



# Women in fire and emergency leadership roles

How can we improve the gender balance?

A research report  
commissioned by the Department of  
Environment, Land, Water & Planning

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Vol. 1



Gender & Disaster Pod

An initiative of WHGNE, WHIN & MIRI

Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations

Vol. 2 Complete Research Report

## **Authorship and Acknowledgement**

Our deep appreciation to the 480 people who took the time to complete a long questionnaire, and to the 23 women and men who participated in interviews and the focus group. It is your expert knowledge and lived experience that allows this research report to be written. It contributes to a body of research that is only emerging, and has the potential to improve the experiences of women and men in fire and emergency roles. The initiative of senior leaders within the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (and others in the emergency management sector) is both welcome and indicative of intent to make positive changes for the benefit of all.

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Logo taken from Ona Henderson's *Girl with a Possum*.



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## Introduction

The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) commissioned and part-funded this research. DELWP established a reference group which met twice during this research project. As stated in the brief, the scope of the research is ‘to understand what (if any) actual and perceived barriers exist for women to take on fire and emergency management leadership roles’ within DELWP and the Networked Emergency Organisations (NEO). NEO agencies are Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water and VicForests. As noted in the brief, increasing the proportion of women in fire leadership roles allows a bigger pool of potential employees, broadens diversity, and increases the capacity of this sector.

The initiative shown by senior DELWP and NEO managers in seeking authentic answers to the research question is reflective of the forward-thinking leadership they have shown over recent years in addressing gender inequity. It echoes the progressive stance taken by Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews<sup>1</sup> when he announced that 50% of appointments to government boards and courts would be women, stating, ‘I’m sick of walking into meetings and seeing a room full of blokes sitting around a table’.

The identified problem is that, in 2014, of the 2,422 DELWP and associated employees in NEO accredited in fire and emergency roles, 671 (28%) were women and 1,751 (72%) were men.

Fewer again hold leadership roles in fire and emergency, (defined as Strategic, Incident and Team leadership). Of the 889 leaders, 175 (20%) women were and 714 (80%) men.

*72% in fire and emergency roles are men.*

*80% in leadership roles are men.*

*1% of men and 37% of women felt they had faced barriers to leadership roles because of their sex.*

*Only 26% of women did not see their gender as a limitation to their future career prospects, compared to 84% of men.*

*2% of men, compared to 18% of women felt they had been denied development opportunities due to their gender.*

### How to read this report

This volume (Vol. 1) is the executive summary, focussing on the qualitative and quantitative research findings, and providing an overview of recommended strategies for improvement. The quotations throughout capture key themes in the words of research participants.

Volume 2 is a comprehensive report on the primary research findings and expansion on the recommended strategies.

Both volumes are authored by the Gender and Disaster Pod research team, conducted under the auspices of Women’s Health In the North (WHIN), and Women’s Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE). Monash University’s Injury Research Institute (MIRI) contributed quantitative data analysis expertise. The exception in authorship is the ‘Contextual reading provided by DELWP’ in Part 1 of Vol. 2. Other sections in Vol. 2 are:

- ‘Comparative Analysis – desktop audit’ which presents available gendered data for six Victorian emergency management organisations and for DELWP and the other members of NEO

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.premier.vic.gov.au/speech-state-labor-conference-2015/>

- Detailed research methodology
- Quantitative and qualitative data findings in full, and
- Appendices including key ethics documents, the research instruments and further quantitative analysis.

## Methodology

This mixed methods study was conducted with ethics approval from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. More than 500 people contributed to this research. Data was collated and analysed from three sources:

- (1) 480 anonymous internet responses to a long questionnaire of 53 required responses and five optional questions (via Survey Monkey)
- (2) 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews in person or by telephone; and
- (3) a focus group of four.

No identification was required for the online survey.

Confidentiality was enhanced for those interviewed by specific measures taken in access to schedules and data, and removal of names. Recruitment for the internet-based survey, interviews and focus group was through organisational emails, flyers and newsletter, with interested people contacting the research team directly for interviews or the focus group. Early bushfires affected scheduled interviews, with 10 people unable to participate in scheduled consultations through deployment to fires.

Data collection covered the period 4<sup>th</sup> September to 9<sup>th</sup> October 2015. Standard ethical research protocols were followed, offering the interview and focus group participants the opportunity to amend their quotations used in the draft report (and taken from verbatim transcriptions). Analysis was inductive, following Glaser & Strauss' Grounded theory (1967). NVivo V.10 software assisted with the thematic categorisation of the data.

## Demographics of respondents

In the internet survey of 480 respondents, participant ages were normally distributed, with respondents indicating their age range from under 26 to over 65 years. The majority of the respondents (84%) had a current fire and emergency role and their responses indicate those without a current role previously held such roles. More men than women held these roles (91% to 79% comparatively). In total, 57% of respondents were female and 43% male.

The 23 participants in interviewees and the focus group covered Levels 1 to 3 across a variety of fire and emergency roles, with length of service varying from recently employed staff members to those with up to three decades work history. Four were male and 19 female.

*Only 1% agreed that women should not be in fire and emergency leadership roles.*

*Yet, more than half (54%) of respondents agreed there are barriers to women taking on fire and emergency leadership roles.*

*More women than men agree: 67% of these were women and 37% were men.*

*More than a third of respondents agreed that 'Discrimination on the basis of gender is **a problem** in the workplace'.*

*Just under half of female respondents felt that **discrimination based on gender** was present in the workplace: 47% of women, and 21% of men*

Through all three methods of data collection, participants in the research were open and generous in their comments. Many began by commending their organisation for gender initiatives, while sharing their observations and experiences on continuing gender-based discrimination and other barriers to women taking on senior leadership roles in fire and emergency. Participants appreciated the lead of senior managers in demonstrating a more equal gender dynamic in the workplace, noting its centrality to culture change. Those who responded to the online questionnaire offered over 90 pages of qualitative information in response to the open-ended and optional questions, and most suggested strategies to overcome identified barriers.

Two aspects of concern were the number of interviewees who chose to retract parts of their quotations for fear of identification, and the number who commented in interviews about the retribution women would face if this

research report were to recommend quotas or other strategies that could adversely affect men. This indicates a level of resistance to a more gender equitable workplace which is addressed in the recommended strategies for improvement. Feedback on the results of the survey would ideally express appreciation of the level of attention by respondents that is apparent in the survey responses.

## **Survey data findings**

This section reports on the 480 questionnaire responses – 57% of which were from women. There was an even geographical spread across urban, regional and rural areas, and a normal age distribution.

## **Opinions on gender equality at work**

A clear trend from the survey was the strong, universal agreement with broad, general statements about gender equality. For example, there was overwhelming agreement that men do *not* make better fire and emergency leaders than women (only 3% thought they do) and that gender does not matter if someone is fit and capable (with 95% of male and female agreement).

Differences between the opinions of men and women tended to emerge with more specific questions. There were consistently stronger differences in opinions between genders as compared to age group or region. An important indicator relates to issues of merit and is key to addressing gender inequality. One such statement: 'People are approved for fire and emergency leadership roles on the basis of their competency to perform the job' revealed that 75% of men agreed, compared to only 57% of women. Another statement that drew strongly gendered responses was 'Gender stereotyping is addressed and countered by individual staff members in the workplace'. Just under half of men agreed (49%) while only 27% of women agreed.

There was substantial difference in opinion on the ease men and women have in establishing personal and professional networks in their workplace and organisation. Half the female respondents (one in two women) agreed with the statement compared to only one in five men. Three quarters of men and women agreed that meetings tend to be dominated by men (78% and 86%, respectively).

## Attitudes towards women in leadership roles

Overall, there was little agreement with the statement 'there are negative attitudes to women in fire and emergency leadership positions in the workplace' at 23%. However other statements indicate higher levels of agreement with statements that contradict this. For example, only 42% of women agreed that male managers had a *positive* attitude to women taking on leadership positions, and one third (32%) of females agreed that men in leadership positions fail to pay attention to what women say.

## Opinions on barriers and solutions

A majority of respondents (52%) agreed that there were career penalties for women caring for family, however, the penalties were not seen as high for men caring for family (32%). Only 37% of respondents agreed that 'I am satisfied with the flexibility of work arrangements in fire and emergency leadership roles'. There was 20% less satisfaction from women regarding the flexibility of their working arrangements.

In response to the question: 'My organisation is supportive of women taking maternity leave whilst holding a fire and emergency role', 72% of men and only 49% of women agreed. There was even lower agreement with the same statement about organisational support for paternity leave, with only 62% of men and 39% of women agreeing – again revealing a substantial gendered difference.

Only one in four respondents agreed that there were initiatives in the organisation to encourage women into leadership positions. Again, more men (30%) than women (19%) believed this to be the case.

There was a strong gendered difference in support for recruitment material for fire and emergency roles being targeted towards women. More than half (54%) of women and only a third (36%) of men agreed or agreed strongly that recruitment should be targeted to women.

## Personal experiences

One third of respondents indicated they were aware of discrimination against women in the workplace. More than twice as many women (43%) than men (20%) agreed. Of equal concern, 27% of female respondents agreed with the statement, 'I have personally experienced discrimination against women in my organisation'.

Overall, 18% of respondents had experienced unwelcome remarks, emails, suggestions or jokes of a sexual/sexist nature in the workplace. The percentage was double for women compared to men (23% to 11% respectively). While 14% agreed they were aware of sexual harassment in the workplace – 8% male and 18% female -, rates were higher amongst regional and rural respondents (metropolitan 9%; regional 14%; rural 16%). A total of 89% of men responded that they had never experienced sexual harassment in their organisation, and this figure was 70% for women.

## Summary of survey findings

In summary, the survey data indicated that after the general statements about gender equality which showed almost universal support for women in leadership roles, more specific questions elicited lower levels of support - especially from men - and greater recognition of barriers and discrimination by women than men. According to the results, men are perceived to have an easier time establishing networks, and there is little countering of sexism, apart

from that from senior managers and exceptional individuals. Women face more resistance, evidenced by male managers' attitudes and approval, and general male domination at meetings. More women than men supported targeted recruiting for women. Career penalties for having children applied more to mothers than fathers and there was low satisfaction from women with flexibility of working arrangements. Few knew about initiatives

*I think I was about to quit until I heard [Adam Fennessy's] talk on that and I thought, 'Oh I might stay'.*

~

*DELWP and Parks Victoria need to be totally commended that there are some men in there who have truly supported gender diversity and spoken about it. That's incredible. They're aware of it and they've done things about it.*

~

*My current manager is very good and he takes on board all these things and so I know from his perspective, especially the flexible working, he's really put that in place and really encourages that in our team. It is that middle management that's often the issue.*

~

*[The Secretary] says stuff like leading flexible teams and I don't understand what it means. It might be great for head office but I don't have that translated regionally.*

~

*She just said [deployment] was the most horrible experience she'd had and I said, 'Wow that's amazing because I just had the most incredible experiences' and what I was allowed to do and the roles that I performed and where I went. She said, 'Yes, because your team supports you.'*

~

*There's also a lot of women that are like, 'I've fought really hard to be one of the boys' and that's where they want to stay.*

to encourage women into leadership positions. More than a quarter of women have personally experienced gender-based discrimination and almost a quarter had experienced sexism. More women than men were aware of sexual harassment in the workplace.

The statistical data was used to further inform the questions used in interviews and the focus group. The transcripts from these give the 'flesh on the bone', and provide specific examples of employees' lived experiences in the section below.

### **Qualitative data findings – what the interviews revealed**

Decades of past sex discrimination have left a legacy of an emergency management sector with 'a blokey culture'. All participants touched on this as pervasive.

Participants reflected on the need for this research; the benefits more women in leadership roles could bring; and their praise for current management in contributing funding for this research project and other gender equity strategies undertaken in recent months or years. Middle management was identified as not as progressive and sometimes a blocker to women's career progression.

The benefits include the different perspective that women bring, through their different socialisation and often through their socially prescribed role as primary care-giver. A strong theme was the greater preparedness by women to question decisions and to moderate hyper-masculinity.

In answering the research question as to the real or perceived barriers, women gave examples of gender-based discrimination in on-ground fire roles, in operational leadership roles, and in senior and executive level roles. Some reflected on the stereotype of male fire-fighters and its relevance in a modern emergency service organisation with team work and technology. In response to our question about women's and men's comparative ability on the fire ground, there was overwhelming agreement that women are equally valuable in the team, bringing fitness, persistence and acumen to the role.

The need for action is clear from the data. Along with positive feedback, participants also drew attention to obstinate problems and the evidence that equality is not yet here. The laudable increase in women still seems relegated to particular roles and lower levels (see Table in Vol. 2, Part 1) and location. Barriers for rural women covered both increased gender stereotyping and less access to leadership training. It was apparent that women's career prospects relied on the subjectivities of their manager and how accepting the broader team environment was for women in leadership or other operational fire and emergency roles.

The kinds of barriers that women employed at DELWP and other NEO agencies face include assumptions about the kinds of roles appropriate for women, sometimes stemming from unconscious bias or benevolent sexism, where decisions that have the effect of hindering women's career progress are taken in the 'best interest' of the woman. This also occurred as a result of women's capability 'in the office', leading to them not being released for deployment because no-one could replace them. The women often displayed a generosity of spirit in excusing men for their sexist behaviours, saying it was often unconscious, and these men failed to see women as having future potential or seeing them as obvious leaders. One spoke of 'an unconscious bias when in interviews you just automatically assume the guy is going to do a better job'. Conversely, participants told of men receiving favourable treatment, evidenced by selective fast-tracking, or observations of men being assessed at a lower standard and sometimes being given accreditations because their skill was needed.

The 'Discussion and Conclusion' in Part 5 of Vol. 2 highlights findings that are common to other research on barriers to women taking on the most senior roles and where much feminist theorising has been undertaken. These fall into three areas: (1) sexism and discussion of gender equity measures (quotas and effective male role-modelling) under the heading, 'Sheilas can't get up in the truck; (2) barriers through pregnancy and parenting under the heading 'Minding the baby'; and (3) the misconception that women will always help each other to progress in the workplace, under the heading, 'Kicking down the ladder'.

*I seriously walk into a room with men and it is the same things they bring up over and over again... but then a woman brings up some-thing completely different which adds to it and takes that to the next level.*

~

*The times where the shit hit the fan ... has all been down to male ego ... If there's a major incident or behavioural problems it never really seems to be the females in the crew that are causing the problems.*

~

*I would go to the course with them and within 12 months all the blokes that I went to got signed off but it would be two to three years before they would allow me to sit the test and be signed off ... There's still so many egos and they're still picking the team if you like ...jobs for mates. Taps on the shoulders for secondments to their mates and it's never women.*

~

*In front of all of us in the class, he said to us, 'Now how you really put out a fire is you grab it by the throat and you rip its head off and you shit down its throat. That's what I'm going to teach you.' That's how you put out a fire.*

~

*If I can have a mix of both sexes in my teams that I take away I'm really pleased because it brings in a whole different thought process.*

~

*Usually the females on the crew are the most likely to speak up and maybe that's because of the type of women that are attracted to this role are already pretty gutsy and pretty used to standing up for themselves ... Like a group of 10 if there's one chick it's probably her and another guy that'll say that, that'll stand up and go 'no, this is not right, this is too dodgy'.*

~

*I was in a meeting and I was the only female and nobody knew why I was there and I wasn't there to be the note taker. At one point the facilitator said, 'Can somebody write this down?' And I kid you not, the whole room looked at me.*

*I just often get pigeonholed just like probably every other female that's told you. The typical response when it comes to it ... females that are VPS - so have a substantive role - they often get chucked into the commander offsider or radio operator or even scribe. They're not often put in with the actual crew.*

~

*The second you say that we've got a quota that builds resentment amongst the rest of your workforce because it's special treatment, all that kind of shit. The whole argument that you're giving a job to someone who's second best when really they're potentially the best person for the job. You just haven't given the opportunity to prove that.*

~

*[A senior women] went away and had children and when she came back she had to fight to get recognition ... because she'd had 12 months off ... And she left because she got so pissed off ... [But] blokes who couldn't go out and fight because they had hip issues ... retained their ... accreditation.*

~

*Statistics show one in five men are denied flexible work time but if we allow men then they're supporting their partners and it keeps women progressing in their careers.*

~

*You stand up for yourself but then you end up exhausted and then over time you just give up. My team is full of bitter women who really know their stuff and probably just haven't gotten anywhere because they've tried and given up. When I first started in the department I'd look at those women and think, 'I'll never end up a bitter bitch like that' but then the longer I've been here, the more I'm becoming that person. It gets you in the end.*

Participants spoke of these three broad issues in the context of their DELWP and NEO work, pointing out issues such as part-time and flexible work being considered problematic and signifying a lack of commitment on their part, especially in regard to fire rosters. Gender stereotyping was common, privileging men for deployment and assessments, and opening women to sexist comments and behaviours from male colleagues. Echoing the survey data, pregnancy and care of family remains a barrier primarily for women and not men. Women felt isolated during maternity leave and returned to a changed workplace with very little support and a loss of status. A degree of agility is required to more adeptly match people's life circumstances and availability with the essential assurance of a skilled and ready workforce to respond to emergencies. The final broad area is the misconception that women will support other women. Vol. 2 articulates the reasons behind this. As half the population, women are not all the same and all women cannot be counted on to be supportive of other women – in the same way that all men are not encouraging of younger men.

Sadly, the consequence is that good women and effective leaders leave for other workplaces where their ambitions will be valued and nurtured. The need for education of the whole workforce on sex discrimination, behaviour change, bystander interventions and quotas is clear.

It was interesting to note a theme whereby women who had achieved significant seniority tended to attribute their success (or part of it) to factors external to themselves or their abilities. The notion of women not wanting to be leaders or not having the required confidence is true for some women – as it is equally true for some men. Barriers face women through assumptions that they will not be interested, confident enough, or available enough for the rigor involved in leadership in fire and emergency roles. A critical first step is to challenge managers' assumptions about what women want or can do and require documentation indicating women have been asked and have been assessed or approved on the same basis as men. When assessments are made about women's confidence, it must be acknowledged that women are, in fact, expected to be better at the job than men. Participants spoke of inevitable human mistakes being attributed to women's gender as the cause – reasoning that is never applied to men in leadership positions.

Participants made suggestions as to what would enable women to undertake these fire and emergency leadership roles, beginning with their belief that the passing of time, and new generations coming in will assist in progress towards equality for women. However, 'progress is not

success' and equality in the workplace has been a long time coming.

Beyond the advantages of equal inclusion of women - to the organisation, the community and the individual women - using the findings of this study to create a fair workplace could lead to far greater benefits in happiness and wellbeing, and provide a blueprint for other organisations.

## Conclusion

The barriers to women taking on leadership roles in fire and emergency identified by respondents were real, rather than perceived. Women have fewer role models and sponsors than men and less developed networks. They face barriers in accessing training and release for deployments. They work in a milieu described by most as “a boys’ club”, where men are seen to dominate meetings and stereotype the abilities of women. There are simply more men in senior roles, leaving senior women isolated and often overlooked. Relatively few respondents knew of gender equity initiatives, and leadership training for women was sometimes inaccessible. Reflecting the wider literature on barriers to women in executive roles, key barriers were threefold as described above – related to career penalties not faced by men for family responsibilities, sexism and assumptions of women helping other women’s careers.

Some participants were under the misapprehension that women need to earn their leadership positions on ‘merit’ and any attempts by management to fast track or nurture women for leadership roles would lead to scepticism about the capability of women in senior roles. This widespread misunderstanding fails to recognise the glass elevator that exists for men, along with the more recognised glass ceiling for women.

Male privilege ensures that male characteristics are more highly valued and rewarded. These include both biological characteristics with the male population generally taller and stronger than the female population, and socially constructed characteristics such as being stoic, decisive and unemotional. Maleness guarantees one dimension of privilege whereby all men share a sex-based advantage to some extent (Kahn, 2011), and the intersection of other factors – race, disability, class – affect the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Pease, 2010).

*The previous area chief ranger at our office was a male so they fast tracked him and he's become a duty officer. They gave him all the experiences. Our current area chief ranger is a woman. There's no fast tracking. There's nothing. No, nothing.*

~

*I've sat in meetings where basically because I was a female rep of a government organisation I had quite aggressive, verbally and almost bullying behaviour towards me doing my job and to the point [my manager] went to the next meeting and sat in the back of the room and called the behaviour.*

~

*There'd be times when you weren't even invited to the IMT meetings and I go, 'I understand that it's on now so I'm going to sit down at the table and join in'.*

~

*I was the sector commander and ... they came with a helicopter to pick us up and take us for a flight over so we could see the thing .... It took this guy probably four times before I was allowed to get in the helicopter and go ... Again it wasn't malicious ... but he just couldn't believe that I would be in charge of this sector.*

~

*Why at this point in my career am I being viewed as someone who should step up to an EA role? Why don't you ask one of the male rangers to do that?*

~

*And I just feel like you've got so much more to prove ... Whereas guys walk into it and they're just trusted.*

~

*It's a white mans' deal. Like there's no halal meal options .... It's not even just women.*

DELWP and NEO management have shown courageous leadership in tackling gender inequity in their organisations and this is clearly appreciated by many employees. The immediate task is now, not only to address the issues raised in this research but, to address the 'push-back' from men who feel their unearned advantage slipping away. The level playing field for men and women – and for others not yet equally represented – is attainable.

As Michael Kimmel (2002) writes, when the standard human is seen to be white and male, women and non-whites face immediate barriers. It is commendable that the leaders of DELWP and the other NEO agencies are directly tackling this issue of equal rights. And right that others welcome it. One man interviewed told us:

*For my own self I've got no doubt [gender equity measures] will have consequences on roles that I go for. But I think that ... then comes back to your own personal values ... I've got a 5 year old daughter, I hope this is not something that is even an issue [for her].*

## Recommended strategies for improvement

The following section identifies a number of strategies, supported by examples, for improvement to address the key barriers identified from this research. These strategies have been informed by the DELWP/NEO participants, the survey monkey findings, the literature review and the expertise of the research team. These recommended strategies address barriers that are specific to the fire and emergency management program as well as organisation wide.

It became evident that effort directed in the following ways would contribute to more women taking on fire and emergency leadership roles. As we were requested to prioritise the recommended strategies, we have listed them in priority order and highlighted the three most important areas for early implementation. Further detail to implement each is included in Volume 2.

DELWP management have advised they are committed to undertaking a process of staff engagement in early 2016 to reflect on the findings and recommended strategies and ultimately provide input to the strategies and actions DELWP and its NEO partners will progress. This will culminate in an Action Plan towards June 2016. As several of the recommended strategies have implications across the fire and emergency management sector, DELWP management have advised they will consult across the sector to ensure that an integrated approach is taken.

1. Establish a *Gender Equity Sponsor Program* for women so that women are well-supported and well-advised by more senior, experienced and respected women and men. It is critical that sponsors have the time and personal qualities to be effective in this role, and that appropriate monitoring be in place. Ideally, monitoring would be strength-based, for example, through an award for a 'Sponsor of the Year', with publication of those nominated. Acknowledgement of Sponsors is critical. Establishment of a *Gender Equity Review Panel* is an important component to the success of this program. The

program must be equally available to rural women, potentially utilising Skype and teleconferencing.

As the first priority, *a detailed case study* of how this could be operationalised is included in Vol. 2.

2. Monitor the approval of training for women and release for women to attend fires on deployment, potentially through the *Gender Equity Review Panel* (in 1. Above). A number of strategies have been identified to enable women to have the same opportunities as men. These include clear documentation of applications for training and deployment and managers' decisions; removal of subjectivity and unconscious bias by managers; and attaching accountability to senior management for women's progress in their 'Fire Role Development Plans'.

We believe this to be a high priority for effective management action to increase the number of women in fire and emergency leadership roles.

3. Change the culture from a 'boys' club', to organisations where the division of people into classifications does not extend to social interactions. Encourage a culture of people contributing equally in diverse roles and levels. In communications, emphasise people, not levels, and ensure women are free to participate equally.

This can be operationalised through training with assessment and follow-up, and promoting (in level and/or prominence) senior men and women who demonstrate a more egalitarian approach and effective by-stander interventions. Particular attention is to be paid to rural areas.

This is the final priority for management, nominated in the understanding that many of the other recommended strategies will naturally follow implementation of these three priority areas.

4. Ensure merit is applied by eliminating unconscious bias and removing structural barriers. An example is the AIIMS structure, which could be reviewed to ensure accreditations and assessments for progress are relevant to modern fire-fighting and emergency management demands.

The relevance of this to gender equality is that annual deployments - as a pre-requisite to maintaining fire accreditation - mainly exclude women taking maternity leave. This is particularly the case for women who are interested in pursuing operational fire and emergency roles rather than the more strategic planning, resourcing and communications areas.

5. Address current and past sex discrimination through effective strategies such as fast tracking or recruiting for a 50/50 gender split in *executive teams* so women are not seen as tokens of 'political correctness'. Documentation is central to proving that merit has not applied when leadership runs at 80% men. Annual reviews/audits in a number of areas are required, including take-up and availability of gender equity programs.

Address expected resistance (from some men and women) through encouraging reporting of increased gender-based harassment. This could be through an anonymous site on each organisation's intranet where discriminatory comments are noted. This would alert managers to the scale of the problem.

6. Contract consultants from Workplace Gender Equality Agency and recognised gender advocates and academics to devise more effective recruiting for females. Introduce changes to minimise interviewers' subjectivity in recruiting, for example, by conducting medical and fitness tests before interviews. Populate interview panels with women and men from the database of sponsors.

Kick-start fire leadership careers for young women by 'over-releasing' them for deployments and training in their early years with DELWP and NEO. As part of induction and yearly performance reviews (or discussions on Fire Role Development Plans), in print and verbally, advise new recruits that reviews (such as this research) have found that opportunities for on-ground fire experience and deployments become harder to manage with family responsibilities.

7. Improve the quality and accessibility of leadership training for women, ensuring female facilitators lead training sessions. Increase accessibility, especially for rural women.
8. Improve support for family/ work balance for women and men. Review maternity and paternity provisions, with a focus on supporting those on this leave while away and upon their return.
9. Support flexible and part-time fire and emergency roles through forthright advocacy and communication from managers at every level. The required message is that part-time work is equally valuable to the organisation; that part-time workers are no less committed; and that part-time work is possible (and even advantageous in some respects) in critical and senior roles.

Reflect current thinking and promote the concept that 4-day deployments are valuable and credible in terms of experience.

10. Improve the roster system. Eliminate assumptions that people will or will not be available for rosters based on sex, family responsibilities and perceived commitment. Automate availability for rosters through improved computer software to avoid assumptions and enable employees to put themselves on the roster (or not). Commission software to assist in complex rostering and tracking.

Consider increasing the number of 4-day deployments in line with the practice of CFA, SES and some DELWP/NEO regions. Explore ways to manage deployments and availability through comprehensive consultation with staff, avoiding 'call when needed' options to allow for planning and increase the potential pool of available personnel.

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