

**GENDER BIAS AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN'S  
ADVANCEMENT IN THE FIRE SERVICE**

**EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**

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## Abstract

The American Fire Service is predominantly male, and white. Despite legislation and the implementation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination more than 30% of the women in the fire service today are still experiencing discrimination and over 50% experience social isolation within their chosen profession. The opportunities for women to achieve top-level positions as chief executive officers has been a problem, significantly impacted by the attitudes and behaviors of their officers, their peers and society as a whole.

The purpose of this research project was to identify the barriers impeding women's advancement in the fire service and make recommendations that the Albany Fire Department and other fire departments nationwide may employ to increase women's presence as chief executive officers.

Descriptive research was used to determine and report the current status of women in the fire service. An analysis of survey data and a review of pertinent literature were employed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the origin of gender bias?
2. What barriers exist for women in the fire service?
3. Is the fire service culture supportive to the acceptance and progression of women?
4. How can we change the face of fire service leadership?

It is concluded that gender bias does exist in our fire houses across the nation. It is supported by the development of the "gendered identity", and reinforced as women experience familial, societal, and cultural interactions. It will take a concerted effort on behalf of men and women to effectively eliminate gender bias and truly have equity in our society. One

good way to ensure more women executive officers are represented in your fire department is, well, to have a lot more women firefighters to begin with.

The research concluded with the following recommendations for fire service leadership:

1. Communicate a clear statement of values and a commitment to diversity.
2. Develop leadership behaviors and management styles demonstrating a commitment to diversity.
3. Develop mentorship programs and create role modeling opportunities.
4. Develop support networks for women and minorities within the fire service.
5. Extend positive diversity role-modeling, actually walk the talk, out into the community.

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## **Introduction**

The demographics of the American Fire Service is predominantly male, and white. Despite more than two decades of affirmative action and equal opportunity programs, minority representation in achieving top-level positions as chief executive officers has shown somewhat slow progress.

The problem is that despite more than twenty-five years demonstrating success in the fire service very few women hold top level positions as chief executive officers.

The purpose of the research was to identify the barriers that exists impeding women's advancement in the fire service and make recommendations that the Albany Fire Department and other fire departments nationwide may employ to increase women's presence as chief executive officers.

Descriptive research was used to determine and report the current status of women in the fire service. An analysis of survey data and a review of pertinent literature were employed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the origin of gender bias?
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## **Background and Significance**

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination as it relates to wages, fringe benefits, assignments or promotions, use of facilities, or training or retraining (Pettman, 1977, p. 46). Despite legislation women are still experiencing harassment and discrimination in their chosen careers in non-traditional employment. Firefighting has long been considered a

profession for the strong, hardy and brave, however those words have been known to describe male characteristics, not female. Female firefighters are still describing their employment conditions as they were prevalent in the early 1970s when they were seen as not physically capable of performing the work of a firefighter.

The first seminar on women in the fire service was conducted in August of 1979. At that time there were approximately 300 female firefighters nationwide. The 1980 United States Census recorded 1% of all firefighters were women, with that number increasing to 3% in the 1990 census data. Ten years later, the 2000 census, indicated these figures have not changed, still only 3% (United States Census, 2002). According to statistics compiled by Women in the Fire Service there are approximately 6,100 women active in career-level structural fire suppression in the U.S. and less than 300 officers above the level of Captain (Women in the Fire Service, 2003).

The Albany Fire Department currently has six females, roughly 11%, considered emergency line responders; all firefighter paramedics, four of which were hired within the last two years. Two have been with the organization for greater than 15 years and still hold the same positions they were hired to. One additional position, not mentioned in the above number, is the only female officer within the service. This female officer was originally hired to oversee Emergency Medical Services (EMS) training, and currently holds the title of Battalion Chief, assuming the responsibilities of a former Assistant Chief. A reorganization of the department eliminated the Assistant Chief of EMS and Administration position.

Women have chosen to enter the fire service knowing that their road to success would be tumultuous. A few quotes from female firefighters illustrate their experience as “always under a microscope”, “no matter what a female does in my department, it will never be right. The



spotlight is always on. People are constantly looking for you to make a mistake...If you don't make one, they'll make one up for you". Even with processes established to attempt to exclude subjective criteria for advancement, promotions still seem to be a problem for women to achieve. One woman describes her experience as follows: "Mine is a civil service department, still using only a written civil service test as the only criteria for promotion. I can tell you with all certainty that if any subjective form of measurement were used in the promotional process, the powers that be would have found a way around promoting me or any other female. In fact, when I was up for promotion to Captain, the administration went through abolishing a Captain's position to try to insure that the department wouldn't be "ruined" with a female in the mid-management ranks. After 17 years, and a few women passing through the department...I'm the only one still here. God knows why!" It would seem that women still feel that "we have a long way to go before we find equal opportunity in the fire service".

Fire may know no gender, but people do, and it is the fire chief's job to manage people much more often than he or she manages fire (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 1993, p. 4). The ability to implement and manage a diverse workforce is a skill the emergency service officer of the future will need to possess. An open minded, educated officer applying the principles set out in the National Fire Academy's *Executive Leadership* program would be an asset to any fire department. Applying vision & purpose, risk taking, influencing, networking, negotiation and succession planning to men and women alike within the fire service would ensure a truly diverse workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond (National Fire Academy, 2000). Olin Greene (1993) stated "we all benefit from a fire service that is inclusive of women at all levels. USFA is committed to promoting an environment where women and men can work harmoniously and productively together to protect our communities" (FEMA, p. 2).

## Literature Review

The challenge facing the fire service today is not only a commitment to a diverse workforce but to a workforce where diversity itself is valued, encouraged and sought after. A cultural change is required of the fire service; to get people to think and act differently. Irrespective of race, religion, marital status or sex colleagues should be treated with dignity and respect. In order to achieve cultural diversity, a better understanding of what the obstacles are impeding that ideal, must be investigated. A literature review was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What is the origin of gender bias?
2. What barriers exist for women in the fire service?
3. Is the fire service culture supportive to the acceptance and progression of women?
4. How can we change the face of fire service leadership?

### **1. What is the origin of gender bias?**

Weiss (2001) claims that one's development as a human being is announced at birth. Whether male or female, one's gender marks one's entire life from within and without. Although biology and hormones play a definite part in one's sense of gender identity, it is the way we are programmed culturally that matters most. The general reproductive differences in the bodies of girls and boys have not been shown to cause 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviors, although the behaviors that girls and boys are encouraged to perform can make parts of their brains more responsive or cause their motor skills, both fine and gross, to develop along different paths (p. 2).

Sanders (1996) established that, from the moment infants are identified as female or male, the development of a gendered identity begins as they experience familial, societal, and

cultural interactions. It is society's emphasis on gender differences that creates two separate sets of values, beliefs, and assumptions for girls and for boys that restrict opportunities for each sex. By referring to gender values, beliefs, and assumptions as "embedded" we recognize that most gender bias is inadvertent. We all learn to generalize on the basis of sex, and we learn it pre-verbally perhaps even more powerfully than we learn it consciously (p. 15 & 16).

Owens, Smothers & Love (2003) found gender bias in education. Early differences in the treatment of girls and boys can result in enduring learning patterns. After 25 years of research, documentation reveals numerous examples where girls are denied opportunities to excel in the classroom. Girls do not receive as much attention from teachers as boys, and boys are called upon to answer more abstract and complex questions than girls. The sexism is subtle, and the bias very often is unconscious. Girls are rewarded for their conformity to classroom rules by simply being ignored, thus they pay a huge price for their compliance (p. 2).

Weiss (2001) agreed that teachers interact with males more frequently, ask them better questions, and give them more precise and helpful feedback. Girls suffer the cumulative effect of their teachers' uneven distribution of energy, talent, and attention. Discrimination is often not overt. Girls and young women who exhibit fierce independence of thought and action are often considered strident and unfeminine (p. 3).

Norton and Fox (1997) concluded that American organizations are products of American society, reflecting a history that has been dominated by a traditional white-male value system (p. 113). They go on to say that underlying assumptions drive or restrain the behaviors of employees at all levels of the organization. Underlying assumptions are, by definition, implicit rather than explicit. Because they occur at a subconscious level, they often go unstated and consequently unchallenged. They are so automatic and taken for granted by insiders that they

are virtually impossible to identify except by someone who is not part of the culture (p. 102).

The subliminal messaging that occurs to both boys and girls through the educational process is not lost, it becomes reinforced and enhanced.

Cohn (2000) coined “occupational sex-typing” – the tendency for men to work in some jobs and women to work in others (p. 15). The most common explanation for why certain jobs are male and certain jobs are female is that such divisions are traditional. People like interacting with people of their own kind, and this is especially the case when they are nervous about performance and need reassurance that they are doing the right thing (p. 99). However, discrimination comes into play when people of different ascriptive statuses, despite identical qualifications and merit, are treated differently and receive unequal benefits.

Melymuka (2000) stated that the roots of gender discrimination are built into a plethora of work practices, cultural norms and images that appear unbiased, such as definitions of competence and commitment and leadership. Some of these patterns are so subtle that even women affected don't see them. They come up against obstacles and attribute them to their own lack of persistence, misreading of cues, not finding the right style rather than to patterns that affect women and men. Anytime anyone is in the drastic minority, there's a dynamic of being a token. There is pressure to distance themselves from other women to prove they're one of the boys even though that's precisely the time they most need to work with and associate with others like themselves (p. 53).

Mehl's (1990) research explored the process of acceptance – or ultimate rejection of women in the fire service, and the feelings of these women as they invade the world of the professional firefighter. His research found that women are subjected to harsh and unreasonable treatment by their peers, the wives and girlfriends of the male firefighters, and by the general

public, who usually do not understand why these women would want to perform this type of work (p. 1).

## **2. What barriers exist for women in the fire service?**

Grube Farrell (1994) cited that evidence exists that women in male dominated nontraditional/blue collar occupations encounter significant occupational gender bias. They are restricted from the full range of work activities, denied formal and informal opportunities for training. Their presence in such occupations fosters resentment, skepticism, prejudice and various forms of (sexual) harassment, ranging from practical jokes to threats of violence and in some cases actual violence (p. 18). Grube goes on to say that male resistance to gender integration, and the accompanying problems, tends to be particularly acute in occupations with the following characteristics; physical danger and reliance on other workers for safety, working in pairs or small crews; extended periods of low activity when social interaction with peers is high; strong unions; traditions allotting easy jobs at the same rate of pay to older/injured workers; and salaries which are higher than average (p. 18).

Baxandall, Gordon & Reverby (1976) brought to light that during the Second World War women were given access to skilled, higher-paying industrial jobs for the first time. Many women taking these jobs had always worked, but had been previously restricted to lower-paying, unskilled, service jobs. Women responded to these new opportunities with skill, ingenuity, patriotism and resourcefulness, as they became switch women, precision toolmakers, overhead crane operators, lumberjacks, drill press operators & stevedores, demonstrating that women could fill any job, no matter how difficult or arduous. Although the war made rapid changes in women's economic status, it did not make a lasting or profound difference in the public attitude toward women who worked nor did it redefine the sex roles (p. 280 & 281).

Turner (1987) states that in quasi-military organizations such as fire and police departments, the rigidity and conservative nature limits the openness to change needed for acceptance of women. The single constant that deserves recognition for reinforcing the status quo and generating resistance to change is the hierarchical structure (p. 28). This type of organizational structure while believed by some to be highly effective for accomplishing occupational objectives is not conducive to implementing changes like gender integration.

Wood (2002) believes firefighters have a good public profile and are well respected. It is a job which offers a ready-made, traditional type of manhood: the work is physical yet also skilled and does not require formal academic qualifications. It also involves bravery in the face of danger and for this reason firefighters embody the romantic cultural ideal of 'protector' (p. 13). Firefighters encounter a range of situations which require good people skills and an ability to communicate with and comfort individuals in vulnerable situations and yet the focus is on manual and technical skills. The physicality of the job is often over-emphasized and a certain type of physical stature still serves as a template for the 'ideal' firefighter (p. 15).

Williams (1989) discussed the orientation program developed for the introduction of two female firefighters to the Hartford Fire Department. Department personnel were asked to provide reasons why they thought a woman might want to enter the fire service and what problems did they think might arise from women coming into the fire service. The reasons for wanting to enter the fire service were for the most part the same for men and women; benefits, challenge, security, good pay, vacation and sick leave, and family tradition. The general consensus for the problems that might arise were: sexual harassment, facilities/accommodations, physical strength, preferential treatment, language, hazing, reading material, maternity leave, menstruation, mutual attraction, irate spouses (p. 3).

Grube Farrell (1994) concluded that women are able to learn the skills and perform assignments up-to-standard, but drop out because of ostracism, verbal and sexual harassment, social isolation and hostile supervision. This suggests that perhaps the social relations of the workplace setting, more than the occupational tasks, constitute the major barriers women face (p. 2).

### **3. Is the fire service culture supportive to the acceptance and progression of women?**

Wood (2002) defines culture, as a shared set of values and ideologies which are partly 'maintained and created...through day to day interactions with others (p. 11).

Cohn (2000) mentioned that the introduction of women to a male workforce threatens homophile and creates the potential for social disharmony. Men view work as an expression of masculinity, just as home and child care can in some contexts be expressions of femininity (p. 105). Chetkovich (1997) found that men are concerned about preserving all male spaces and privilege in order to sustain 'a cultural ideal of masculinity' (p. 188).

When a woman enters the workplace, talk about sports goes up and not down. Sexual jokes and comments become overt rather than repressed. In some settings, the physicalization of the workplace can begin to approach sexual harassment. Derogatory comments about women or minorities are made publicly and loudly. You either react resulting in avoidance by the group or you accede and play along with the group potentially placing yourself in a subordinate position within the hierarchy (Cohn, 2000 p. 100).

Norton (1997) states organization's go on auto pilot, assuming that the successful strategies of the past will continue in the future. They fail to notice the necessity for changing

their assumptions until it is too late. The longer the history of the traditional organization, the more difficult it is for it to change (p. 106).

Grube Farrell (1994) concluded that the cultural framework suggest that change depends in profound ways on the existing culture. Change challenges the status quo. Organizational members respond to change according to how well the change “fits” with the existing organizational culture. To understand or predict how an organization will behave under different circumstances, therefore, one must know what its patterns of basic assumptions are – its organizational culture (p. 5).

Organizational reality differs for women and men. Unconscious bias in perception and evaluation of women’s work, sex-segregation of occupations and the application of different standards for performance and evaluations have created different organizational realities for women and men. (Haslett, Geis, and Carter, 1992, p. 81)

Women face some obstacles that most men never have to contend with as officers, Such as being treated with disrespect by the public. Having your authority challenged because of stereotypes or prejudices can be demoralizing (FEMA, 1999, p. 54). Women usually lack the access to the informal side of the organization that is open to most men. Women are less likely to be included in hunting or fishing trips, golf outings or socializing after union meetings. In these settings those present can gain tremendous insight into the subtext of an organization. Women often say they never feel like real insiders in the fire service, that they can never truly be “one of the guys.” (FEMA, 1999, p. 56)

Kirchner (1992) believes women are balking at giving up their cultural identity to try and fit the “company mold”. They have a right to maintain their own identity and self-image. By forcing minorities and women to assimilate into the majority culture, the fire service has lost the



insight of different viewpoints and the infusion of new ideas (p. 9). Women's characteristics and behaviors are not evaluated in the same way as men's. Double standards exist: autocratic behavior exhibited by men is considered positive, whereas women behaving autocratically are considered negatively.

Norton (1997) the stumbling blocks to the advancement of women within the organization in this country continue to include stereotyping regarding suitability for leadership positions, exclusions from informal networks that help advancement, lack of development plans for female employees, lack of good career planning, unrealistic fears of placing women in line positions, inflexibility regarding work schedule ... and a failure to hold managers accountable for developing and advancing women (p. 42).

Men have been conditioned to view women as mothers and spouses rather than executive peers or potential protégés. Males in the workplace may associate good job performance by females with a temporary state of extra effort, as opposed to ability and competence. Given the rarity of women in the management structure, thus highly visible, their failures may receive more attention than those of their male counterparts.

In quasi military organizations such as fire and police departments, rank is important and explicit – information flows up and orders flow down. Role requirements over-shadow any individual characteristics or predispositions strictly, and new entrants have the least stature and power. This is particularly true of women who are disproportionately located at the bottom of the hierarchy due to their recent entry and difficulty in advancement (Grube, 1994, p. 20 ).

Herfetz & Linsky (2002) believe power can be a potent aphrodisiac and source of attraction for women just as it is for men. But due to gender norms in our culture, women often feel more threatened than men as they rise to positions of authority (p. 181).

A failure to promote a woman because someone in the fire department doesn't want women to be officers; or as a refusal to train women properly; or consider them for special assignments; is discrimination. Often it is as subtle as giving women evaluations that are just never quite as good as men's (FEMA, 1999, p. 29). Norton (1997) discovered that women in the United States are not promoted equally given the same experience and level of job performance (p. 40). Team building, open communications about the problem, training, and loyalty that is earned will do much to ease the transition for the women officer.

#### **4. How can we change the face of fire service leadership?**

In a world in which organizations are highly dependent on the ingenuity and commitment of their workers, leaders must be skilled at identifying and removing barriers that hinder the full development of each worker's potential. They must learn to look for and dismantle both internal and external barriers as well as those that are rooted in ideology and custom (Norton, 1997, p. 231).

Weiss (2001) reminds us that there's no point in blaming those who expect the world to continue as it has been in the past, but we shouldn't let anyone off the hook either, including ourselves. We must continually remind ourselves that the world is changing and [that] women and men no longer can be depended upon to stay in the narrowly prescribed roles [they have been] consigned to in the past. It seems obvious that when the gender-bias patterns are changed, no matter how long it takes; women and men will be better able to reach their full potential as equally contributing members of society (p. 4).

It will take a concerted effort on behalf of men and women to effectively eliminate gender bias and truly have equity in our society. Owens, Smothers & Love (2003) believe that achieving equity will require more than gender-balanced textbooks and gender-fair teaching

practices. The traditional curricula should be transformed to include the contributions, experiences, and scholarship of women. The lack of women in leadership positions did not create a positive image for girls. Girls need female role models as mentors and opportunities to interact with women in the community who work in technical and nontraditional fields. Parents need to become aware of the impact of the culture and empower their daughters with their support and active involvement. A more conscious approach to exposing both male and female children to like activities, encourage children alike when trying new activities, provide girls with puzzles, building blocks, and teach them to use common household tools as prerequisite skills needed for science. To understand the position of girls and women in education requires an understanding of changing structures and complex processes and a commitment to breaking down the barriers which continue to result in female disadvantage (p. 4).

Positive leadership in workforce diversity means working to build a fire service culture where all employees can function productively together. Weak leadership and a superficial commitment to diversity can mean reduced respect for the fire department in the community. Kossek & Lobel (1996) believe that diversity strategy involves not only a clear statement of strategic intent, but also incorporating diversity management in all functional areas and activities throughout the organization. “Unless an organization develops a culture that understands, respects and values differences, diversity is likely to result in decreased organizational effectiveness” (p. 369).

Thomas, Jr. (1991) stated that in the context of managing diversity, the issue is not whether this system is maximally efficient but whether it works for all employees. Executives who sponsor only people like themselves are not making a contribution toward managing

diversity (p. 59). One good way to ensure more women executive officers are represented in your fire department is, well, to have a lot of women firefighters to begin with.

Formal and informal mentoring relationships are an excellent means of gaining insights. The best mentoring occurs informally, but women and minorities do not have the same access to informal mentoring that white male's do. It's easier to form a relationship with people who are like you than not like you. Zey (1984) believes that by selecting a woman as a protégé, a senior manager bestows de facto legitimacy on her. Since mentoring represents senior management's public commitment to the junior member, this brings the organization closer to the acceptance of women as bona fide members of its managerial power structure (p. 453).

Kossek & Lobel (1996) found that:

- women seem to be more effective in learning from mentoring and other relationships,
- women utilize their mentors more effectively than men,
- women leaders were significantly more likely than men to use learning's from other people as key development events,
- women learn more from reflection and self-assessment,
- women are more aware of their identity in the workplace and better able to utilize help from relationships for development (p. 121).

In the absence of effective mentoring, female employees' quests for power and achievement may become stymied, resulting in demotivation for acquiring management skills, and extend to the decline of skills and performance in their present positions (Noe, 1988).

Women should seek out and take advantage of all the training they can get, both within their department and from outside sources. Wood (2002) found that half of the women interviewed in her study were degree educated whereas none of the men had been to University. Female firefighters tend to be better educated than their male counterparts. (p. 15) Teaching is often the highest form of learning, women who choose to help others in this way may find they are the ones who gain the most from the relationship. (FEMA, 1999, p. 58) Skill sharing

undoubtedly strengthens group cohesion by forging bonds between the firefighters, thereby increasing credibility and trust.

In business, information does not come from a library; it comes from people. If one does not have a wide ranging network and receive input from lots of different people, one is at danger of being blindsided by new organizational developments. Become involved with a smaller number of co-workers and use that as a springboard to enhance work relationships. An individual acting alone has less chance of being heard than those acting together. Cohn (2000) encouraged joint support allowing for comparisons for what works and what doesn't; joint support also allows for a "safe place" where workers can relax and be frank without having to manage more fragile intergroup relationships (p. 100, 103). Networking provides women with an opportunity to see others like themselves, women who have faced the struggle and have achieved the rank of fire officer.

In summary, all of the literature supports that gender bias is established at a very early age, is reinforced through our educational system and significantly impacts our employment choices and accepted diversity within our employment arenas.

### **Procedures**

Descriptive research was employed to determine if there were any recommendations forthwith that would minimize or eliminate altogether the barriers impeding women's advancement in the fire service. A survey was developed and distributed to women currently working within the fire service to obtain their personal experiences regarding gender bias. A literature review at the National Fire Academy, two local college libraries and on-line through the Internet provided resources to texts, journal articles, and research studies that had been previously written on gender bias issues.

A fifteen question survey was developed to ascertain the current status and impression of gender bias issues affecting women in the fire service. The survey, Appendix A, sought to identify specific demographics of the respondents as well as their experiences with gender bias. In order to better facilitate the ease of access to the survey and ensure the anonymity of the respondents the survey was placed on an online survey service, "Advanced Survey". A letter of instruction, Appendix B, was developed directing the interested parties to the web site to respond to the survey. As an attachment to an email the instruction letter was then distributed to approximately twenty Executive Fire Officer course participants, professional associates and other female firefighters in the local geographic area. All recipients of the email were encouraged to participate in the survey if applicable or forward to women currently in the fire service. Six email respondents confirmed that their organizations did not have women within their services, however they would forward to women in their geographic vicinity. In addition to the email, letters of instruction were mailed to women graduates of the Executive Fire Officer Program. Of the 32 letters sent three were returned as undeliverable.

The literature search at the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy resulted in finding a dissertation specific to gender integration of the FDNY firefighting force. Another more recent dissertation on mentoring practices and their impact on career outcomes of Chief Executive Fire Officers provided a substantial resource to applicable references. The reference list from both of the dissertations provided a substantial base of resources and numerous articles and studies related to gender bias issues. A computerized search of EBSCO Host Research Databases provided numerous hits using key words of "gender bias", "discrimination", and "sex discrimination". A few publications referred to previous research that

had been conducted on gender bias and attempts were made to review the original document if it was available.

The literature research was employed to answer the following questions:

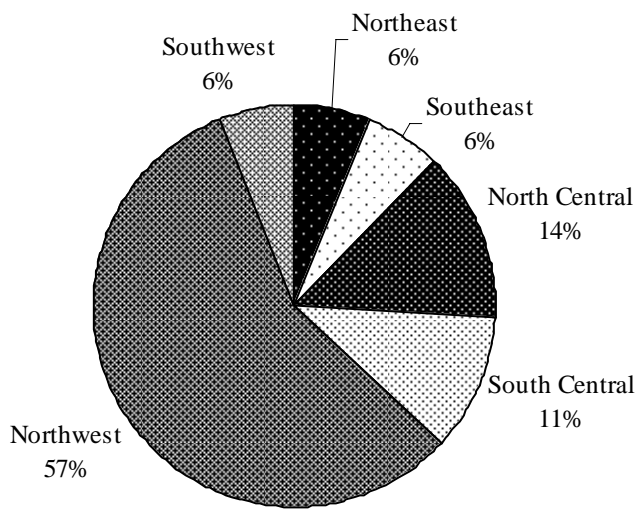
1. What is the origin of gender bias?
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Limitations to the findings and conclusions drawn from the data analysis may be affected by the potential of males responding to the survey and respondents taking the survey more than once. It could be argued that the conclusions drawn may not be representative of all women in the fire service due to the small percentage actually surveyed.

### **Results**

A total of 82 individuals responded to the survey entitled “Gender Bias in the Fire Service”. The preponderance of the responders, 57%, resided in the Northwest part of the country. However every geographic location of the country was represented by at least five respondents. The North Central and South Central part of the United States represented almost 25% of the women responding. Figure 1 represents the geographic location of the women responding to the online survey.

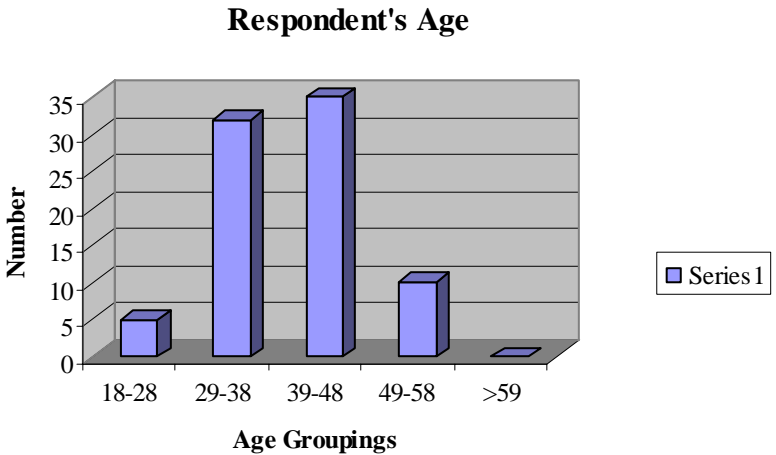
**Figure 1: Geographic Location of Respondents**



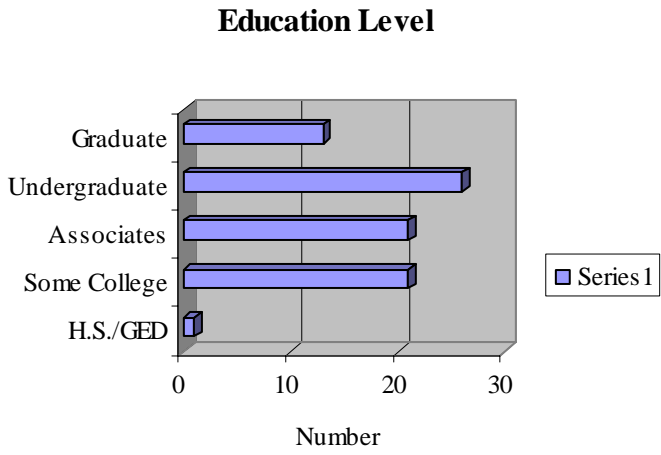
Approximately 55% of those responding were 39 years of age or older. No one was over 59 years of age. Figure 2 graphically displays the age groupings of all respondents. It would seem that women choosing to enter the fire service are preparing themselves not only physically but mentally as well. Out of the 82 individuals responding to the survey only one had not received any college education. 73% had at least a two year Associates degree and 48% had a 4 year degree or better. Figure 3 indicates the educational level of the women responding to the survey.



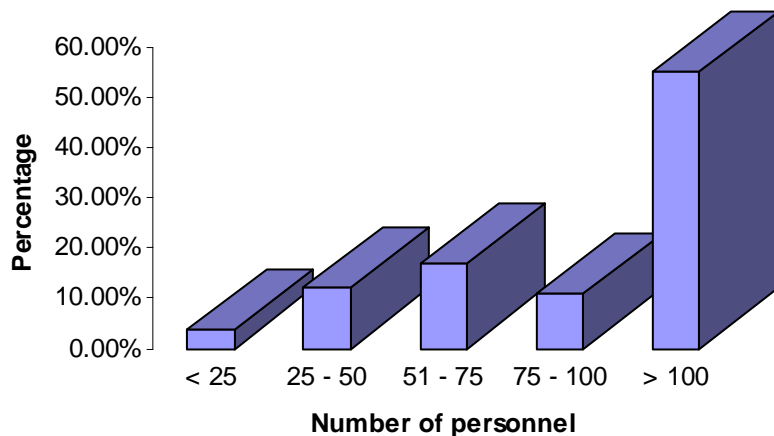
**Figure 2: Respondents by Age Group**



**Figure 3: Education Level of Respondents**

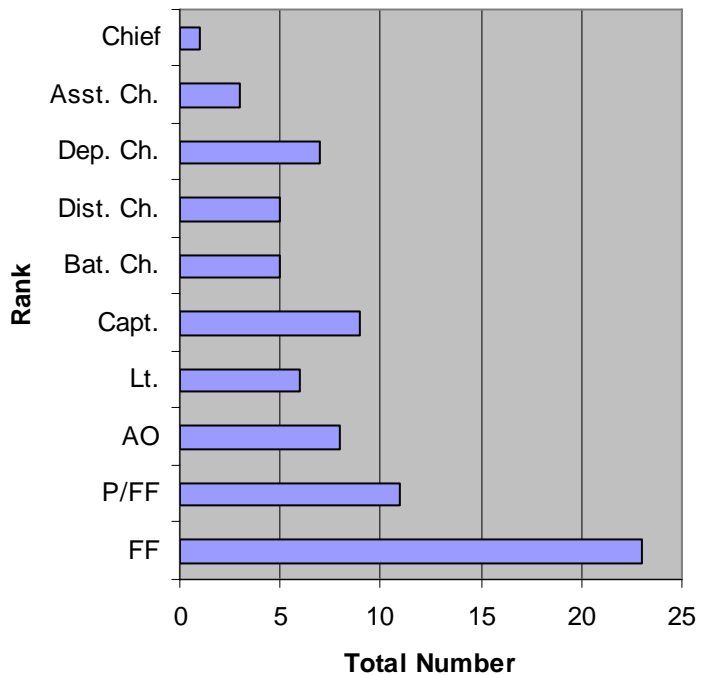


In order to differentiate whether the phenomenon of gender bias was limited to career departments, each person was asked to identify the type of organization she represented. Over 65% percent of the women were employed with a career fire department, 27% by a combination department and only five women considered themselves volunteers. 55 percent were from organizations with greater than 100 employees. The total number of personnel in the organizations is represented in Figure 4.

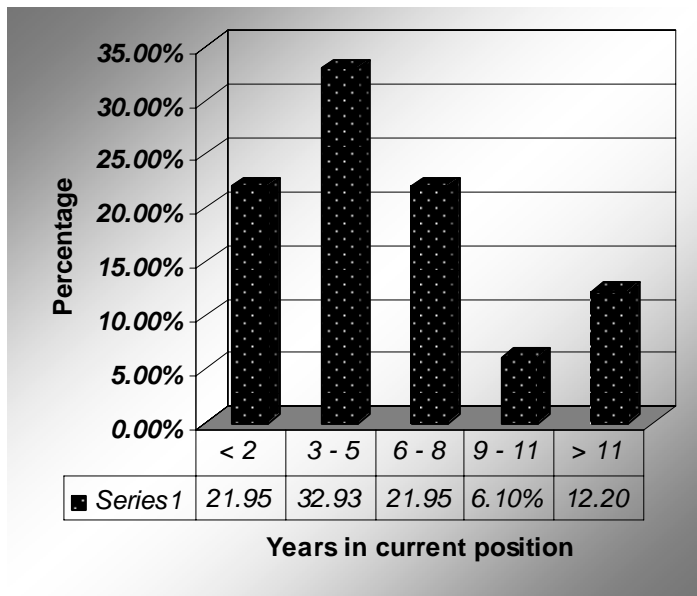
**Figure 4: Number of Personnel in Your Organization**

Seventy-eight women identified their current rank in their organization, of which only 36.6% were above the rank of Captain. Figure 5 indicates the positions represented by the women responding to the survey. Figure 6 depicts the length of time the women had spent in their current position. Of the women responding to the survey almost 61% had over 11 years of experience in the fire service, and almost 20% had over 21 years experience. 55% of the women had less than five years experience in their current position and 12.2% had been in their current position for 11 years or longer.

**Figure 5: Current Rank**



**Figure 6: Length of Employment in Current Position**



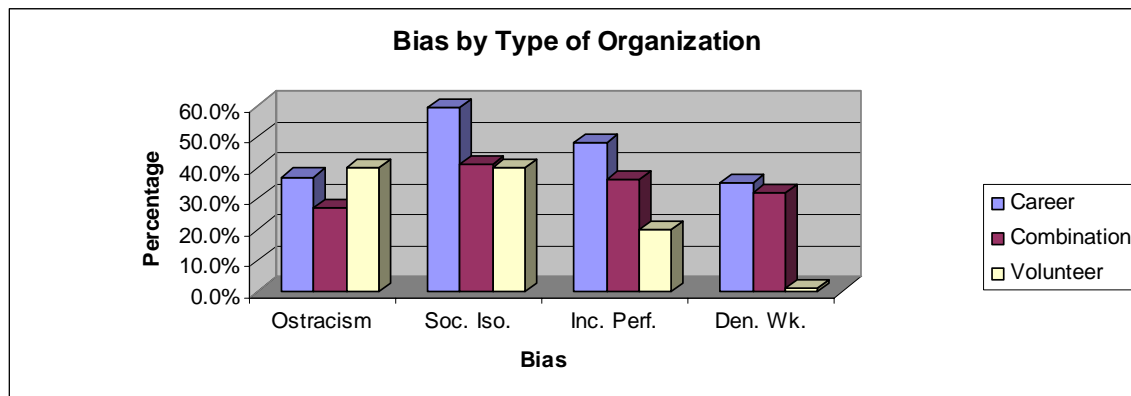
The most amazing finding from the survey was the percentage of women who have experienced gender bias during their career. Question 14 of the survey asked the women if they had ever experienced any of the eleven different mentioned categories of bias sometime during

their career. Information provided in the “other” category indicated in many cases that, even today, most are still experiencing gender bias in the work place. In order to better facilitate the graphic displays portraying gender bias, an abbreviated format of each bias was necessary to label each graph. Table 1 is an explanation of the abbreviations utilized for each of the specific biases mentioned in the following graphic displays.

**Table 1: Bias abbreviations**

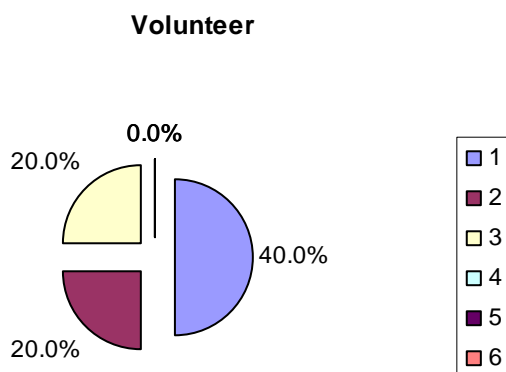
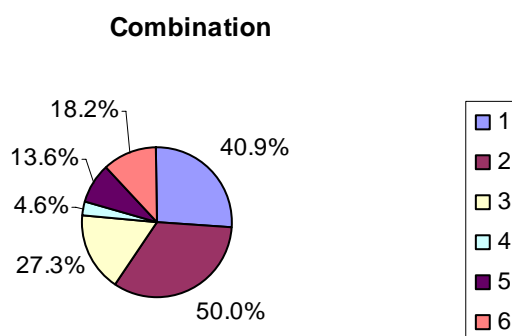
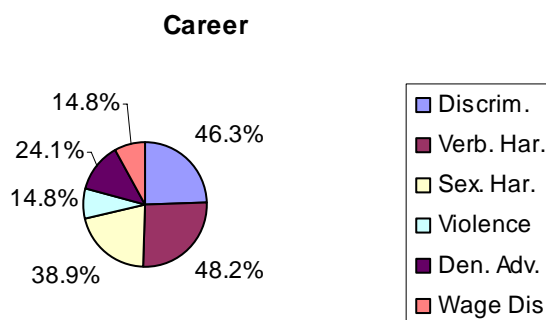
Den. Adv.	Denied Opportunities for Advancement Training
Den. Wk.	Denied Certain Work Assignments
Discrim.	Discrimination
Inc. Perf.	Increased Performance Expectations
Ostracism	Ostracism
Sex. Har.	Sexual Harassment
Soc. Iso.	Social Isolation
Verb. Har.	Verbal Harassment
Violence	Threats of Violence
Wage Dis.	Wage Discrepancies

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the percentage of responses in the various categories by type of organization. Figure 7 focuses by type of organization the specific biases of ostracism, social isolation, increased performance expectations and denied certain work assignments. Figure 8 illustrates the remaining listed biases. One would expect that the volunteer group might experience less bias than a career or combination department, because they are giving of their time freely and not in competition for the employment. However it seems to make little difference when it comes to being ostracized, experiencing social isolation or outright discrimination, the numbers are similar. Women may be able to enter the field of firefighting but truly are not seen as “one of the guys”.

**Figure 7: Biases by Type of Organization**

Ostracism, social isolation and discriminate activities can be perceived differently by different individuals. One woman may believe she has never experienced any bias in her career; “I don’t feel that I have ever faced any of these [bias]”, or “if there has been any increased performance expectations they haven’t been verbalized...and I haven’t been ‘drilled into the ground’ with expectations of having to defend my abilities after the first six months or so of proving myself”. Whereas others have been “required to perform a more difficult physical agility test than any other FF ever hired by the department”, “being singled out to receive ‘extra’ training”, “being passed over for promotion for a man with little qualifications”, “sometimes it seems there was a double standard as far as strength and task completions”, or “guys just act differently around me when I am in their presence”. The type of organization a woman represents seems to matter little when it comes to feeling ostracized, isolated or experiencing any one of the other forms of harassment or discrimination.

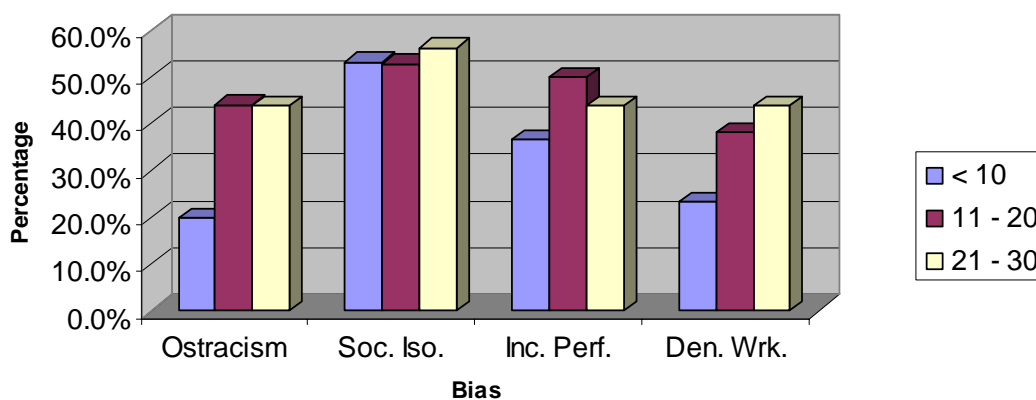
**Figure 8: Remaining Biases by Type of Organization**

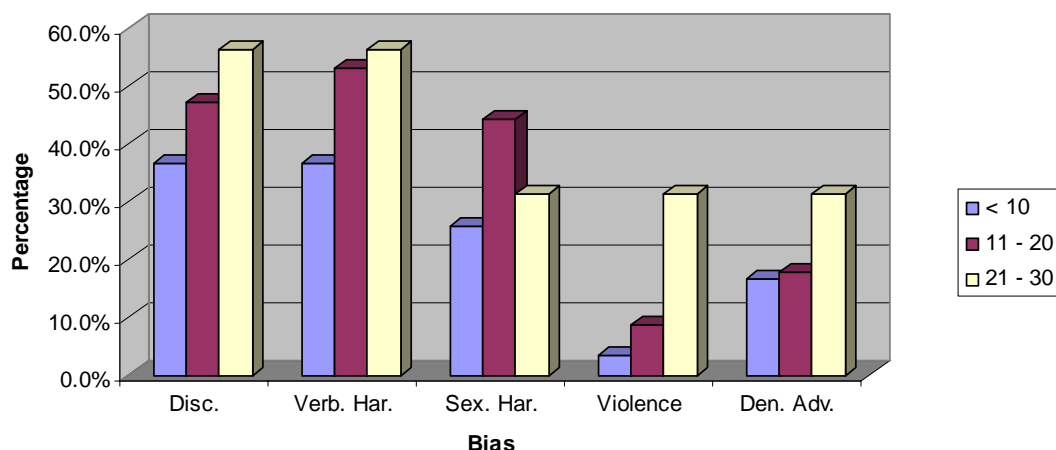


. Time in grade seems to make a slight difference as to the perception of experiencing bias; or perhaps we just get used to it. “Early on in my career I felt more like I was under the microscope, but after proving that I was capable of doing the job, I am treated just like one of the guys”. “As always, discrimination has sometimes been of the grey-area variety – hard to discern”. One woman summed up her experiences with acknowledging that “my career has been

very good. I've had ups and downs in my career just as everyone usually does but for the most part I've been able to achieve everything that I have gone after. I don't think I could have chosen a career that I could have excelled in like the one I have. I would agree that there are things that need to be changed and everything that happens is not right. We need to have some focus placed on cultural differences. Bias in the fire service is not limited to gender". Are women entering the fire service today being treated any differently then their sisters of 20 years ago? It would seem by the review of Figures 9 & 10 that women with less than ten years on the job are experiencing slightly less in just about every category. A closer look indicates that in every case bias still exists.

**Figure 9: Bias Experienced by Number of Years in Fire Service**



**Figure 10: Remaining Biases by Number of Years in Fire Service**

### Discussion

It is evident that gender bias does exist in our workplaces and in our society. The prevalence of bias is pervasive and a reality for the women entering and currently employed in the fire service. As one woman respondent so aptly noted her personal experience “being a woman I will never be one of the guys, I work well along side of them but I do not share all their hobbies off duty so there is little isolation. I have been involved in two separate sexual harassment situations. Both complaints initiated from another member of the department. They were supposedly looking out for me, however in both situations the actions were totally unoffensive [inoffensive] to me. I feel all women who join the fire service are out to the test and pushed just a little more than the guys. They want to make sure you are physically fit enough to perform the job. I found once I proved myself physically I felt like the performance expectations were similar to those the men seemed to have to meet also”. Women have demonstrated their abilities in performance of the tasks of firefighting and have aptly served their communities well as public servants, so why is it still an upward battle and a struggle for acceptance? Recognizing that the road to equality was a difficult one legislation was necessary to even get the ball rolling. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination as it relates to wages, fringe



benefits, assignments or promotions, use of facilities, or training (Pettman, 1977, p. 46). Despite this legislation even today women are experiencing discrimination, unequal pay, denied opportunities for special training, and singled out for increased skill testing and promotional opportunities held to a minimum.

In the span of twenty-five years the population of women in the fire service has increased to only 3% (U.S. Census, 2002). Women have chosen to enter the fire service knowing that their road to success would be tumultuous, but so worth it. Many have experienced a road riddled with “mobbing, intentional defamation of character, hostile environment”, required to perform a more difficult physical agility test than any other FF ever hired by the department”, or having “photos overused in publications especially those for the commissioners and the general public”. Others have accepted their lot and believe that they have experienced no bias toward them at all. “As younger men and women enter the service, it’s a given there will be both sexes, it’s not a man’s club anymore; and it’s accepted. As long as the women can pull their own weight, there’s no question as to whether they should be there or not. It’s come a long way in the past 20 years and I think it will only improve as time goes on”. Melymuka (2000) stated that the roots of gender discrimination are built into a plethora of work practices, cultural norms and images that appear unbiased. Some of these patterns are so subtle that even women affected don’t see them (p. 53). These same women who believe they have never experienced any bias may have fallen victim to Melymuka’s principle.

Since the day of our birth our parents, grandparents, and siblings have patterned our life responses to meet societal norms. Women have been given dolls and little miniature houses and cook sets to replicate the role of the women in society, as a wife and mother. Little boys were trained to be the soldier, the home builder, the race car driver, the little man that never cried and

was the king of the mountain. Our educational systems perpetuated this societal placement of the genders; allowing the boys to be active contributors to complex problem solving and the girls to sit back and be complacent little angels. “It seems that the majority of male firefighters still believe the world should adjust to who they are and how they behave as firefighters rather than learning how to behave appropriately in today’s world of diversity”. The limitations placed on women and the subtleties of supposed unacceptable behaviors displayed by women, did well in making women feel that they were inadequate, insecure, and incompetent. Grube Farrell (1994) concluded that women are able to learn the skills and perform assignments up-to-standard, but drop out because of ostracism, verbal and sexual harassment, social isolation and hostile supervision (p. 2).

Have women experienced less difficulty being accepted in the fire service since the first seminar on women in the fire service was conducted in 1979? Not really! The number of women entering the fire service within the last 10 years has not significantly increased, still remaining at approximately 3%. Of those that do venture into the fire service over 53% experience social isolation from their fellow firefighters, and 37% experience verbal harassment, discrimination and increased performance expectations. Twenty years ago 56% of women in the fire service were experiencing social isolation, discrimination, verbal harassment and 44% experienced ostracism, increased performance expectations and denial of certain work assignments. Not a significant decline, however a decline none-the-less.

A more recent challenge for many women that have been in the fire service for a number of years, who have already proved they are competent in performing the skills necessary to be a firefighter, is the issue of promotion. The proving ground is open up to challenge again. Women face obstacles that most men never have to contend with as officers, like having their authority

challenged because of stereotypes or prejudices and being treated with disrespect by the public. Women face an up hill battle in acquiring the necessary training to promote and find themselves not amongst the “insiders”, again not “one of the guys”. The gender norms in our culture continually remind women that they are of the minority with more obstacles in their midst as they rise to positions of authority.

Weiss (2001) reminds us that there’s no point in blaming those who expect the world to continue as it has been in the past. Conversely we shouldn’t let anyone off the hook either, including ourselves. When the gender-bias patterns are changed, no matter how long it takes; women and men will be better able to reach their full potential as equally contributing members of society

(p. 4). It will take a concerted effort to eliminate gender bias, to construct an environment where men and women can function productively together, and a culture that understands, respects and values diversity. The leaders of our organizations must lead by example and actually walk-the-talk. Management must take the initiative to change their own attitudes and behaviors first in order to redesign policy and provide the education that will implement change throughout the organization. They must be willing to take the unpopular stance, make a commitment to diversity, and hold subordinates accountable to any and all forms of discriminate behavior.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the data analysis and literature review the following strategies are recommended for fire service leadership:

1. Communicate a clear statement of values and a commitment to diversity.
2. Develop leadership behaviors and management styles demonstrating commitment to diversity.
3. Develop mentorship programs and create role modeling opportunities.
4. Develop support networks for women and minorities within the fire service.
5. Extend positive diversity role-modeling actually walk the talk. out into the community.

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## Appendix A

### Gender Bias in the Fire Service

1. Your age:
  - 18-28
  - 29-38
  - 39-48
  - 49-58
  - 59 or older
  
2. Your race:
  - Caucasian
  - African-American
  - Hispanic
  - Asian
  - Other
  
3. Your highest level of education:
  - High school diploma or GED
  - Some college
  - Associates 2-year degree
  - Undergraduate 4-year degree
  - Graduate degree
  
4. Your geographic location:
  - Northeast
  - Southeast
  - North Central
  - South Central
  - Northwest
  - Southwest
  
5. What type of department is your organization:
  - Career
  - Volunteer
  - Combination
  
6. Number of personnel in your organization:
  - < 25
  - 25-50
  - 50-75
  - 75-100
  - > 100
  
7. Number of women assigned to emergency response:



- < 2
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- >20

## 8. Your current assignment:

- Emergency response
- Administration
- Prevention
- Training

## 9. Total years of fire service experience:

- <10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- >31

## 10. Number of promotions since joining the fire service:

- <2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- >7

## 11. Frequency of promotions: (on average)

- 18-24 months
- 25-36 months
- 37-48 months
- > 49 months

## 12. Current rank:

- Firefighter
- Paramedic/Firefighter
- Apparatus Operator
- Lieutenant
- Captain
- Battalion Chief
- District Chief
- Deputy Chief
- Assistant Chief
- Chief

## 13. Length of employment in current position:

- 2 years or less
- 3-5 years

- 6-8 years
- 9-11 years
- 11 years or longer

14. During your career have you experienced: (check all that apply)

- Ostracism
- Social isolation
- Discrimination
- Verbal harassment
- Sexual harassment
- Threats of violence
- Increased performance expectations
- Denied certain work assignments
- Denied opportunities for advancement training
- Other (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_

15. Please provide any additional comments you might find beneficial.

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## Appendix B

TO: Women in Fire Service

FROM: Denise A. Giard, EMS Chief

SUBJECT: Survey on Gender Bias in the Fire Service

I am gathering information for my final Applied Research Project (ARP), in the Executive Fire Officer Program with the National Fire Academy. The topic I wish to research is whether gender bias in the fire service is impacting promotional opportunities for women. Your participation and response to the survey by August 18, 2003 would be greatly appreciated.

In order to facilitate confidentiality of the responders I have established an account with an online survey service. Your responses will be entered and tabulated by Advanced Survey.

### **Instructions to participate:**

Please go online to: <http://www.AdvancedSurvey.com>  
Go directly to the "Take a Survey" box – type in **6650**.

Thank you for assisting me with this endeavor. If you know other women who might be willing to participate in this survey, please forward the information to them. If you have any questions or have additional information that might assist my research, please email me at [dgiard@ci.albany.or.us](mailto:dgiard@ci.albany.or.us) or call (541) 917-7705.