

**Submission
No 100**

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Organisation: Women and Firefighting Australasia

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Women and Firefighting Australasia Inc. (Wafa) presents the following submission to the NSW Government Portfolio Committee No. 4 - Legal Affairs inquiry into and report on emergency services agencies.

Wafa is a unique organisation established to promote equity across the emergency services sector within Australasia to empower all women to embrace their strengths. In collaboration with individuals, communities and emergency services, we build confidence and empower women to achieve their full potential and be supported, as women, in their roles within our sector.

As such, please see our responses to the below items 1 a-f:

a) the prevalence of bullying, harassment and discrimination, as well as the effectiveness of the protocols and procedures in place to manage and resolve such complaints within emergency services agencies, including:

- New South Wales Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS)
- Fire and Rescue New South Wales (FRNSW)
- New South Wales Police Force
- Ambulance Service of New South Wales
- New South Wales State Emergency Service

While we have members within the NSW SES and the Ambulance Service of NSW, our primary NSW member base is within NSW RFS and FRNSW. These agencies have a different cultural approach i.e. volunteer vs career and different levels of female membership. From within that membership we continue to hear stories of women still feeling the need to cover, to not fully be themselves in order to fit in with the current male-dominated culture. Anecdotally we hear stories of women in operational roles being bullied, harassed, excluded, and less respected on the fire ground. Some members describe a culture where they feel they have to perform over and above, in order to be measured as equals. In a similar vein there also positive and inspiring stories of women successfully traversing the ranks.

It is important to note that Wafa also has members from within the Forestry Corporation of NSW, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, and Airservices Australia, each of which have emergency response and/or firefighting responsibilities, and are likely to also encounter similar experiences in relation to the prevalence of bullying, harassment and discrimination. To some extent, such negative experiences and even positive ones, may be more difficult to identify and understand due to the fact their firefighting responsibilities are hidden within other business operations.

FRNSW has recently (2016) begun to undertake parity recruitment and implement employment strategies to increase female employment within uniform firefighters. Wafa welcomes this. What has been disappointing is the circulation of a petition calling for a review policy, initiated by a male firefighter (and signed by both male and some female firefighters), challenging whether females are being appropriately recruited to career roles. The FRNSW leadership has made it abundantly clear that no standards are being diminished in order to increase female employment. This petition epitomises an underlying, dominating, male-centric culture.

Furthermore, each year when recruitment is announced the FRNSW Facebook page is awash with misogynistic and racist comments, unfortunately some made by currently employed FRNSW firefighters. This can be very discouraging to prospective female candidates considering a career with FRNSW. One

might wonder what they may experience upon employment.

Culturally the NSW RFS volunteer membership is dissimilar to its counterpart NSW career agency, notwithstanding that parallels can be drawn in many areas. 22% of NSW RFS volunteers are female. This represents the largest female workforce in any fire service across Australasia. Conversely the number of females in leadership roles is disappointing and lacks parity as a percentage of the overall membership. Anecdotally, Wafa understands some of the reasons for this to be an unwillingness to step up, lack of support and confidence and inhibited opportunities to gain qualifications. Others indicate it is not their desired path and that can be reflected across both male and female membership. Members also report a general culture of unconscious bias which flows through many aspects including day-to-day discussions. Many struggle to achieve a work-life balance with employment, family and volunteering given that they feel they must go above and beyond to prove themselves as equal to their male counterparts.

The NSW RFS leadership has acknowledged these issues and over the last few years has introduced strategies, one being the Next Generation Workforce Plan. This plan articulates specific deliverables around gender equity, inclusion and equal opportunity. Other initiatives include code of conduct training for volunteers and the promotion of a respectful and inclusive workplace policy. Wafa welcomes these plans and initiatives.

Although Wafa has confidence that the senior leadership in both agencies is actively working to change the culture, whilst advocating for inclusion and diversity, the pace of change, particularly for long enshrined cultural behaviour, can take some time. Wafa feels it is unlikely that significant change will be seen until a balance in the leadership gender is achieved. Wafa acknowledges that given the environment of equal opportunity and organisational parity many of our membership will achieve leadership functions through their own volition and commitment to professional development.

b) the support structures in place to assist victims of workplace bullying, harassment and/ or discrimination within emergency services agencies,

Both NSW RFS and FRNSW have support structures in place to assist victims, including Professional Standards, Employee and Volunteer Assistance Lines and FRNSW also has a recently established women-specific network group. These services are of a high standard and are available at no cost to all staff and volunteers across the state. The women's network group has already proven successful with implementing changes such as the inclusion of sanitary bins in each fire station, and is making inroads with other issues.

With regards to the other services offered, what remains in question, however, is whether appropriate resolution is achieved through the use of these services given the confidential nature of the interaction. Wafa respects the confidentiality delivered by any interaction with these services however is unsure of the utilisation rates, what barriers exist and whether they are actual or perceived.

Fire services universally can be constrained in their ability to deal with issues of bullying, harassment and discrimination appropriately due to a range of circumstances. These have been reported as a lack of procedures for reprimand sometimes related to the remoteness of the incident, a culture of silence, covering, "looking after mates" and the fear of subsequent bullying and discrimination that can follow whistleblowing. Furthermore, we hear stories from members of bullies and discriminators receiving no more than a slap on the wrist due to internal cultural norms and a lack of understanding or full knowledge of the depth and impact of the bullying.

c) the support services available to emergency services workers and volunteers to assist with mental health issues resulting from workplace trauma and the effectiveness of those programs

Both NSW RFS and FRNSW have Critical Incident Support Services available to all staff and volunteers at no cost. These programs are well established and respected across emergency services nationally

and include the ability to refer to mental health professionals as required. Wafa acknowledges the quality, timeliness and professional nature of these services which, given the impactful and often confronting nature of the work we undertake, are regularly provided to our membership.

d) the appropriateness of uniforms provided to personnel in emergency services agencies

Wafa understands this question to relate to the Personal Protective Clothing (PPC) provided to fire fighters to undertake the various operational duties. The current PPC issued to fire fighters within the two fire services currently meets the relevant Australian Standards for the roles undertaken. It is noted however that until recently both agencies provided a PPC product based on a unisex standard tailored for men.

FRNSW has recently provided all female firefighters with female specific uniforms, tailored and cut to fit women. It has been a big improvement with very positive feedback from female firefighters.

NSW RFS announced some two years ago their intent to deliver what they describe as their next generation PPC and that this would include both male and female specific sizing. As part of the change process piloting and test groups were targeted to provide feedback with test group membership reflective of the NSW RFS female membership percentages. Wafa was pleased that a number of our members within the NSW RFS were included as trial participants. Positive and constructive feedback was received from these members indicating the significant difference it has made whilst undertaking their operational duties.

Wafa acknowledges the efforts of both fire services to ensure the protective uniforms supplied to firefighters address a long outstanding need for female specific sizing.

e) the relocation of the New South Wales Rural Fire Services Headquarters to Orange, Dubbo or Parkes

Wafa is not currently in a position to comment specifically on item e.

f) any other related matter.

A recent Wafa (2015) researched Gender Balance Overview including Australian and New Zealand fire services, indicated that on average less than 3.5% of career firefighters and just over 20% of volunteer firefighters are female, with less than 1% of these women in leadership roles. These numbers are significantly lower than what is reported across other emergency services such as NSW Police, Ambulance NSW and organisations such as the Australian Defence Force. Acknowledging that since 2015 there have been moves from several fire services across Australasia to increase the recruitment of women, to date the numbers have not significantly increased.

Both FRNSW and NSW RFS currently each have a single ranked female Assistant Commissioner. The NSW RFS female Assistant Commissioner was able to progress through the ranks, whilst the highest internally promoted female firefighter within FRNSW holds the rank of Acting Inspector. The FRNSW female Assistant Commissioner transferred from Juvenile Justice.

Although this difference may not seem important, what it does highlight is that there is a significant disparity in the number of females who have progressed through the ranks to be internally promoted, with the vast majority of current, senior ranked males having progressed internally from recruit firefighters to senior management. This may be due to many reasons ranging from unconscious bias, to “boys club” support, limitation on promotion due to individuals caring responsibilities, or time taken off work due to maternity arrangements.

Wafa also acknowledges that both services have specific requirements for promotion, including an example of this FRNSW having a set time of duration held at each rank prior to promotion, should an applicant be successful. This has been further complicated by the low numbers of females recruited throughout the 1980s-2000s, meaning the majority of women have not as yet been employed long enough to have progressed internally through the ranks.

Wafa welcomes and acknowledges the incremental changes in fire service policy such as the focus to increase female recruitment, gender equity, diversity, inclusiveness and the promotion of women into leadership roles. As described throughout the paper the cultural change model, whilst commenced, has some

distance to go. Given the unique political environment outlined within, now, more than ever, female firefighters require increased support structures to be put in place to empower them to deliver and achieve their full potential.

