



Women & Firefighting Australasia

WAFA Conference
14-16 August, 2014
Mecure Hotel, Canberra



“You can succeed in life if you are prepared to stand up, speak out and be relied upon for having the courage of your convictions”.

Senator, Michaelia Cash



The **5th Conference for the Australasian Women & Firefighting Association**, represents a tipping point for the Association and confirms our role and relationship with Firefighting agencies, Government, and individual members.

In all, 24 agencies were represented and included Fire Agencies from every state and territory of Australia and our first International representation from the New Zealand Fire Service. The two and a half day conference provided the 100 delegates with a well-programmed mix of presentations, panel discussions, hands-on workshops and networking opportunities.

ACT Senator, Michaelia Cash opened the conference with a video message that capitulated the very reason and importance of the Women's Network.

After Aunty Violet's Welcome to Country, Commissioner for the ACT Emergency Services Agency, Dominic Lane, welcomed us to Canberra and shared his personal and professional commitment to increasing the number of Female firefighters in the ACT. Currently, sitting at 2%, ACT Fire is just below the national average of 3% and has recently been resourced by a Government strategy to increase representation across all their emergency services.

We were delighted to see the commitment from the ACT Fire Brigade throughout the conference. At leadership level, both Dominic Lane and Fire Chief, Paul Swain were demonstrative in their support for women. They not only publicly verbalised their commitment, but were Gold sponsors of the event, sponsored 30 delegates to attend and hosted the Hands on Training workshops at their training facility in Hume.

Hands on Training Sessions (HOTS)

This was a new addition to the conference and will certainly become a permanent fixture for future conferences. In response to requests made at the last conference, the two sessions were: The Science Behind Firefighting - Case Studies from CFBT and Technical Large Animal Rescue.



Inspector John McDonough and Senior Firefighter Anthony Hatch, both from Fire & Rescue, NSW were the presenters for the two sessions. Both workshops provided theoretical and practical components and Anthony Hatch facilitated rescue scenarios for all participants using the mechanical prop horse, Bruce.



Concluding the workshops, the ACT Fire Brigade gave demonstrations in Road Crash Rescue & the use of their Gas Props. They also brought one of their Aerial appliances down for the afternoon and a few lucky delegates from RFS got to experience its operation.

During the afternoon tea, the participants compiled a list of their preferred workshops which are being reviewed by WAFA for future events. There are currently plans to run some of these workshops throughout the year and in various locations.



The Conference theme was **Women At The Firefront: Motivation, Innovation & Inspiration** and the programme of speakers was assembled to explore and promote each of these themes. A sub-theme that was encouraged was the issue of Rhetoric Vs Reality - the notion that often the policies, procedures and rhetorical regulations of Fire Services are not always reflected in the operational reality experienced by women. This notion came about through surveys and information gathered at the start of the year to determine the direction for this conference.

Fortunately in the last five years, Fire Services have come into line with government directives to build a diverse workforce and have supported the initiatives with policies and procedures aimed at encouraging women to join. However, surveys around the country indicate that women are not only hugely underrepresented, but also still face huge cultural barriers that inhibit job satisfaction, result in harassment & discrimination situations and limit promotion.

From previous conferences, WAFA felt that delegates have a good understanding of the spectrum of “Realities” that exist and ensured the programme would focus more on solutions needed to address the challenges. This was very successful and from all received feedback, the conference achieved this objective and the findings are included in this report.

One of our opening keynote speakers was Wing Commander Dee Gibbon from the Australian Air Force who delivered a presentation that reinforced the conference theme & inspired the delegates to take action.

Dee Gibbon is the Director of Workforce Diversity in the Airforce and last year’s recipient of the 100 Women of Influence Award (Diversity category). Her doctorate studies have centred on gender-based barriers and challenges to attracting, retaining and supporting women in the Air Force. Most of her findings were directly transferrable to the workplaces in our respective Fire Services.



Dee explained her model on Occupational Feminism and facilitated some workshopping on perceptions of the gender-based factors that affect recruitment, retention and support of female firefighters. She split the delegates into groups to discuss & record their perceptions on:

1. Attraction to the job of a firefighter
2. Recruitment processes
3. Selection & Promotion processes
4. Retention
5. At work experiences (Culture)
6. Career Progression

Following is a summary of the findings from her presentation:

Barriers to Joining a Fire Service

- Support from others
- Historical perception that its a male-only job
- Fireman vs. Firefighter – commonly held language affects children from birth & influencing stereotyping
- Society- imposed gender expectations
- Lack of representation at Career Days/Community Education, Open Days, Media
- Cultural stereotypes within female population
- Preconceived ideas about dangers and risks of the response phase of the job
- Not enough public information about the variety of the role & station life
- No prestige for women – seen as butch
- Focus on strength & response phase of job, little promotion of community engagement role
- Recruitment of women is narrow – white middle class
- Education of educators may help – training packages into schools for teachers and parents
- Biggest advantage to recruitment is knowing a firefighter – less women have a personal connection to someone already in the job.
- Few public icons & minimal visual representation across media
- Unknowns – can I have kids, can I juggle family roles & responsibilities
- Its dangerous myths – it's dirty, not for women, concerns of family

Challenges to Recruitment:

- Physical testing: Lack of preparation & not knowing what is involved
- Rostering/shift work: Implications for childcare, family responsibilities
- Arrangement of process - i.e. sequencing, often no consideration of resume & background until interview stage.
- No feedback from missing out previously
- Insufficient access to mentors or people genuinely trying to help women meet the requirements
- Aptitude testing considered to be based on white male testing groups - Theory of Homo-social representation
- Lateral transfer – no current lateral transfer for Firefighters – through recruitment only
- No national strategy – little cross agency networking, lack of strategy from governing associations such as WAFA, AFAC
- Lack of preparation – not knowing what is involved throughout the stages of the process and opportunities to prepare adequately
- Structure of recruitment – campaign vs. continuous - seeing varied successes between agencies and their structure e.g. QFES

Recruitment Recommendations

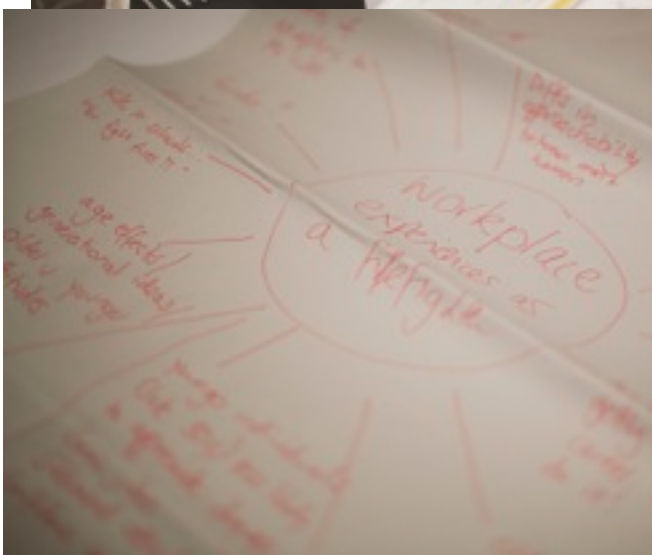
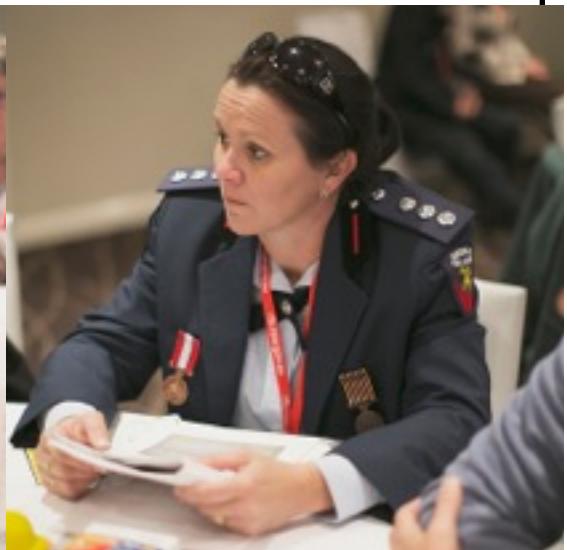
- School cadets/work experience programs
- Representation at Career Days/Community Education, Open Days, Media
- Firefighter boot camp for women – WAFA proposal in place
- WAFA workshops during Recruitment campaigns for Aptitude testing, Physical Testing preparation, Mentoring
- Joint initiative with SLSA to run Emergency Services beach events
- Recruitment specific video - WAFA proposal in place - to be on all Social Media, news event, website links
- Team presence at sporting events: Tough Mudder, Beach Bash etc
- Operational display/ visual presence during campaigns
- Firefighter for a Day - run by female firefighters

Cultural Challenges that affect Retention & Productivity (the majority of which affect men also)

- Being a minority without internal/inbuilt support systems - not being able to stand up for yourself
- Lack of connections & informal/formal networks
- Confidence vs. capacity - gender difference
- Exposure to operational role – as needed for promotion
- Absence of maternity policy and programmes regarding operational duties - inconsistency in management of pregnant firefighters
- Workplace experience as a fire fighter
- “What problem? – There is no problem!” - identifying the intangible/insidious harassment/discriminations.
- Perceived vs real barriers
- Balancing/maintaining being a woman/feminine traits in a traditional male role
- The need to repeatedly prove your self as a good firefighter & valuable to a team
- Gender stereotypes
- Younger individuals (late 30's) less likely to appreciate change – comic jibes, subliminal attacks & cultural behaviours impact on confidence & therefore more likely to make mistakes & reinforce beliefs of the perpetrators
- Role modelling is really important, designated Mentoring programme
- Age effect, generational issues, older vs. younger ideas
- Plenty of exceptions to the rules
- Attitudes to women who may need to have more flexibility in work arrangements due to being primary carers for children & ageing parents.
- Lack of self confidence & sometimes limited opportunity to experiences that build confidence

Long Term retention in Fire Fighting

- Adapting work to the age group – changing physical capacity, work continuity issues around having a family, return to work plans after maternity leave
- Managing Childcare – difficulty in finding it for shift work
- Single parents
- Require childcare for training and updating skills
- WHS of pregnant women & suitable duties, management plans
- Awareness and recognition of the benefits of both men and women to the role – complimentary skills – both create the whole
- Long term colleagues and friends over the career.
- Higher expectation around fitness and skills - affects confidence
- Too visible – too much focus; heightened visibility of being different – needs mentoring and support



Leadership

As part of the focus on how to close the gap of Rhetoric and Reality, we proposed a direction for Solutions-focussed Leadership.

We assembled a panel of female Leaders across the sectors who through their own experiences in becoming leaders, were able to share some discussion on what is needed for Fire Services to change & become more attractive for female employees.

The panellists were: (l to r in photo)

Rosemary Milkins, Deputy Commissioner, FRNSW

Michelle Young, Inspector, QFES

Mary Barry, ex CEO Victoria SES

Naomi Brown, ex CEO AFAC

The panel was facilitated by Associate Professor, Marilyn Childs who has done extensive academic work around gender in Fire Services and is a life member of WAFA for her contribution to Women in Firefighting.



A limited time frame for the Panel meant we could only explore a few leadership issues. We steered the discussion to the topical solutions of Quotas/Targets & Management of subversive behaviours in the workplace.

Quotas and Targets

Some of the thoughts and ideas surrounding the notion of applying Targets for Women to recruitment campaigns included:

- Importance of maintaining standards
- Are positions earned or just distributed to meet quotas?
- Ensuring an education/information campaign for existing firefighters happens prior to or alongside a recruitment campaign that has targets.
- Expect there to be a cultural backlash against women and minorities given targets
- Could do targets for Retained firefighters into Permanents at same time so they benefit men AND women.
- For quotas to work selections must be made from the group – all must be at the same level
- A % target provides a supportive environment despite a potential backlash
- Other things aren't working and change will happen too slowly at current recruitment rates
- Still has to be the right people for the job; to include other diversity sectors
- What does success look like? Important to ensure a realistic target percentage as widely considered that 50% is not viable.
- National framework around quotas? This can make it more of a government directive which might alleviate some backlash
- Forces change to happen but needs to be managed
- Merit is deceptive – perceived to already be unequal
- Perception is powerful
- Targeting of groups coming in under quota - women, culturally & linguistically diverse, Retained
- If there is a quota or not how do you counteract the perception there is?

Covert and Subversive behaviour

Everyone agreed that the real challenge is the intangible cultural aspects that are difficult to identify let alone manage. A concept of “Moral Courage” was introduced and the need for us all - men and women - to have the moral courage to report and speak up at every instance of inappropriate behaviour. Other recommendations included:

- Report it immediately, call it – confidentially
- Pick your battles & ascertain the importance in overall objective
- Draw the line: set and maintain personal boundaries with all colleagues
- Learning to recognise the covert & subversive behaviour
- Speaking up – address the barrier
- Create a safe working environment and one which encourages supporting each others difference rather than judging it against a narrow Fire Service “norm”
- Incident investigations with good panels, swift and decisive action
- Not more training – make it real for people; Respectful workplace training is not being treated with deserved respect.
- We need to say something at the time but don’t always know how to address it and fear reprisal
- Don’t let it slide – enables the behaviour and often we perpetuate/condone the behaviour
- Don’t walk past = acceptance
- Choosing to ignore can escalate behaviour
- Address behaviours in private
- Support for each other and share techniques and information that has worked for others
- Open door policy by management, transparent processes
- Courage to speak up - How?? Workshops for Boundaries/Moral Courage
- Establish boundaries as a team
- Early intervention and direct/transparent management of issues as they arise
- Current perception that women are handled differently when issues arise
- Backlash when treatment perceived to be unfair & favouring women

Breakout sessions - Innovation, Motivation & Inspiration

The conference also satisfied objectives to provide content that represents the Rural setting. The Breakout sessions in particular provided innovative and motivating presentations for this sector.

Dr Christine Eriksen is a social geographer from the Centre for Environmental Risk Management of Bushfires at the University of Wollongong.

Her research examines the role of local environmental knowledge in building disaster-resilient communities with a focus on the influence of gender relations.

Dr Eriksen presented a précis of her research into Gender & Wildfire: landscapes of uncertainty.



Dr Holly Foster, from Emergency Management Victoria shared current developments in Climate Change and their impact for the Fire Industry.

FireFoxes

In an incredibly moving & emotional presentation, the Firefoxes - Jemma Richards & Kate Riddell, recounted their harrowing personal experience of Victoria's Black Saturday fires in 2009 and their community response in the aftermath.

Both residents of Kinglake, they had independently been involved in the relief efforts during and immediately after the fire. Jemima retold the chilling phone calls from her husband with the roaring thunder of the firefront in the background. His last call was to frantically say that he and their children would be in the dam ... and then the phone went dead.



Her family did manage to get out alive but as we know 173 other people were killed and some 7,500 people were displaced. For 3 months Jemima ran a private relief centre on her property which serviced hundreds of people daily and was eventually funded by the State Government. At this time she met Kate and through shared experiences and recognition of the community need to heal from their trauma, formed Firefoxes.

As a support group, Firefoxes have hosted an array of events that bring the community and families together including family retreats, women's leadership retreats, trauma recovery workshops, Wunder-Woman weekends, CFA and fire preparedness activities.

Mel Irons

In another outstanding example of motivation, inspiration and simply responding to a community call, Mel Irons shared her experiences during the Tasmanian bush fires in January 2013.

Whilst following the Tasmanian Fire Service website as the fires worsened, Mel worked from her lounge room to coordinate a full-scale resource distribution network through Facebook. Her site reached over 2 million people around the world in the first 3 weeks.

Her story and statistics of her operation was truly inspiring. The coordination she facilitated between all emergency services, government officials, victims, rescuers and people donating food, shelter and equipment confirmed the power of social media and the capacity of communities responding to an emergency.

Mel has since resumed her PhD with renewed research into crisis communications and disaster resilience and was a State Finalist in this year's Young Australian of the Year awards.



Alex Shehadie, Assistant Director, Human Rights Commission, speaking about Cultural Change & similarities with the Australian Defence Force.

ACT Human Rights Commissioner, Helen Watchirs with WAFA Deputy Chair, Steve O'Malley.



WAFA was grateful for the participation and contribution made by Fire Service leaders. Both the host-city agency, ACTESA and Platinum Sponsor, FRNSW were noticeable for the commitment shown by their Leaders in support of the conference and of their personal objectives to lead improvements in their respective agencies.



ACT ESA Commissioner Dominic Lane participated throughout the conference



ACTFB Chief, Paul Swain shared his commitment to eliminating inappropriate behaviour in the ACT Fire Brigade and his plan to increase the number of women over the next 3 years.

In particular, FRNSW's Commissioner, Greg Mullins shared a personalised commitment to stamp out the remnants of an “old school” culture and ensure that Fire & Rescue, NSW is a workplace that encourages, values and supports women as an important part of its family.



Sponsorship

Promotion of sponsorships started later than it should. This was largely due to a misunderstanding by HPE of the history of sponsorships for this particular event.

Fire & Rescue NSW	\$15,000	Platinum
NSW Rural Fire Service	\$15,000	Platinum
National Parks & Wildlife Service NSW	\$10,000	Host
ACT Emergency Services Agency	30 delegates	Gold
Queensland Fire & Emergency Services	\$7,500	Gold
Airservices Australia	\$5,000	Silver
Metropolitan Fire Brigade VIC	\$5,000	Silver
Forestry Corporation NSW	\$2,500	Bronze

Attendance Breakdown

ACT ESA	15
ACT Fire & Rescue	11
ACT Parks	3
ACT RFS	9
ACT SES	6
AFAC	1
Airservices Aust	5
DEWNR	2
EMV	1
FRNSW	22
Forestry Corp NSW	2
MFB	5
NZFS	2
NSW RFS	10
NTFRS	2
QFES	11
Redland City Council	1

