calls or from just not being able to face my crew cause they're shitheads, and I just can't deal with that that day. Like when I had that bad captain. ... So, I can see how the job and in particular the misogyny and some of that bad attitude has affected me.

Haley suggested that the difficulty of speaking up about harassment and challenging harassers was particularly stressful. From her perspective:

There are definitely vicarious trauma issues... but, as a woman, I suffer the most when something has happened and I should say something or I should have said something, or, I feel like I can't say something, um, whether a remark was directed at me or it was just a terrible remark in general, and if it came from like a senior officer. ... The times that really affect me is when I don't have the ability to address certain things. ... There are still present times when I want to be able to use my voice and, um, my own personal judgements prevent me from doing that.

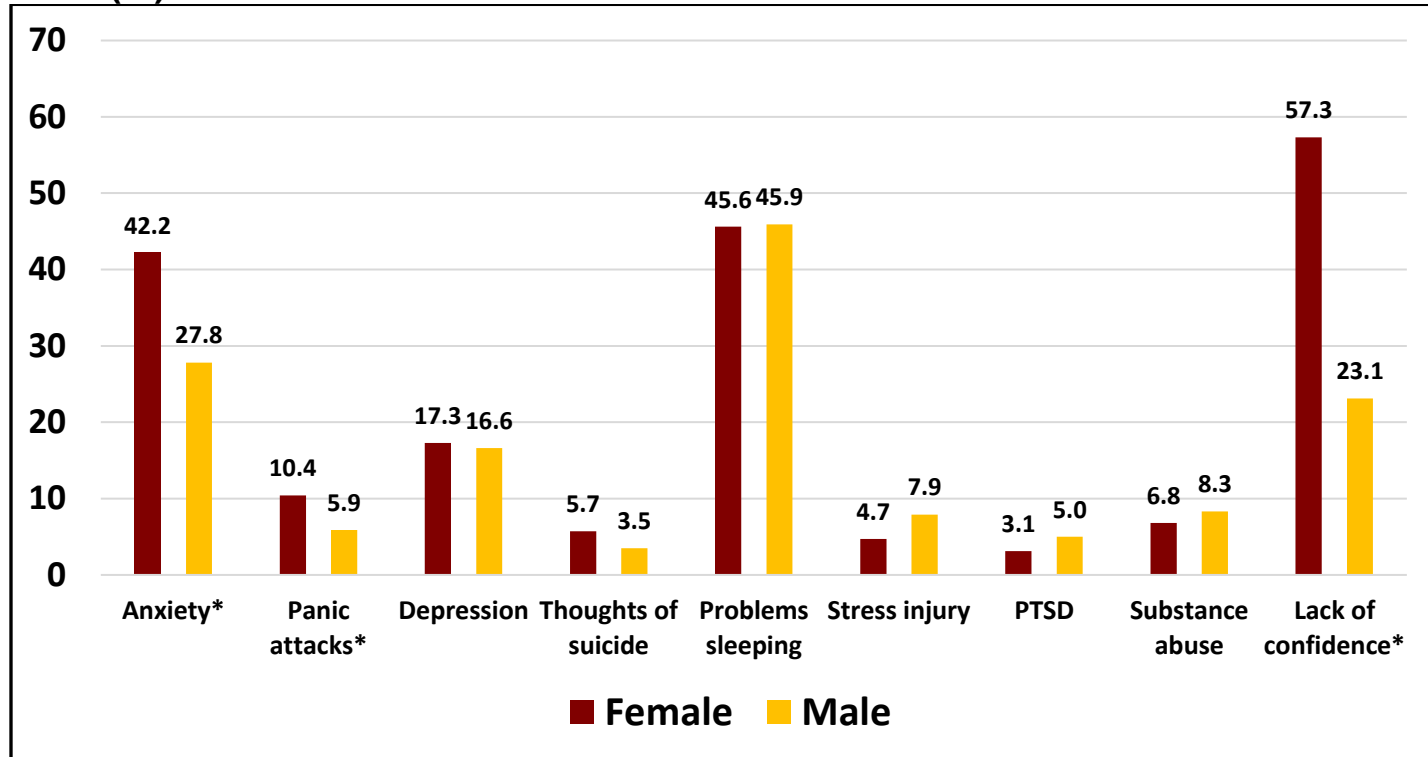
Not everyone has a negative response to the mental stress associated with the job. Leah had a positive evaluation of her work experience. She indicated:

A lot of us are happy in our job and can deal with the mental stress, you know, and the physical demands of the job and I really believe that I'm one of them. Like I love my job, and I'm happy doing it and I don't feel that I'm gonna, you know, I don't carry negative thoughts around for long.

Survey questions measured the prevalence of nine conditions that together suggest the image of excellent firefighter mental health reported above underestimates the work related health issues of firefighters. Chart 4.2 summarizes these findings. Over one-third of male firefighters and over half of female firefighters reported experiencing at least two such conditions. Female and male firefighters were equally likely to report

most conditions. Women reported more frequent work-related anxiety, panic attacks and lack of confidence.¹⁶

Chart 4.2: In the last twelve months, I have experienced as a result of work (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Advanced statistical techniques were used to examine simultaneously the association between reporting anxiety at work, lack of confidence at work, and problems sleeping on the one hand and several personal, workplace and social relations characteristics.¹⁷ This makes it possible to assess if it is the characteristics of the person, the characteristics of the workplace, or social relations at work that best explains the prevalence of these outcomes. The characteristics explored include: personal characteristics (age, seniority and gender); workplace characteristics (size of the workplace, whether one works with women, and rating of the work environment); social relations characteristics (experiencing harassment or violence at work, level of support, leadership committed to making the workplace safe for everyone, and rating employee morale and comradery).

¹⁶ Other studies have also found women suffer high rates of stress-related outcomes. See Khan et.al. 2017.

¹⁷ Logistic regression analysis was used in this section. Details of the analysis are available from the authors.

None of the personal characteristics or workplace characteristics were significantly associated with the frequency of anxiety. Several of the social relations indicators were statistically significant, however. Individuals who reported they had experienced harassment or violence from co-workers either in their careers or in the last three months, were more than twice as likely to report anxiety at work. Rating employee morale and comradery positively or reporting having support at work reduced the probability of reporting anxiety at work by almost fifty percent. These findings indicate it was not being a woman that led to anxiety, but rather how women were treated at work.

The factors associated with lack of confidence at work were different. Women were more likely to report lack of confidence at work than men, even after controlling for other workplace characteristics and social relations characteristics. The probability of reporting lack of confidence at work fell with seniority. Social relations at work again played a significant role in the probability of reporting lack of confidence. Having experienced harassment and violence from leadership over a career, or from co-workers in the last three months were all strongly associated with reporting a lack of confidence.

A similar analysis was done with sleep problems. Here the factors that had the strongest correlation with frequency of sleep issues were being new to the job, working in a hall with more than fifteen people, and reporting harassment or violence from leadership or from workers in the last three months.

The sleep benefits of working in a slow hall were described by Jane during an interview:

It's nice to be at a slow station. Less exposure to occupational cancer hazards, less physical danger, emotional risk, also you get a good night's sleep, you're not running around working at a fire all night and having to sleep in the day which is never as good as sleeping at night.

4.3 Coping with stress, harassment and mental health issues

There are only limited supports available to firefighters to deal with stress and mental health issues related to work. Haley recounted the challenge of getting help after having a traumatic experience attending an injured individual and how this can lead to PTSD. She told us:

After you lose a patient... you don't know how to take it, or you don't know how to respond... and nobody is really talking about it, not being told, Oh, you know you should go get some professional help if you're feeling this way, or this is available to you, because now we know, that's how PTSD and vicarious trauma and all the other mental health issues happen, that's what I didn't like, um, getting into the profession is that side of the lasting effects that nobody ever told me. ... It's only in the last couple years that there's been a lot of attention drawn to that, but we're still now trying to catch up

In an environment where workers are supposed to be tough or where your right to work as a female firefighter is regularly challenged, it can be difficult admitting one is suffering from stress or a mental illness. Nicole, who was receiving counselling to deal with PTSD admitted to us the insecurity she felt as she navigated her illness. She told us:

Well I had to come to terms with it myself before I was willing to share. ... So, now I can talk about it more comfortably, and I just talk about that my PTSD is in remission now, is what the term is, so I took it as a death sentence when it happened I was like, I'm done. I have PTSD, I'm done. Because I had never heard stories of people coming through it to the other side, where they'd had it.

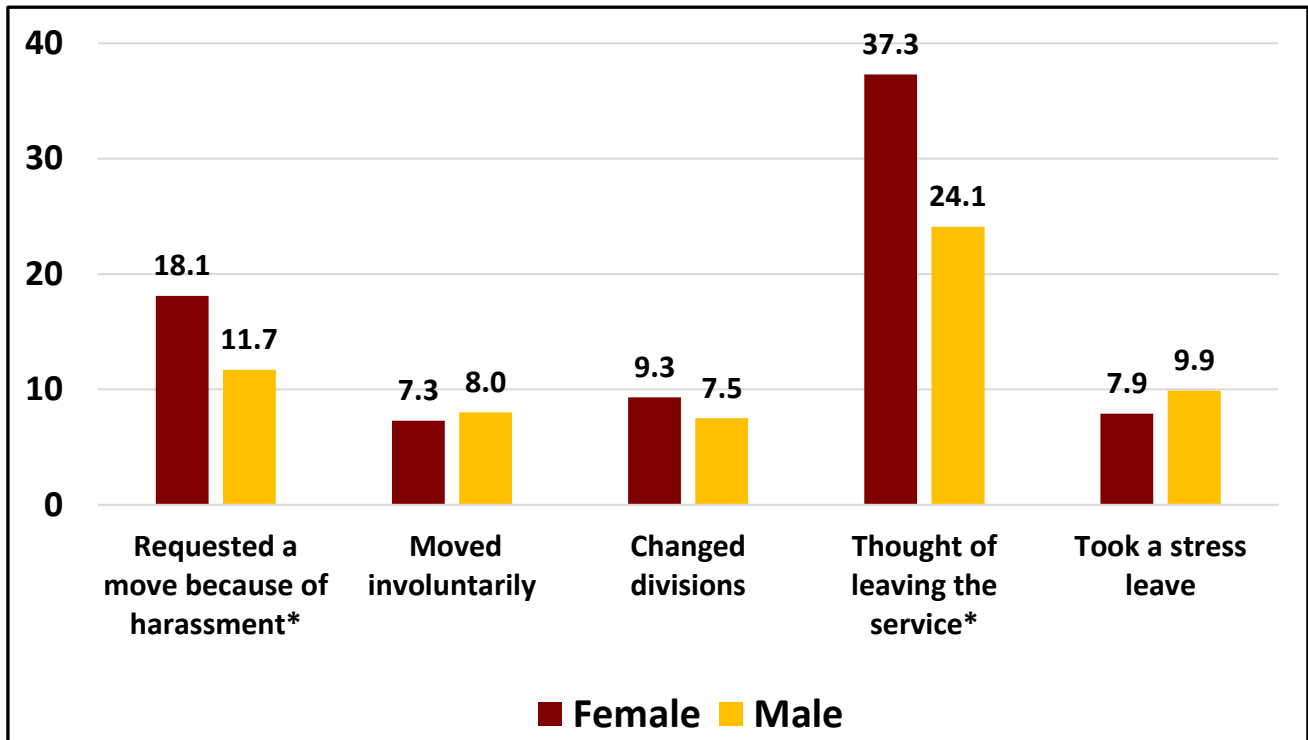
O'Neil and Rothbard (2015) discuss how firefighters suppress negative thoughts and feelings arising from crisis situations. They diffuse tension through a "masculine culture of joviality." Whether this is the optimal strategy for firefighters dealing with emotional stress at work is questionable. Evidence in this section suggests it does not work well for women firefighters.

For some women, having a network of friends to discuss health issues was helpful. Caroline, who was a mid-career firefighter dealing with a serious harassment issue recounted:

There was a period where some stuff had happened at work a few years ago where I dealt with a really homophobic person. ... It had sort of snowballed into this really unmanageable situation. And because I had been around long enough to have a network of friends at work that I could talk to, that was really helpful. But I can imagine that would be something that would be a very difficult thing to manage very early on in your career.

Seeking help to deal with stress and mental health issues is one coping mechanism. The other is to move work locations when stress becomes overwhelming. For women, changing work locations is a more common strategy, particularly when the stress is associated with harassment and discrimination at work. Chart 4.3 provides a summary of some of these coping mechanisms. Women were significantly more likely to request a hall change because of harassment. Over one-third contemplated leaving the service altogether, a much higher rate than men. Female and male firefighters were equally likely to change divisions or take a stress leave.

Chart 4.3: Other responses to harassment and stress at work (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.

Suppression only.

Moving halls was a common theme throughout the interviews as a means of dealing with harassment and stress. Katherine recalled how at one point the constant harassment she observed became more than she could cope with and she requested a move:

The guys probably didn't know how [their comments were] affecting me cause I didn't say much. I tried to redirect it with humour, but I never said, You know what, guys, I don't wanna hear this stuff. Never. It wouldn't have occurred to me to say it directly like that... It just took a toll on me and [my husband] said, You gotta get out of that hall, like you're just grumpy. And it was great that I got out of there. Like it was taking a toll on my mental health, for sure.

Erica was dealing with a young male firefighter who was harassing her. Rather than report him she opted to simply move halls. This decision was driven by the understanding that reporting the incident would ruin this man's career, but it would also be something that would lead to her being criticized by other firefighters.

I could have really hurt that person's career. ... But again, knowing that I have twenty-five years ahead of me here, what... how do I want to play this out? ... Ultimately, ... I went to the captain and I said, I have a lot going on in my personal life, and I'd like a fresh start, and please move me to another station. So I went to another station, and nobody knew

anything more than that, you know, so that's where I'm at today and it was the best decision I've made.

Several survey respondents felt that dealing with harassment by moving people to different halls was ineffective. Rather than discipline the perpetrator of harassment, people in leadership positions often move the people involved to different hall. One person wrote regarding the problem with this approach on her survey:

A lot of harassment is buried by the chiefs, and they move firefighters out of their halls, treating them like the problem when they are actually the victim.

Another mid-career female firefighter added to her survey:

I would like to see actual consequences for men who harass women on the job instead of shuffling him off to another hall and she ends up quitting because her life is made so miserable by other coworkers.

Further insight into how women firefighters cope with stress and harassment at work comes from examining a small group of women who work in the fire service, who completed recruit training, but who no longer work in suppression. These sixteen women were fifty percent more likely than women still in suppression to report having been harassed at work by co-workers or by leadership. They were more likely to have witnessed women firefighters being treated differently than male firefighters or to have their competency challenged compared to women firefighters still in suppression. This small group of women firefighters were much more likely to have availed themselves of some of the coping mechanisms reported in Chart 4.3. Nearly one-third had requested a move to a different firehall. Three-quarters had changed divisions, and almost forty-five percent had thought of leaving the fire service.

4.4 Conclusions

Firefighters report above average overall physical and mental health. However, a more detailed analysis revealed many firefighters experience physical trauma while working and have numerous conditions indicative of poor mental health. These are particularly worrisome for women firefighters who cope with both the stress of dealing with people who are experiencing trauma and their own trauma related to their treatment at work. Making firefighting a healthier profession for all requires greater attention to the mental health and stress-related illnesses that can develop from helping people in distress.

Section 5: Support

5.0 Introduction

This section explores the degree of support that firefighters report at work and the effectiveness of institutional arrangements designed to address issues of harassment and violence at work. Women firefighters were less likely than men to report being supported at work and found the mechanisms meant to address issues of harassment and discrimination at work less effective than that reported by men.

The organization of fire service workplaces makes support from co-workers more important than in most workplaces. Firefighters depend on each other in dangerous situations. They live, eat and sleep together during twenty-four-hour shifts. Many firehalls are small with over eighty percent of all firefighter survey respondents working in halls with fewer than fifteen firefighters. Within a hall, firefighters mostly work in small crews of four. These factors make support from co-workers a critical issue for the well-being of firefighters. The critical role support plays in the overall experience of working as a firefighter is revealed in Dana's description of her first few years as a firefighter.

Lucky for me, I've been put in halls where I was pretty busy, and I was able to gain a lot of experience. ... I also had a great crew to start with, a great captain who was very confident, with great leadership skills, who was very trusting, right? So, a crew that was also able to take care of me and really make me feel at home, so because of that experience I think I was a lot happier and it exceeded my expectations, for sure.

Not all women were lucky enough to work in such a positive environment. In discussing if women are treated differently, Erica told us:

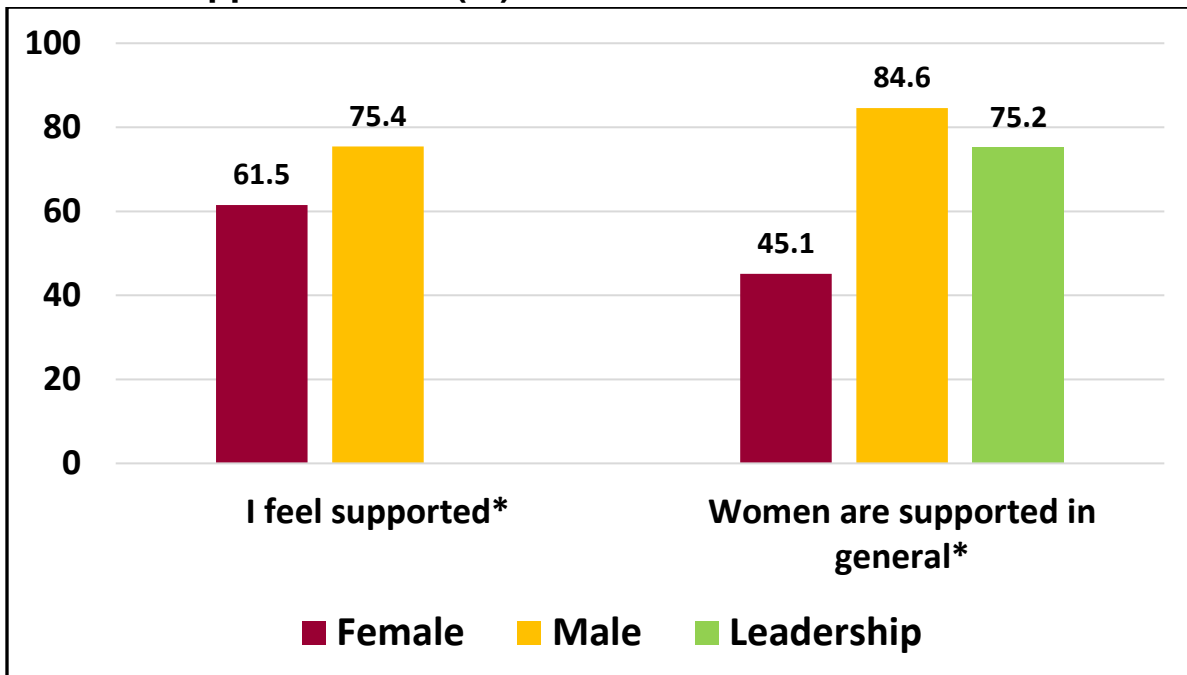
I always knew the, oh it's a girl, like that kind of mentality, but I never knew it was as strong as, I refuse to work with a female, like that stance. ... I know for a fact that girls get stationed in very specific spots for a reason, the board is not open to me. I can't go where certain people work, like there's a whole game behind that. I don't know all the ins and outs, but I know I get put in very specific places.

5.1 Support at work

Chart 5.1 provides indicators of the support female and male survey respondents reported. Over seventy percent of firefighters reported feeling they were supported at work and just over seventy-five percent reported feeling that women in general were supported at work. There were significant differences between female and male firefighters. Women were less likely than men to feel supported and about half as likely

to feel that women in the fire service were supported. Just over three-quarters of senior leadership felt women firefighters were supported.

Chart 5.1: Support at work (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Interviews shed further light on the question of co-worker support. Most women reported being supported by most of the people they work with. Jamie pointed out the many ways the male firefighters support women and the difference this makes. She told us:

Even though a lot of guys have issues on the job, there's a lot of wonderful men, for sure, very encouraging, very wonderful, many dad-like relationships, many brother-like relationships that I've had over the years that I cherish, for sure. I would say that there are guys out there that are really supportive of women being on the job because they know the value of it.

Starting with a supportive crew can get one's career off to a positive start. Karen, a senior firefighter on her way to a leadership position, recalled:

I started out with a group of guys who were welcoming and fantastic and supportive. ... I feel like they really set my career in the right direction because they allowed me to prove myself, basically, cause they let me do the work, they let me, they didn't treat me any differently. And I've seen other women be treated differently where they're not, like they say, Oh I'll get that for you, or I'll do this for you, I got that, right? And they didn't do that, they just let me do the work, and it was fantastic.

Others were not so lucky. Sandra recalled her early experience at a less supportive hall.

I was going to a shift that was he-man woman-haters. ... I know from the minute [the captain] met me, he hated me. I'm college-educated, I'm a single mom, I'm making it on my own. ... I'm tough. And he literally beat me down every day of my job for the next three years straight. Every day. He'd yell at me, he grabbed me at a fire.

For some, the support was more a product of women having to be tolerated in the workplace and supported so that everyone can do their job. Leah, a senior fulltime firefighter told us how:

There's definitely been some men that are more the mentoring type. ... They wanna make sure the job gets done properly, and safely, right? I mean you're a team, a crew, and there is closeness with your own crew, you have to be able to trust each other. ... They [men] need to know that you can do your job, regardless of what sex you are. So it takes time, but when that starts developing, I think your relationships with your crew gets better and better.

For others the support they got from male colleagues was still conditional. Erica reported she was supported in general, but that did not extend to supporting the right of women to be firefighters. She suggested she feels supported:

... in the sense that they encourage me and they will stand up for me, you know, they'll do it in that way? Are they going to stand up and say, girls have as much right to be [firefighters]? ... No, I've never seen that. I don't think I would go that far. ... It's really a case by case thing and they won't stand up for every girl, they'll stand up for some girls.

Most of the women interviewed wanted to be treated as equals at the workplace. This meant that actions by leadership, even when well intentioned, could make them feel less than equal. A good example was Ryan, who reflected on how his own actions, taken with good intentions, could be taken as less than supportive of women's equality at the workplace. His experience reflected the importance of leadership taking its cues from women themselves regarding the appropriateness of how they show support. Ryan a mid-career firefighter described his support of women as:

I don't treat women any different than men. I guess sometimes I might offer to carry something heavier and stuff like that. I know that [my female colleague] hates that. So, I do my best to not do that but I think it's just natural to hold the door, and in that regard, I think she thinks she's treated differently but I do my best to not do that. But I've got to be conscious of it.

Several women pointed to examples of men coming to their support. Beth recalled:

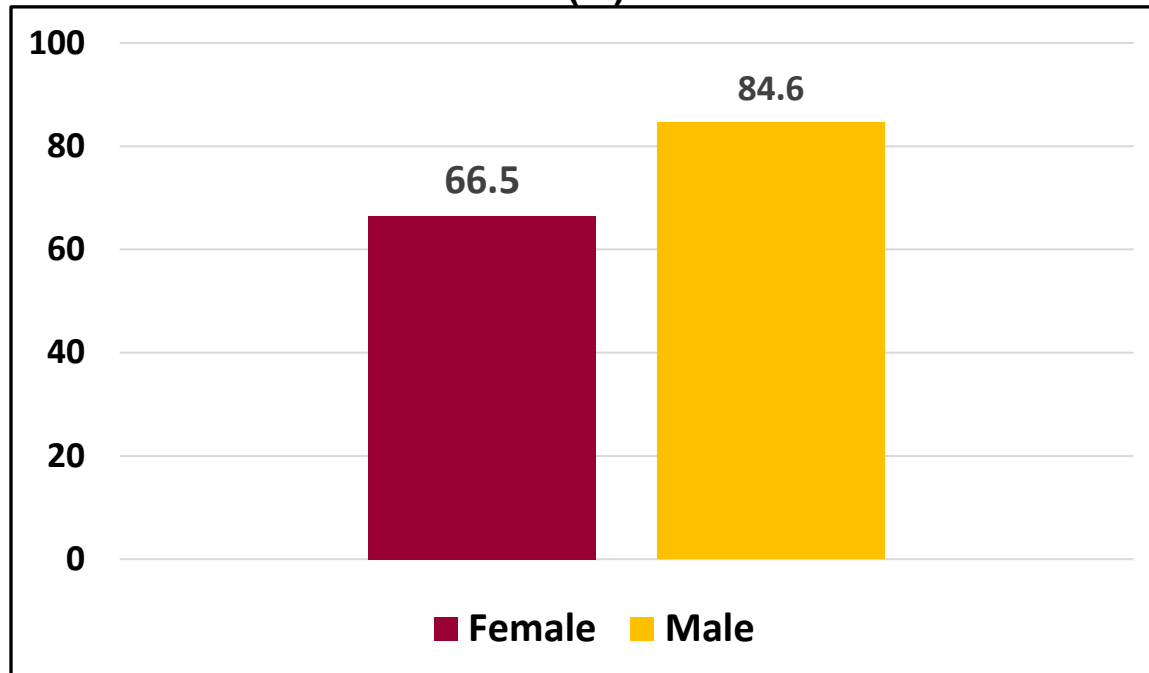
The fire investigator shows up, and we're all standing there, we're all in our gear, mucky, dirty, and I say something and he turns and goes, Oh, you're one of the THEM. And the guy beside me, my friend, goes, No, she's one of us. And he's a very well-respected firefighter.

Grace, a young female firefighter recalled the aftermath of a fire:

I'm in full bunker gear, but the call ended a while ago, cause I just got back from the hospital, so they're in jeans and t-shirts, and we're standing around here, and a woman comes up the bay, and she looks at all these guys in jeans and t-shirts, and looks at me in the bunker gear and she goes, Ah, you must want to be a firefighter like these gentlemen. And before I can even be like...Jim turns around and he says, Actually, we want to be a firefighter like her.

Chart 5.2 provides a more focussed assessment of the likelihood of firefighters reporting they would be supported by co-workers if they experienced harassment or discrimination. Just under eighty percent of all firefighters reported they would be supported in cases of harassment and discrimination. Women were significantly less likely than men to report they would be supported. That one-third of women firefighters felt they would not be supported points to an important area for education of all firefighters. Interviews suggested that often it was men failing to support their women colleagues. In other cases, it was reported that women were sometimes unwilling to support their female colleagues out of a fear of damaging their own reputation with their male crew.

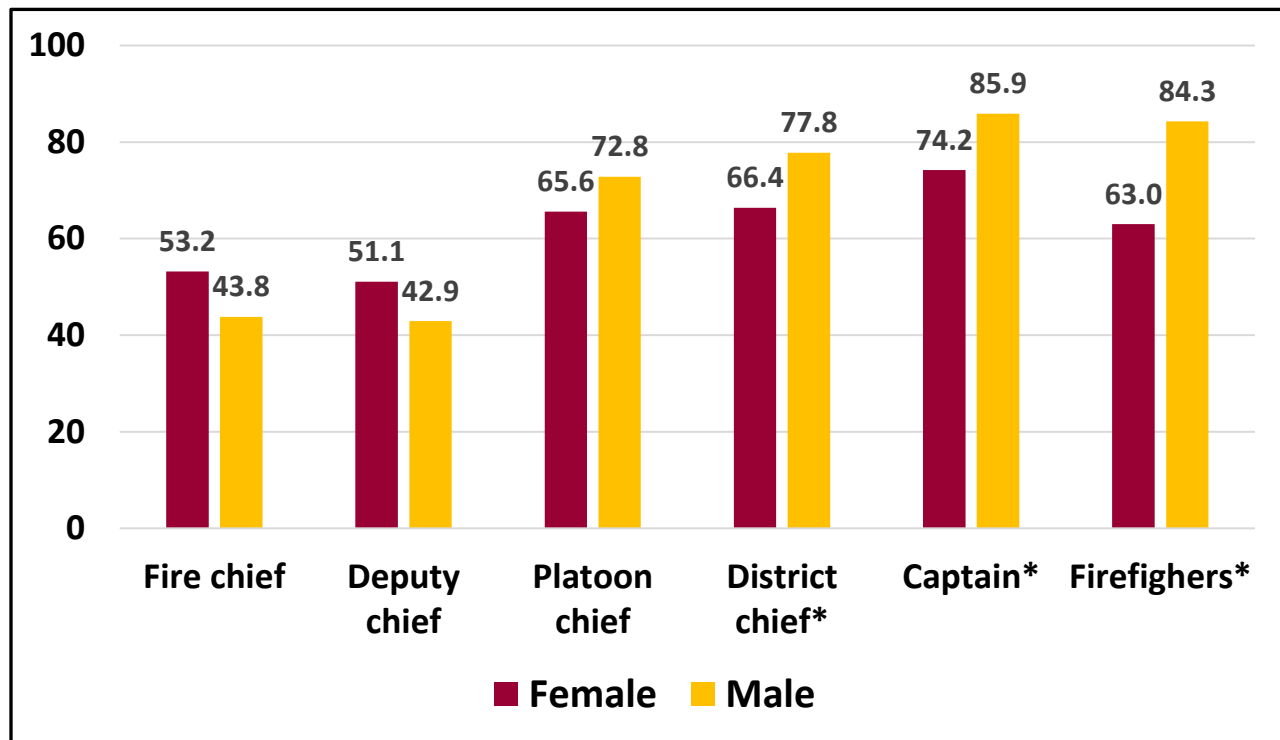
Chart 5.2: Would your co-workers support you if you experienced harassment or discrimination? (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Chart 5.3 shows who firefighters felt supported by including leadership and co-workers. There were some important differences between women and men. In general, firefighters were more likely to report feeling supported by those they work with directly (captains and co-workers) and less likely from the most senior leadership. This trend was more pronounced for male firefighters who were almost twice as likely to feel they were supported by their captains and co-workers relative to senior leadership. For women, the trend was less pronounced, and the increase was only ten to twenty percent. Women were marginally more likely to feel supported by the most senior leadership than men. Women were significantly less likely than men to feel supported by their captains and co-workers. These trends suggest that the support senior leadership provides for women firefighters does not fully translate into support for women at firehalls from captains and co-workers.

Chart 5.3: Who do you feel is supportive of you at work? (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Interviews revealed the complexity of support from leadership and captains. For several of the women interviewed, their relationship was very positive. They felt they were being treated as equals. Beth described such a situation:

[My captain] never treated me differently. That's all I would want, is just to be treated like everyone else. ... I just felt like such a part of that team. I just felt like we were all the same. It's because he didn't do things differently whereas other stations where I felt like I was treated differently it was obvious.

Grace also described a very positive relationship with her captain:

My captain that I have now, he's an incredible person, great firefighter, knows his stuff, but also has a wicked sense of humour, and just, he just appreciates good work. He doesn't care who we are.

Others described situations where captains were simply unaware that their actions were harmful, or where captains thought they were helping women but instead made them stand out as different to other firefighters. Carla reported:

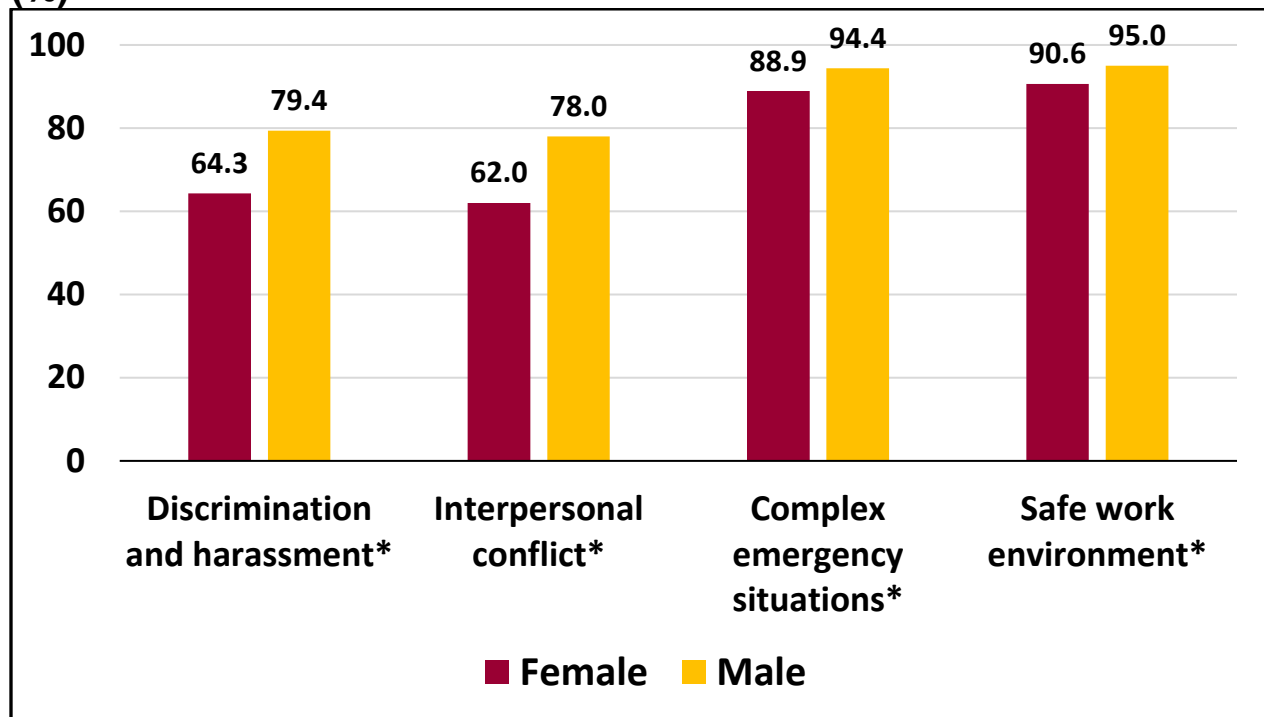
I had this other captain who would centre me out during training, cause he thought he was doing me a favour by having me do all the work at a training exercise, so that I could show the guys that I could do it. Meanwhile I'd been a firefighter for twelve years. Would you make a guy who's been a firefighter for twelve years and just was off for mat leave or parental leave do that? Nope. Didn't help me. Right?

Dana described a relationship where the captain lacked the skills to lead and support. She told us:

My current captain... he's a little difficult to deal with, right? And you'll get some of that in the fire service, um, I guess my problem with him or a lot of us have that issue with him, is he doesn't know how to be a good captain, he doesn't know how to be a good leader, and that's why it's hard for me to even find that support from him, or like, leadership. It's hard to learn from a captain who doesn't really lead, right?

Dana raises an important point about the training leadership receives and their ability to lead. As reported in Chart 5.4, survey respondents were generally positive regarding their officer and supervisors possessing the skills needed to manage complex emergency situations and to create a safe work environment. They were less positive about leadership having the skills needed to manage issues of discrimination and harassment or interpersonal conflict. This was true of both female and male firefighters with female firefighters being much less likely to view their supervisors having the skills needed to manage these situations. This is another area where additional skills training could improve overall well-being at work, particularly for female firefighters.

Chart 5.4: My officer or supervisor has the necessary skills to manage (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

The lack of training to deal with human resource issues was a common concern amongst those interviewed and was commented on by several firefighters on their surveys. A young male firefighter wrote on his survey:

Our firehall is run by a few old school men who have no regard for women whatsoever. ...They have almost no education...are very outdated...and have absolutely no communication or supervisory skills. They do not represent the direction the fire service has moved in the past 50 years. They are not held accountable whatsoever for their actions. The captains at the hall continuously harass women at our hall to a disgusting level. ... I'm embarrassed to work at the station.

A woman firefighter working in prevention with over twenty years of seniority wrote on her survey:

The policies and guidelines are in place to prevent discrimination or harassment and to protect employees affected by it, but many officers don't have the training/skills to effectively deal with concerns that are reported.

For some interview participants, the problem was related to the role of seniority in deciding who gets leadership positions. This can lead to firefighters being promoted

who lack management skills, particularly as they relate to human resource issues. Haley, herself a senior firefighter told us:

So part of our limitation in being a seniority-based department and just timing into these promotions is that ... we don't have the leaders that have all the tools to lead effectively, so that when it comes to matters of harassment or discrimination or stepping up where they need to be, it's just like, it's panic mode because they know that they could get in trouble if they don't do the right thing but they don't know what the right thing is, and plus they have a loyalty to their crews.

5.2 Support from senior leadership

As suggested above, there is a sense that it is up to leadership and, in particular senior leadership, to emphasize the importance of how people are treated at work and the need to take human rights issues more seriously. Other researchers have noted the relationship between the prevalence of harassment and senior leadership's tolerance of such behaviour. Hulett et.al. concluded:

Our interviews confirmed a direct relationship between the level of harassment in a department and the tolerance for such activity by the department's senior managers. In the few departments that have instituted and seriously enforced a 'zero tolerance' policy, it was reported that incidents decreased. (Hulett et.al. 2008a: 201)

Several interview participants suggested senior leadership were not always proactive on this issue and were reluctant to take steps that might improve the situation. Haley indicated:

Departments know what they need to do to encourage a better work environment, like having maternity policies, have a conversation with the people that are there, you know, see how we can make things better, but nobody wants to have a frank conversation because, I don't know if they feel like the blame game is gonna happen, but there are some phenomenal ideas out there but nobody's looking for that information.

The lack of support from leadership for activities that might advance human rights such as FSWO conferences is a further barrier to making progress in changing workplace culture. Paula, a regular attendee at FSWO conferences, was not supported consistently. She reported how sometimes she might be lucky to be offered a car to attend the conference but nothing else, while some chiefs would cover registration and accommodation.

The lack of resources to support initiatives that might improve human rights issues was pointed out by several interview participants. Beth told us:

As soon as you go up there, you are ruled by the budget. So yeah, you got great ideas for programs but there's no money to support them. So, all the ideology of making a better place, you know, it's all good but it doesn't go anywhere. ... I don't know what would be offered me in terms of opportunity to do something.

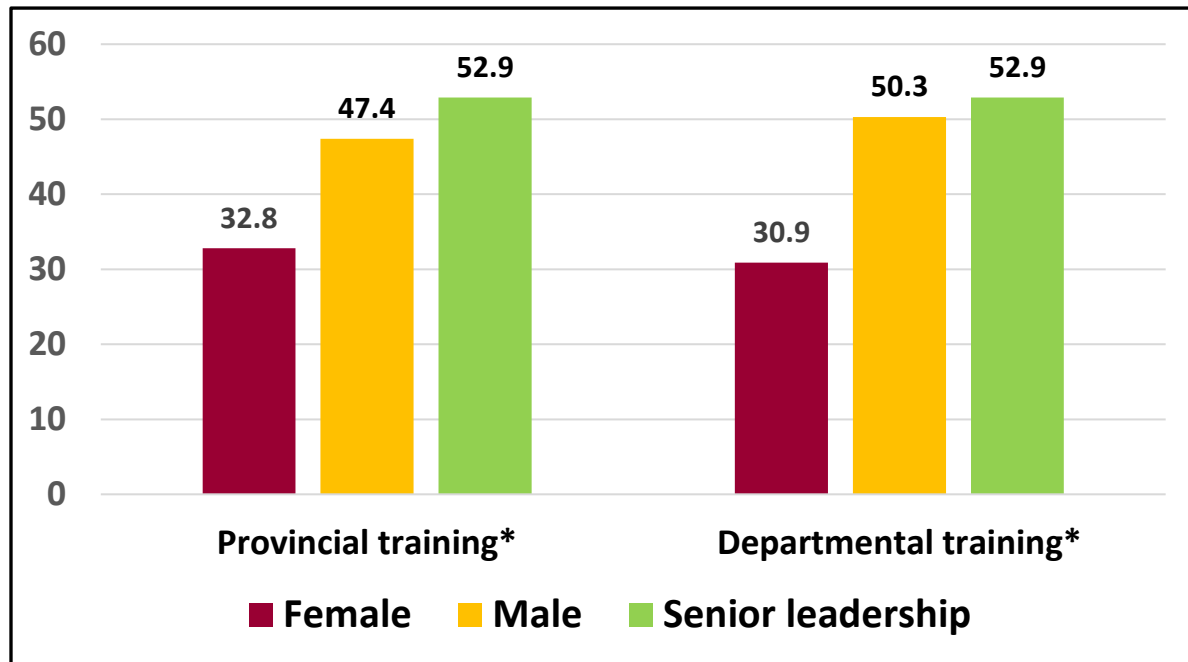
A mid-career female firefighter pointed to the lack of action by leadership as a reason for lack of movement on human rights issues. She wrote on her survey:

Very little is done to correct these individuals at the chief level. The attempt at abuse of power is very real. Having additional information resources directly related to emergency services that can be accessed outside of department HR departments would be useful. A trend exists which indicates HR departments are supporting management vs suppression firefighters.

5.3 Human rights and anti-harassment training

Chart 5.5 reports findings related to the effectiveness of human rights and anti-harassment training. The majority of firefighters found both types of training ineffective. Less than one-third of women thought the training achieved its goals. Senior leadership was more likely to view such training as effective.

Chart 5.5: Human rights and anti-harassment training was effective (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Comments during interviews and added to surveys were almost unanimous in criticizing the delivery of human rights and anti-discrimination training. A young female firefighter wrote on her survey that senior leadership needs to take a more proactive role in promoting this sort of training:

HR can train diversity all they want the guys just go back to halls and laugh/joke about it. Things will change once all the old school men leave the floors and hope their way of thinking have not rubbed off on the younger guys. The support for woman needs to come from management. Chiefs need to instill open communication with female staff and let male staff know that they are serious about problems in the halls.

During her interview, Haley pointed to the problem of being trained by someone unfamiliar with the work of firefighters. She told us:

When we get harassment and discrimination training through, HR, through the city, we have an HR representative come in, and firefighters immediately shut down, because they don't know our job, they don't know who we are, they sit at a desk all day, they don't know what we deal with all the time, so we automatically question the legitimacy of the message based on who it's coming from. ... So, we don't accept the message right off the bat because of who it's coming from.

Others pointed to how the dominant masculine firehall culture undermines efforts to advance issues related to human rights and anti-discrimination. Jamie expressed her frustration during an interview:

Sensitivity training is a joke. No one wants to go to that, it's a mandatory bullshit thing that people are just like, let's just say nothing so the training goes by quickly, and then throw the material in the garbage when you get home and be like, that woman was such a bitch.

Jane placed the blame on leadership for failing to set the tone that might make the learning exercise productive. She told us:

[Diversity and Inclusion training] was prefaced in the training division by the training officer telling us, Oh, everyone be careful, the PC, political correctness police are coming today, so just endure it, we have to do it, and not giving it any kind of weight or importance. Pretty much just dismissing it before it began.

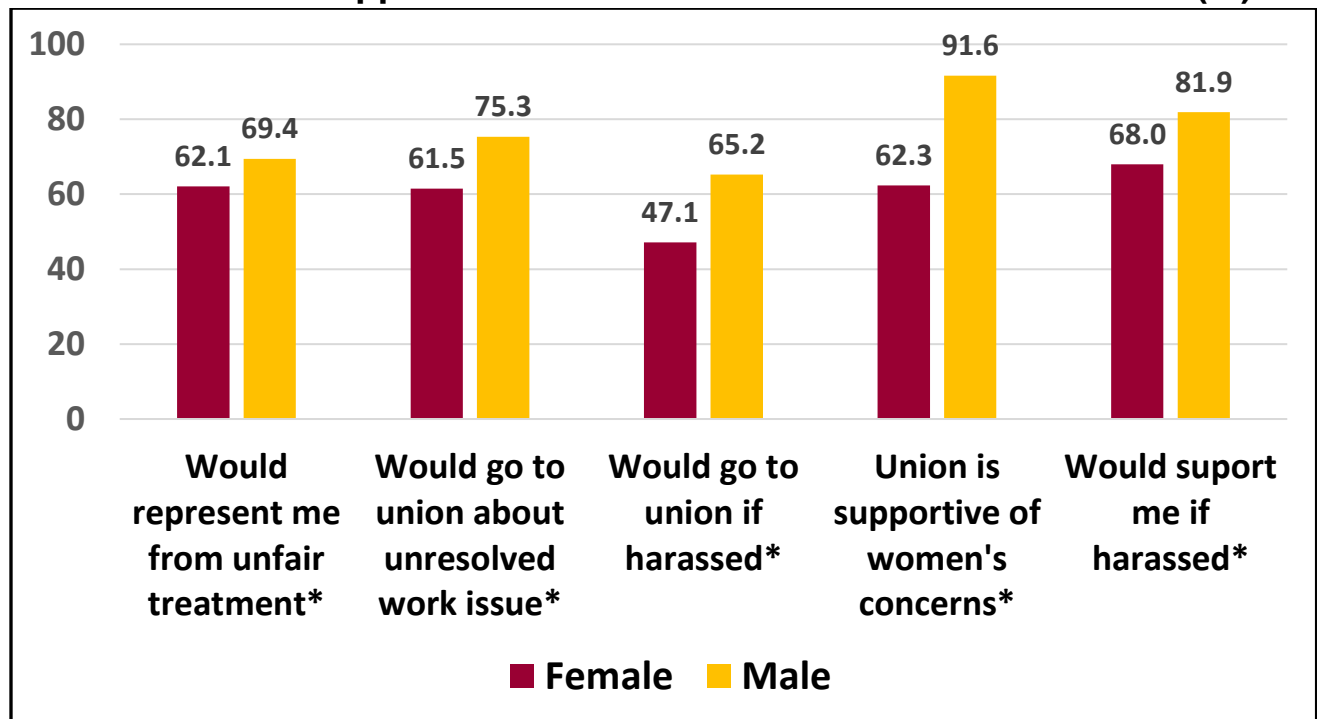
There was a general sense that the training was limited to what firefighters should not do, rather than why they should not discriminate or harass. Until this deeper lesson is taught the effect of training is likely to be limited. Haley offered the following assessment during an interview:

We need to learn why we can't say those things, not just that we can't, cause then they're just gonna say those comments when you're not in the room. And they're gonna blame the fact that they can't say those things on the fact that you're in the room and they have to change their behaviour. ... But we have to have more critical conversations like that, because then that removes the... Oh that's just HR, they don't understand. Whereas...if I had the guts all the time to tell somebody personally, how does that make me feel? Like, you shouldn't be saying that because of this, or if they make, you know, jokes about rape, like how do you now know the other woman in the room wasn't raped?

5.4 Union support

Chart 5.6 provides several indicators of firefighters' evaluation of the support they receive from their union. On all the indicators, women were less likely than men to see their union coming to their assistance. Less than half of women firefighters would go to their union if harassed and only two-thirds reported the union would support them if harassed. This is an indication that many women, while feeling the union would support them on harassment issues, do not view the union as the best strategy for dealing with harassment. The difference in female and male responses to the question whether the union was supportive of women's concerns is instructive. While men were almost unanimous in seeing their union as supporting women's concerns, less than two-thirds of women had the same view.

Chart 5:6: Union support of harassment and discrimination issues (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

Interview participants had complex attitudes about their union. Most felt the union was supportive on general employment issues. However, they were almost unanimous in the view that the union was of less help in resolving issues related specifically to women such as harassment and discrimination. When such issues arose, they would approach co-workers or a trusted captain or chief before they would approach their union. For some it was simple math: there are very few women firefighters so at the bargaining

table their issues are not always made a priority when trade-offs needed to be made. Dana, a new recruit, indicated:

I know that there is help if I was dealing with something major like post-traumatic stress, I know that I can go to [the union] for that sort of help. Right now these are just minor things so it's never gone to that point. But I do know that it's available, I do know that they're there, and I do feel supported by them. I know that they'll do whatever they can to help firefighters and members.

Even those who fully support the union were aware of the limitations of the union in dealing with issue of harassment and discrimination. Jamie indicated:

I definitely support the union and have felt supported by the union. ... When there is wrong doing, there's definitely a fallback to circle the wagons and protect the guy, you know?... It's just like sending the complaint into the ether. Like, where's it gonna go other than me making the complaint. And being that person who made it.

For others there was a sense that the union was not as well informed regarding the issues women face at work relative to those faced by men. Many viewed the union as an old boys network. Jane told us:

I mean the union is very much old boys club. It's very insular. ... But when people do have grievances they're often against other members, and then how the union can respond and has to respond legally is complicated cause the union has to represent both members in different ways, and then it's a he said, she said, mess. But yeah, I do struggle with feeling like my union cares about the things. I don't feel like they have the knowledge or understand what things are like for women on the job. I don't think they care.

Beth also raised the issue of the difficulty the union has when it is an issue of one member raising a complaint about another member.

I understand that it's their duty to make sure everybody is fairly represented, and when it's member on member you can't grieve against other members, right? So, they can assign somebody to support you, but equally.

The duty to represent all can also result in the union giving support to a male member involved in harassment that negates a penalty that was deemed warranted by senior leadership. Haley described such a situation:

Essentially what it came down to is that [a] senior officer was reprimanded, he was supposed to receive a demotion, but then the union fought and got a lesser punishment, so then the message to me is that, well, why participate in these things. ... I just wanted to curl up into a ball and quit my job and run away, because this is the worst-case scenario for any female.

There was also a sense that even when the union gave the impression that they supported women's issues, their actions sometimes suggested their commitment was limited. Erica had strong views on this issue:

I perceive [the union] as feeling they have a duty to portray they want to see women in the department. Do I believe they back it up in real life, for us? No I don't. No I don't.

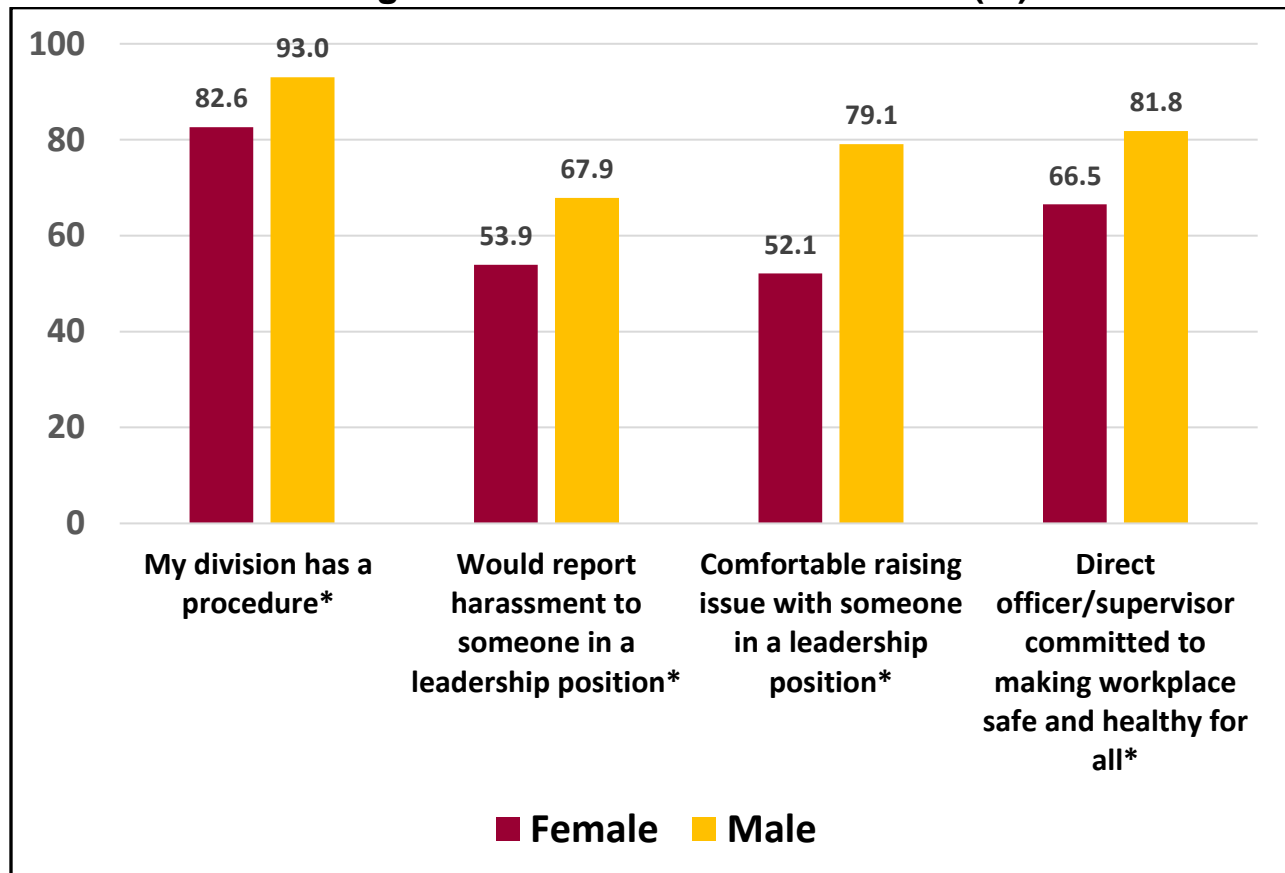
Some attributed this failure to act on the more serious issues women face as a product of only listening to women who make fewer demands on the union. Caroline stated:

They're always happy to listen to women who are not feminist. ... They'll take the woman who does not have progressive ideas about things as their token person who they can say, Well, we've consulted with so-and-so, and so you're just a fringe minority in our opinion.

5.5 Procedures to deal with discrimination and harassment

This section describes the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms meant to deal with issues of harassment and discrimination. Most firefighters reported that their division had a procedure in place to deal with harassment and discrimination. Women were less likely than men to make use of this procedure by raising harassment or discrimination issues with leadership. Barely half of women firefighters would be comfortable raising or reporting such issues with leadership. Men were significantly more likely to make use of existing procedures. Women were less likely than men to report their supervisor was committed to making the workplace safe and healthy for all compared to men.

Chart 5.7: Addressing discrimination and harassment (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level.
Suppression only.

Chart 5.7 points to a high level of reservation in using existing mechanisms to deal with harassment and discrimination. This was confirmed during the interviews. Making a harassment complaint can be hazardous for women, even if the person accused of harassment is disciplined. Jamie described how even when a complaint is successful, the person being harassed could suffer grave consequences. She told us:

If I were to bring to a supervisor's attention that those two dudes said that shit to me, it's like, why? Where's that gonna go, other than them being disciplined at their workplace, and then they tell everyone they know that I did that, and then everyone they know tells everyone else, and then other guys are like, "Well that's just part of the job". ... It's still not an environment where you can make a complaint.

Paula offered a similar perspective:

But it's also difficult for a woman to complain, because then they get excluded from the group. They don't want to be the one creating issues, cause the guys are...all buddies, they're all going to stick up for each other. So, if a woman says "This guy's harassing me," the men generally don't believe her, or they generally think that she's making too big a deal of it...and they're generally going to side with their buddy. So, it excludes her just complaining...just her standing up for herself, going to someone... you know, going to a higher up, is going to exclude her, and... they're, like I said, they're generally not believed or they're generally made to feel like it's not that big of a deal.

The effectiveness of harassment and discrimination procedures drew numerous written comments on the survey. A female captain wrote:

When a complaint is made don't minimize, penalize or make women worry about their reputation or mental health because they "said the true thing."... Many women stay quiet because to be successful on this job...you MUST be liked, trusted and fit in. Women will not compromise their reputation to stand out and be segregated.

Another women working in prevention wrote:

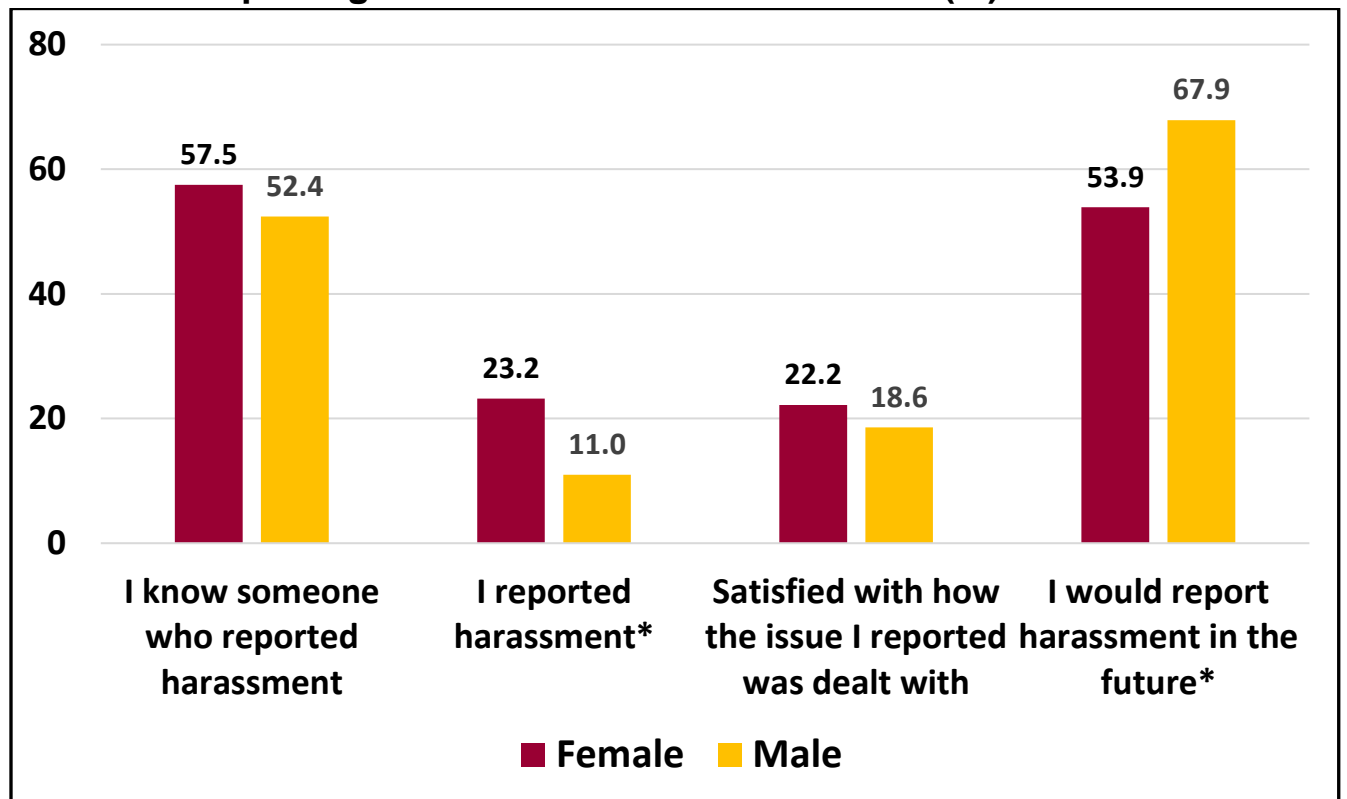
Management always seems to protect the perpetrator. When things are bad even if the perpetrator wants to apologize, they cannot as they would be admitting the wrongdoing. I have experienced things that would make the front page of every paper in Canada, but fear I would not be able to cope with the backlash if I was to come forward. It isn't worth my life to effect change.

Others discussed how even when the procedure resulted in some form of restitution for the victim, non-disclosure clauses made the event invisible creating a sense that harassment was not a problem in the fire service. Haley suggested:

When settlements are reached... part of that signing of the papers is a non-disclosure clause, so nobody can talk about why these women are leaving the fire service. Nobody! And so unions and the fire service can be like, Oh yeah, we're doing really great with our women, we're doing so great, because they're not hearing the stories of where the failures are happening.

Chart 5.8 looks more closely at how many firefighters report harassment and discrimination and whether the issues were dealt with to their satisfaction. Harassment and discrimination were major issues within firefighting with over half of all firefighters reporting they knew someone who had reported being harassed. Almost one-quarter of women firefighters and just over ten percent of male firefighters reported they had been harassed. Nearly eighty percent were not satisfied with how the issue was dealt with. Men were significantly more likely to report they would report a future issue than women. Barely half of women would report future harassment.

Chart 5.8: Reporting harassment and discrimination (%)



* Female-male difference significant at the 5% level. Suppression only.

5.6 Maternity leave

Women had mixed experiences with pregnancies and maternity leaves. Most of the women we interviewed reported a lack of formal rules regarding how pregnancies were dealt with. Who could women trust to discuss their situation? What sort of modified duty would be made available? Would they get their old jobs back? A mid-career female firefighter working out of a small firehall wrote on her survey:

Our department does not have a policy for pregnant firefighters. Modified work hours and duties are not outlined in writing. Expectations seem to change with each pregnancy. There is a bit of a disconnect between HR and the fire department when it comes to this.

For others, the policy was ad hoc and not clearly spelled out. Haley described the maternity policy as follows:

So we have nothing in paper that says what your accommodations are gonna be, what your hours of work are gonna be, what you have to do, what happens if you have to go to a doctor's appointment, what happens if you have a miscarriage, because women on the fire service are three times more likely to miscarry. ... These are all great big things...worrying about what's going to happen to you when you get pregnant or what the process is to let them know that you are pregnant and, you know, what you have to consider whether you still want to ride the trucks, none of this information is readily available. So that when you're wanting to start a family, you're spinning, cause you don't know what's gonna happen. That's where women are really struggling, and the women are feeling like they're not supported, and they have to navigate that process on their own.

Carla's experience was different. She told us:

My accommodations for [my] pregnancy...were phenomenal. Really great, really supportive. I would say our department is great, if you have any sort of family member [who needs care] my captain's like, Go, do what you need to do ... and they call someone in. ... They find someone to fill your place. Our department's good that way.

However, even for Carla who had a positive experience in being accommodated, the lack of a clear policy on pregnancy led her to not report her pregnancy early on:

I did not tell anyone I was pregnant...because I didn't know who I could trust. I didn't know who I could trust in the union, didn't know who to trust in the administration, to keep it private, didn't know who I could trust. So that is definitely a problem I feel, as a woman in the fire department.

The need to report any pregnancy very early on can create serious privacy issues. Most forces require women to notify management as soon as they become pregnant so they can be taken off the trucks. This creates privacy issues when pregnancies are not carried to term. This is particularly the case for women trying to become pregnant using fertility treatment with a high proportion of unsuccessful pregnancies.

5.7 Support from FSWO and informal groups/individual of women

Many female firefighters rely on organizations such as the FSWO or informal peer groups to find the support they need to deal with workplace issues. For Haley, FSWO is a crucial source of support. She told us:

My experience with FSWO, in creating that opportunity and that network for women to come together and share experiences, and to train... both in the classroom and on the fire ground, is by far the best thing that I've ever experienced. ... What FSWO has created and given these opportunities and opening up these conversations has been the most progressive dialogue that I have seen throughout my twenty years in the fire service.

Caroline expressed a similar sentiment. She suggested:

I wish that the network I have now through FSWO and through people I've met at work over the years, I wish that I'd had that when I first started. It would have made a world of difference to me.

For others, informal peer groups serve a similar purpose. Kendra turned to a peer group for the support she felt she could not get from her crew. She told us:

I don't feel like I have a good enough relationship with my crew to talk about anything I'm struggling with, but I do have members of the peer support team, because they're part of my team, that I go to them if I'm struggling with something.

Despite the positive role many women felt the FSWO provides, not all women were supportive or willing to become members. In part, this was driven by a desire not to be singled out as different than their male colleagues. Jane suggested:

There's lots of women I can't convince to come to FSWO events or have anything to do with what FSWO does because they don't want to be singled out or they think it's dumb, why do we need a special thing?

To at least one male firefighter, the FSWO on its own will have difficulty making the kind of cultural shift within firefighting that would make women welcome and increase the number of women firefighters. Men need to step-up and initiate and promote a change in workplace culture. He indicated:

The reality is that women will never move women forward into the fire service. Men will move women forward in the fire service. ... That's the way it was in the police service and the paramedics. It wasn't the women who were saying, 'Hey pay attention to us.' It's the men who said, 'They're right and I'm in a position of power so I'm going to make a change and we're going to do something,' and that's not happening in the fire service.

5.8 Conclusions

This section examined the issue of support at work and the mechanisms available to firefighters to deal with harassment and discrimination. Most women firefighters were mostly supported by their crews. However, given the importance of support, when support was partial or absent this could have serious consequences for the ability of firefighters to do their jobs. This was an issue for a significant number of women firefighters. This section also pointed to serious shortcomings in the procedures designed to deal with harassment and discrimination issues. Most women were reluctant to pursue such issues through their union but found working with senior leadership also disappointing.

Section 6: Recommendations

This study was initiated by the FSWO to gain a deeper understanding of the work experience of women firefighters and how the number of women firefighters can be increased. **Insights from the Inside** argues that neither a shortage of women who are physically able to do the job, nor a lack of women who are socialized to want to do the job, are the main barriers to increasing the number of women firefighters. Rather, the most significant barrier is how women who are already firefighters are treated at work and the image this creates in the public eye regarding firefighting as an attractive career path for women.

The overall conclusion of this report is that the dominant male workplace culture of firefighting creates unique challenges for women.¹⁸ Many women firefighters navigate this dominant culture successfully and have rewarding and satisfying careers. However, virtually all the women interviewed for this project, and who added comments to the online survey, are aware that they are not fully accepted into the profession.

Culture is a hard thing to change. It includes social norms, attitudes and perceptions, how people interact on a day to day basis, how people talk to each other. In what follows, we make recommendations related to recruitment, hiring and training, support and retention, leadership, and the physical environment. Together, these changes will go some way towards changing firefighter culture. However, these recommendations on their own will fall short of modernizing firefighter culture without a comprehensive education program whose goal is to create a different mindset amongst firefighters, one that will lead to a more inclusive, harassment-free and welcoming workplace. As pointed out by a mid-career female firefighter on her survey, there is a need for:

REAL education around gender, equity vs equality, unconscious bias, systemic barriers/discrimination. REAL training of leaders/officers to change the 'boys will be boys' mentality of the fire service. Still far too many think that 'slightly' racist, misogynist, homophobic humour is just part of how we bond and deal with the rough stuff we see.

Recruitment can be increased to reach more women. Supports for woman can be improved as they follow the path from deciding they want to be firefighters to becoming one. However, if women are not welcomed and supported by their male colleagues and leadership once they become firefighters, and if they continue to experience harassment and violence at work, increasing the number of women firefighters will continue to be a struggle. In the words of one interview participant:

¹⁸ In her Ph.D thesis, Contursi concluded that most obvious factor creating barriers for women firefighters was "An organizational culture that protects and perpetuates an exclusive work environment that often does not include women and favours men." Quoted in Fire Rescue 1 (2019) p.3. Thurnell-Read (2008) in a study of British firefighters also stresses the role of workplace culture in excluding women.

It (women as firefighters) needs to be normalized. It's not normalized. It's still a novelty. ... I'll go days without seeing, I'll go months without seeing another woman.

6.1 Recruitment¹⁹

Recruitment will continue to be an important mechanism to attract more women. Some report participants felt their units had reduced their commitment to recruiting more women in the last few years or were focusing their recruitment efforts on the wrong groups. For others, seeing women as firefighters and in leadership roles led to their decision to embark on a career in firefighting.

Recommendations related to recruitment:

- **More targeted recruitment of women and racialized minorities.**
- **Making better use of female and racialized firefighters at recruitment centres.**
- **Encourage women to volunteer at an earlier age so they acquire the pre-service experience.**
- **Programs to introduce young girls to firefighting as part of their schooling.**
- **Present the physicality and collegiality of the job as an attractive feature in recruitment drives.**

6.2 Hiring and training²⁰

The women who participated in this study were generally satisfied with the hiring and training process that took them from passing their physicals to becoming qualified firefighters. While all the women interviewed successfully navigated this process, this does not mean that the system was perfect, worked for all or was fair. It was noted in Section Two that some women struggle with the equipment they are provided during training and that, as training moved into the firehalls, issues began to emerge that made women feel less welcome.

Recommendations related to hiring and training:

- **Provide better training to hiring panels to make them fully aware of how and why women may present to hiring panels differently than men.**
- **Include women firefighters on hiring panels so that panels are more sensitive to and value the skills and talents that women bring to the profession.**

¹⁹ For a study of the recruitment process see *Hulett et. al. (2008a). Enhancing women's inclusion.*

²⁰ For a detailed study of the hiring and training process see *Wilcox (2018). Hidden Hurdles.*

- **Review all physical and skills tests so they better reflect the requirements of the job.**
- **Review all physical and skills tests to remove bias that unnecessarily disadvantages women.**
- **Review tests so that women get full credit for things they are very good at.**
- **Review social activities during training to ensure that all recruits are equally welcome.**
- **More attention needs to be paid to where women are initially placed after training and how to better integrate them into firehall life.**

6.3 Support and Retention²¹

Sections Three, Four and Five discussed the experience of women as firefighters. They revealed the extent to which women face harassment and discrimination, the impact this has on health outcomes, and the prevalence of women moving divisions or considering leaving the service altogether in response to harassment. While most departments have procedures to deal with harassment and discrimination, many report participants found them ineffective. In some cases, there was a sense that the most penalized party to these events was the person harassed or violated rather than the harasser. There was a sense that HR departments were not neutral when the conflict was between someone in leadership and a firefighter. The union finds it difficult to deal with these issues as they often have a responsibility to represent both sides of these conflicts. Others were wary of the lack of privacy which results in harassment complaints becoming public and the complainant being labeled as a troublemaker by their peers. Retaining more women as firefighters requires improved support and a more effective mechanism for dealing with harassment and discrimination.

Recommendations related to retention and support:

- **Formalize mentorship for new recruits.**
- **Equity and diversity caucuses within the union.**
- **Increased support for FSWO as a forum for women to explore solutions.**
- **Create local peer support groups.**
- **Create an environment of open discussion of harassment issues led by leadership to prevent harassment from happening in the first place.**
- **Create a neutral third-party procedure independent of the chain of command to receive harassment complaints and to offer remedies.**
- **Increase the penalties associated with harassment and implement a zero-tolerance policy.**

²¹ For a discussion of some of the ways in which retention of firefighters could be improved see Contursi (2018).

- **Review policies to ensure that victims of harassment are not victimized a second time in the resolution process.**
- **Provide new recruits with an information package on harassment at work and resources available to a worker being harassed.**
- **Promote EAP programs and make them more accessible.**

6.4 Promotion and leadership²²

Leadership is the key to a successful program to normalize women as firefighters. It is up to leadership to implement and enforce policies that reduce harassment and discrimination and make work more welcoming for women and men. The importance of leadership was raised frequently and passionately during interviews and by survey participants. For some, there was a concern that the process of promoting firefighters into leadership positions resulted in leaders with weak leadership skills. However, the far more common suggestion was that leadership was not being trained to deal with conflict in general, and issues of harassment and discrimination.

Promotion within the fire service is based predominantly on seniority. This serves several purposes including reducing favouritism in promotion decisions, and moving people to more responsible roles and away from more physically demanding roles as they age. It also has disadvantages. It reduces the promotion opportunities for women who often start their careers later and are less likely to accumulate the years of service needed to qualify for a promotion. Women represented over one-quarter of firefighter survey respondents but less than fifteen percent of management respondents. The other disadvantage is it creates situations where individuals are promoted based on seniority while lacking some of the skills needed to be outstanding leaders able to deal with complex human resource issues.

Recommendations related to leadership:

- **Review criteria for promotion into leadership roles to balance seniority, leadership skills and people skills.**
- **Mandatory certification and higher-level educational qualifications for all senior leadership.**
- **Peer mentorship program for new leaders**
- **Mandatory training to all leaders in how to deal with conflict and discrimination and harassment.**
- **Mandatory equity and inclusion training for leadership.**
- **Make leadership accountable for the fair treatment of women and other marginalized groups.**

²² For a discussion of promotion policies and leadership training see Contursi (2018).

- **Begin leadership training as a component of firefighter skills development rather than having leaders learn on the job.**

6.5 The physical design of the workplace²³

The physical design of workplaces and the suitability of personal protective equipment are the most visible manifestations of the failure to make women welcome in the fire service. Equipment that does not fit properly, firehalls designed as if only men were firefighters, and uniforms designed for male bodies all contribute to the sense that women are not welcome and a workplace culture that keeps women on the margins of workplace culture.

6.5.1 Physical environment: Dorms and bathrooms

There was no unanimous conclusion regarding how firehalls should be designed other than in many halls, particularly older halls, little thought has been given to what is needed to integrate women into the workplace. Even in some new halls, their design suggests that there remains an assumption that the workforce will continue to be predominantly male into the future. Sometimes temporary fixes to accommodate women create as many problems as they resolve. There were different opinions regarding co-ed dorms versus separate sleeping quarters. There was general agreement that firehalls need to include washroom and shower facilities assigned for women. Both women and men firefighters in leadership stressed the necessity of giving more attention to workplace design to support the messages of inclusiveness coming from senior leadership. Everyone needs to feel as if they belong. In the words of a female firefighter:

Facilities and making us feel like we have a place in the station, would be hugely helpful, I would say. And I don't care if it's a gender-neutral bathroom where people can go in and out of it. But to say that it's only a guys' bathroom and I don't have a bathroom sucks. ... We can find simple ways. I'm not saying tear down the station and build brand new facilities, but let's find ways so that I feel like I have a spot in that station.

Recommendations related to make the physical environment more welcoming to all:

- **Include individuals of all genders in design decisions for new stations.**
- **Review existing stations to ensure that women have a spot in each station that is theirs where they can change and shower.**
- **Gender neutral washrooms and change rooms.**

²³ For a discussion of some of these issues see Khan et.al. (2017).

- **Increase sensitivity to how station redesign intended to accommodate women can create tension between female and male firefighters.**

6.5.2 Personal protective equipment and uniforms

It was noted in Section Three the serious problems many women firefighters had with both equipment and uniforms. The lack of proper fitting equipment is both a safety issue, but also another way in which women firefighters are made to feel unwelcome. In speaking to this issue, Haley told us. "Don't make me feel different based on the fact you don't have something to fit me." Report participants noted that gloves were too large, helmet design impeded safe operations, and SCBA straps sometimes do not tighten enough for smaller individuals. Ordering smaller size equipment designed for men is at best a partial solution.

Recommendations related to PPE and uniforms include:

- **Provide custom designed PPE for women, including gloves, coats and bunker pants.**
- **Look into sourcing breathing apparatus to fit smaller bodies.**
- **Provide dress/serge uniforms designed for women.**

6.6 Education

The recommendations listed above will go some way to changing the sense that women are not fully accepted in firefighting culture. Adopting mechanisms to better support women and to resolve issues of harassment and discrimination will help. Designing physical workplaces to accommodate mixed gender workforces and providing personal protective equipment suitable for women will go a long way to building a welcoming environment. However, without a comprehensive education program designed to change the mindset of firefighters and to modernize firefighter culture, women firefighters will remain largely on the outside of this culture; tolerated but not fully accepted.

Recommendations related to education and reforming workplace culture include:

- **Design a comprehensive educational program to modernize firefighting with the objective of making firefighting an inclusive, harassment-free and welcoming profession for all.**
- **Part of this education program needs to address issues of gender inequality as well as racism, homophobia and transphobia.**

- **Leadership must make eradicating harassment, discrimination and violence at work a priority.**
- **Make harassment training more targeted to firefighting and done by firefighters in sessions that include leadership.**
- **Revise harassment training from a focus on these are things you should not do, to here is why you should not do these things.**
- **Do training in small groups.**

6.7 Future research

This report was based on research with firefighters who remain employed by the fire service. Much could be learned from a study of women and men who have left the fire service for other jobs and a study that targets women who are still with the fire service but have moved from suppression to another division.

Recommendations for future research:

- **Survey female firefighters who left the fire service and women who were unsuccessful in qualifying during the testing process.**
- **Survey female firefighters who have moved from suppression to other divisions.**
- **Intersectionality study focusing on race, gender and firefighting.**
- **Investigate how to make possible annual reports of province-wide statistics including basic demographics, recruitment, retention, and advancement of all career firefighters.**

Section Seven: Conclusion

This report has focussed on the barriers that prevent more women from becoming firefighters. Particular attention was paid to the experience of women at work as the main barrier to more women joining the fire service. Many participants in this study made the obvious point that as long as women are a small minority in the fire service they will be treated as others. We conclude with an eloquent statement by a senior female firefighter who wrote on her survey:

We need more women to join the fire service, if only to get to about 10-15%. ... That will help with systemic stereotyping. As long as we are in such a minority, issues will remain. If one woman does something wrong, it's because of her gender. That same issue does not apply to men. If a male makes a mistake it is not due to his gender but because he screwed up. All the other men don't get lumped together. I have had a great career so far, but I am still seeing younger women struggling and hear the men speak about them in derogatory terms. They don't understand that a women's experience will always be different than men's. The entire workplace has been built from the male perspective from station design, tools we use (all made for men's hands), uniforms and PPE. I am reminded every day at work that I am different than my peers, not necessarily in a negative way but it can be exhausting. ... The Ontario fire service needs to be better.

Appendix A:

The body of **Insights from the Inside** focusses on the experiences of female and male firefighters in the suppression division working in firehalls. 154 firefighters working in non-suppression divisions and 160 firefighters in senior leadership positions (higher than captain working in suppression and chief in non-suppression divisions) also completed the survey. Part A of the appendix describes who responded to the survey, the characteristics of their workplaces and their households. It includes suppression, non-suppression and leadership characteristics.

Part A: Survey sample characteristics

Individual characteristics (%)

	Female Suppression²⁴ (n=195)	Male Suppression (N=549)	Non- suppression²⁵ (N=154)	Leadership²⁶ (N=160)
Employment contract (%)				
Full-time	67.7	85.4	85.7	80.4
Paid Volunteer	30.8	13.5	10.7	12.5
Division				
Suppression	100.0	100.0	-	36.3
Prevention	-	-	33.1	7.5
Communication	-	-	22.7	1.3
Administration	-	-	14.9	49.4
Training	-	-	22.1	3.8
How many years have you worked in the fire service?				
<5	63.8	25.5	36.1	3.1
5-20	25.4	27.9	22.2	1.0
>20	10.9	46.6	41.7	96.2

²⁴ A total of 13 survey participants identified as either transgender, non-binary, or other. They were too small a group to analyze on their own and we did not have sufficient information to confidently allocate them to the female or male category, so they were excluded from the gendered analysis.

²⁵ Non-suppression includes fire fighters not in the suppression division and not in senior leadership roles.

²⁶ Leadership includes fire fighters with a rank higher than captain in suppression and chief in non-suppression divisions.

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non- suppression	Leadership
How old are you?				
<35	44.6	24.4	24.1	2.6
>=35	55.4	75.6	75.9	97.4
Before taxes and deductions, estimate how much money you made as an employee in the fire service over the last 12 months?				
<\$60,000	35.2	17.4	15.8	12.1
\$60-\$100,000	40.9	32.2	36.2	15.4
>\$100,000	23.8	50.5	48.0	72.5
Education completed				
Apprenticeship	8.2	19.3	13.3	21.9
BA	38.0	25.2	26.7	25.4
MA or Ph.D	7.2	2.6	3.7	1.8
Do you identify as a member of a racialized minority group (as a person who is non-white or a person of colour)?				
Yes	4.6	6.4	11.0	3.5
Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?				
Heterosexual	82.6	99.3	91.2	89.3
Gay/queer	-	<1.0	<1.0	1.7
Lesbian/queer	9.2	-	<1.0	1.0
Other	8.2	<1.0	1.5	1.7

Household characteristics (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non- suppression	Leadership
Are you in a supportive relationship?	81.4	91.0	82.5	93.1
Do you have a supportive family or close friends who you can talk to about work?	96.4	96.0	94.9	94.0
Children under 18 in household	41.7	59.4	41.6	28.4
Work-related discrimination or harassment often affected your home life or social life?	13.9	4.8	13.1	7.8
Before taxes and deductions, estimate how much money everybody who lives in your household earned from working or received from other sources in the last 12 months?				
<\$100,000	31.8	13.9	18.1	11.8
>=\$100,000	68.2	86.1	71.9	88.2

Workplace characteristics (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non- suppression	Leadership
During your shift how many full-time firefighters work at your workplace?				
<5	41.8	29.7	-	26.0
5-15	39.1	53.1	-	22.0
>15	19.2	17.1	-	52.0
Other than yourself, how many women firefighters do you work with on a regular basis?				
Zero	49.0	36.1	-	14.3
1	21.7	30.9	-	17.9
2-5	28.4	28.9	-	51.8
>5	1.0	4.1	-	16.1

Part B: Responses for non-suppression divisions and leadership

The number of responses outside of suppression was too small to allow an accurate analysis of the different experiences of women and men in these divisions. Firefighters in non-suppression divisions and leadership positions replied to a reduced set of survey questions that were relevant to firefighters in these two categories. Part B provides responses of the non-suppression and leadership groups not reported in the main survey as well as the responses from female and male firefighters in the suppression division for comparison purposes. The tables are organized into sections that reflect the charts in the main report.

Section Two Charts: Pathways to becoming a firefighter

Chart 2.5: Experience with recruit training (%)

	Female Suppression (n=184)	Male Suppression (n=525)	Non- suppression (n=70)	Leadership (n=113)
Have you ever been through recruit training for firefighting?	94.4	95.8	46.4	75.3
Were you satisfied with the support you received from the trainers during recruit training?	59.2	61.1	62.3	70.4
Were you encouraged by your peers during recruit training?	70.5	77.5	75.4	72.6
Were you made to feel welcome in group training activities?	76.5	82.2	80.6	83.2
Were you included in social events outside of class during recruit training?	65.5	74.9	70.8	71.0
Was training difficult for your body size.	17.8	9.3	17.5	15.8

Includes only respondents who attended recruit training.

Section 3 Charts: The work experience

Chart 3.1: Rating the work environment and employee morale (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non- suppression	Leadership
Overall, how do you rate your work environment?				
Positive	68.7	83.4	62.1	79.9
Overall, how do you rate employee morale/comradery at your workplace?				
Positive	64.6	80.2	55.8	73.9

Chart 3.3: Competency at work (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non- suppression	Leadership
In the last five years, I have seen the competence of female firefighters challenged by others.	76.2	49.4	61.2	54.3
In the last five years, I have observed women in the fire service being treated differently because of their gender.	74.5	46.0	59.8	56.8

Charts 3.4, 3.6, 3.8 & 3.10: Discrimination and harassment in my fire service career from co-workers: (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non-suppression	Leadership
Any type of harassment or discrimination	67.9	45.7	62.2	54.5
Harassment or discrimination in the firehall	27.4	14.2	18.5	12.2
Micro aggressions	55.8	30.5	48.9	44.7
Violence	58.4	39.9	57.8	52.0

Charts 3.4, 3.14, 3.15 & 3.16: Discrimination and harassment in my fire service career from leadership: (%)

In my fire service career, I have experienced the following from leadership (Officers\supervisors):				
Any type of harassment or discrimination	50.8	33.2	54.5	43.6
Harassment or discrimination in the firehall	10.8	5.2	6.0	5.1
Micro aggressions	36.8	20.0	42.5	28.1
Violence	43.2	30.1	52.2	41.9

Charts 3.4, 3.7, 3.9 & 3.11: Discrimination and harassment last three months from co-workers: (%)

In the last three months, I have experienced the following from co-workers:				
Any type of harassment or discrimination	36.8	14.9	33.6	15.1
Harassment or discrimination in the firehall	8.6	3.6	1.0	1.7
Micro aggressions	29.3	8.8	30.3	12.6
Violence	17.8	7.6	17.2	11.8

Chart Other indicators of discrimination (%)

In the last five years, I have experienced gender-based discrimination in work assignments.	43.8	16.1	23.4	17.7
My gender is a barrier to my career advancement.	21.8	5.1	9.5	2.6

Charts 3.12 & 3.13: Physical and emotional safety (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non- suppression	Leadership
Other than the inherent risks related to being a firefighter, have you ever been made to feel physically unsafe at any of the following?				
Activities at work or with co-workers	20.2	17.7	23.8	20.2
Firehall	7.3	5.2	7.5	4.0
Socializing with workers	2.1	1.3	4.5	4.8
Meetings with supervisors	1.0	1.3	3.7	1.0
In your current job, have you ever been made to feel emotionally unsafe or uncomfortable by someone in the fire service at any of the following?				
Activities at work or with co-workers	47.9	20.3	42.3	24.6
Firehall	40.1	15.0	21.2	13.9
Socializing with workers	14.1	3.8	9.5	10.7
Meetings with supervisors	14.6	6.2	23.4	10.7

Section 4 Charts: Health

Charts 4.1 & 4.2: Health and Well-being (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non-suppression	Leadership
In general, would you rate your physical health as good?	89.7	86.5	71.5	82.1
In general, would you rate your mental health as good?	87.7	84.6	71.5	82.1
In the last 12 months, have you experienced any of the following as a result of work for the fire service?				
Any stress related health condition	70.1	57.8	70.8	64.1
Anxiety	42.2	27.8	46.7	32.5
Depression	17.3	16.5	33.6	19.8
Suicide	5.7	3.5	7.3	7.8
Sleep	45.6	46.0	56.9	53.9
PTSD	3.1	5.0	8.0	5.2
Substance abuse	6.8	8.3	4.4	7.8
Self-doubt	57.3	22.9	46.0	26.6

Chart 4.3: Reasons why people may have changed work locations (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non-suppression	Leadership
I have requested a move to a different work location such as another firehall because of discrimination or harassment.	18.1	11.7	19.6	6.9
I have been moved involuntarily to a different work location such as another firehall because of discrimination or harassment.	7.3	8.0	13.5	7.8
I have changed divisions.	9.3	7.5	44.0	37.9
I have thought about leaving the fire service.	37.3	24.1	47.0	35.0
I have taken a leave from the fire service because of work-related stress.	7.9	9.9	21.9	12.1

Section 5 Charts: Support

Chart 5.1 & 5.2: Support at work (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non-suppression	Leadership
I feel supported at work.	61.5	75.4	60.9	77.1
I feel women who work for the fire service are supported in general at work.	45.1	85.4	66.2	75.2
If I faced harassment or discrimination in my current job, my co-workers would defend me.	66.5	84.6	64.0	75.2

Chart 5.3: Individuals I feel supported by (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non-suppression	Leadership
Fire chief	53.2	43.8	-	-
Deputy chief	51.1	42.9	-	-
Platoon chief	65.6	72.8	-	-
District chief	66.4	77.8	-	-
Captain	74.2	85.9	-	-
Firefighters	63.0	84.3	-	-
Chief officer	-	-	54.8	56.2
Supervisor	-	-	54.2	68.5
Front line workers	-	-	71.7	78.2

Chart 5.4: My officer supervisor has the necessary skills to manage (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non-suppression	Leadership
Discrimination and harassment	64.3	79.4	71.6	74.5
Interpersonal conflict	62.0	78.0	66.1	74.5
Complex emergency situations	88.9	94.4	69.7	83.3
Maintaining a safe work environment	90.6	95.0	94.5	87.3

Chart 5.5: Human rights and anti-harassment training effective? (%)

Provincial human rights training	32.8	47.4	43.3	52.9
Department provided human rights training	30.9	50.3	40.5	52.9

Chart 5.6: Your Union (Union members only) (%)

	Female Suppression (n=136)	Male Suppression (n=472)	Non-suppression (n=121)	Leadership (n=37)
I am confident that my union would represent me from unfair treatment.	62.1	69.4	45.0	50.0
I would go to my union if I had an unresolved workplace issue.	61.5	75.3	67.5	72.97
I would go to my union if I experienced discrimination or harassment.	47.1	65.2	58.3	54.1
My union is supportive of concerns raised by women firefighters.	62.3	91.6	67.1	74.2
My union would support me in the event of discrimination or harassment.	68.0	81.9	64.3	72.2
I was involved with my union over the last 12 months.	12.5	11.7	12.4	27.0

Chart 5.7 & 5.8: Harassment and discrimination procedures (%)

	Female Suppression	Male Suppression	Non- suppression	Leadership
My division has a procedure to address complaints of harassment and discrimination.	82.6	93.0	90.0	93.4
I would report discrimination or harassment to my officer/supervisor, HR department or another individual in a leadership position in the future.	53.9	67.9	70.0	83.2
I would feel comfortable raising a concern with my regular officer/supervisor about unfairness, discrimination or harassment.	52.1	79.1	57.2	75.4
My direct officer\supervisor is committed to making my workplace safe and healthy for all.	66.5	81.8	65.2	78.0
I know someone who reported discrimination or harassment	57.5	52.4	64.3	63.9
I reported discrimination or harassment to my officer/supervisor, HR department or another individual in a leadership position while working for the fire service.	23.2	11.0	37.9	24.8
I was satisfied with how the discrimination or harassment that I reported was dealt with.	22.2	18.6	15.1	44.8
I would report harassment in the future.	53.9	67.9	70.0	83.2

Appendix B: Methods

This report was commissioned by the Fire Service Women of Ontario. The research team conducted 26 face to face interviews (22 women and 4 men) during the summer and fall of 2019. FSWO provided a list of potential interview participants from which we selected a sub-set of ensure anonymity. An online survey was conducted during the fall of 2019. Invitations to participate in the survey were initially sent by email by FSWO, the union and senior fire service leadership. Further survey participants were recruited using relevant social media. We thank all who helped recruit project participants.

Survey data was collected using Survey Monkey. All responses were forwarded directly to the research team without identifying marks to insure anonymity. 1,364 survey respondents completed enough questions to enable us to allocate them to three workplace categories:

- Suppression including firefighters and captains: n=1,050
- Non-suppression including front-line workers and supervisors: n=154
- Senior leadership including ranks above captain in suppression and chief officers in other divisions: n=160

The main body of the report explores the different experiences of male and female firefighters in suppression working in firehalls including 549 male firefighters and 195 female firefighters who provided information on their gender. The small number of observations in the other two workplace categories prevented us from conducting a similar gendered analysis of those two groups.

Interviews were transcribed and coded using coding software. Survey data was analyzed using STATA software.

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