

2016/04: Women firefighters: should targets be set to foster increased female recruitment into firefighting services?

What they said...

'A reasonable amount of fitness and strength are necessary, but what is really important is an ability to think outside the box, learn quickly and take a very proactive approach to your work'

New South Wales firefighter, Peta Doyle

'Firefighting is a job which demands physical, intellectual and psychological rigour ... of course, we want a fire service that reflects contemporary Australia, but not at the cost of standards and community safety'

Victorian firefighter, Louisa Cannon

The issue at a glance

On March 10, 2016, the United Firefighters' Union (UFU) applied for a Federal Court injunction to stop the Melbourne Fire Brigade's attempt to attract more female recruits.

The Melbourne Fire Brigade (MFB) is seeking to increase the representation of women in its ranks from 3.4 to 5 per cent. This is part of the MFB's diversity strategy which also seeks to extend the range of ethnic groups included within the Brigade.

The UFU has written to the MFB indicating that this diversity strategy breaches the current Operational Staff Agreement as the UFU has not been consulted about it.

Peter Marshall, the secretary of the UFU has stated, 'The MFB wants to lower the standard for new firefighters, and to scrap the "order of merit" which ranks applicants in order of ability.'

Jim Higgins, the chief executive of the MFB has stated, 'We are seeking to increase diversity at MFB because it is proven to improve innovation, problem solving and decision-making and to ensure that we are equipped to deliver the best public safety outcomes for the communities we serve.'

Background

(The information below is an abbreviated version of the Wikipedia entry 'Women in firefighting'. The full text of this entry can be accessed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_firefighting)

Women in firefighting

Firefighting was formerly an all-male profession. While it is dominated by men in both professional and volunteer contexts today, there are women who fight fire alongside their male counterparts.

History and current situation in different countries

Austria

A female fire brigade was formed in 1912 with an initial recruitment of 60 women. In more recent times, women were admitted to volunteer fire brigades in 1978 and as professionals in 1993.

Germany

Volunteer female firefighters worked in Berlin and Breslau, during World War I, but ceased at the end of the war. Women were again recruited during World War II, especially as drivers, continuing until 1955, when they had all been replaced by men. In the GDR, women were extensively used in support roles, but not as front-line firefighters. Women really began to take on all roles in the 1980s. Female professional firefighters now number about 550 (1.3%), and there are 80,000 volunteers (7%).

Norway

Norway got the first documented female firefighters during the 1980s. In 2011, 3.7% of the Norwegian firefighters were women.

Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Fire service started recruiting women for control and ambulance staff in the 1980s, but the first firewoman was hired in 1994. As of 2003, there were 111 uniformed females, but only 8 were operational firefighters.

Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Shazia Perveen (Born 1990), who hails from Vehari District in Punjab, joined the Rescue 1122 emergency services as a firefighter in 2010. Fighting fire with conflagrations in a field feared even by most men. Shazia's determination is acknowledged by her male counterparts.

India

In 2003, the Tamil Nadu Fire and Rescue Services appointed 1975 Born Priya Ravichandran as a Divisional fire officer, making her one of the first female fire officers in the country. First one to win Anna Medal for Bravery in Tamil Nadu. In

2013, the department inducted its second batch of women firefighters.

In 2009, a proposal was mooted in the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation to allow women into the fire services.

In 2012, the Mumbai Fire Brigade inducted five women firefighters, making them the first in the history of the organisation.

Japan

As of 2003 the Tokyo Fire Department had 666 female firefighters, 3.8% of the total. In 2009, as part of a recruitment drive it was stated that there were 17,000 female fire service staff, though it is not clear how many of these were operational, rather than providing support roles.

Netherlands

Women firefighters go back at least till 1939 and accounted for 3.3% of professional firefighters in the Netherlands in 2000.

United Kingdom

In Great Britain, Girton Ladies' College had an all-women's fire brigade from 1878 until 1932. In 1887 it was reported that women employed in a cigar factory in Liverpool had been formed into a fire brigade, and had effectively extinguished a fire at the factory. During the First World War, women's brigades carried out fire-fighting and rescues in the South of England. During the 1920s, women firefighting teams were employed by private fire brigades. At the beginning of the Second World War, 5000 women were recruited for the Auxiliary Fire Service, rising to 7000 in what was then the National Fire Service. Though trained in firefighting, they were not there for that purpose but for driving, firewatching etc. Many received awards for heroism.

The first women to form an official part of a local authority Fire Service were associated with Gordonstoun School near Elgin in Scotland, where staff and pupils had supported a volunteer unit of the local Grampian Fire Brigade since the school's return from Wales in 1948. Gordonstoun became co-educational in 1972 and trained women as firefighters from 1975, but these initially operated only within the school, not being permitted by the Brigade to join the official unit. The turning point took place in 1976, when the scale of a forest fire on Ben Aigan near Craigellachie on Speyside led the Brigade to seek volunteers from the local community to help fight the fire. Alongside personnel from local Royal Air Force bases, a group of trained women firefighters from Gordonstoun attended, and the performance and endurance of this group over seven days and nights of firefighting led the Grampian Fire Authority to agree to allow women to take on official front-line firefighting roles in the Brigade for the first time. The first woman to attend a fire as an official member of a local authority Fire Brigade was Gordonstoun pupil Bridget Koch, who attended a house fire on Coularbank Road in Lossiemouth with a Grampian crew from Gordonstoun on 19 October 1978.

The first woman actually appointed as a public firefighter in peacetime was in 1982 to the London Fire Brigade (LFB). As of 2012 there are 257 female firefighters in the LFB. As of March 2007 the proportion of operational firefighters in the United Kingdom who were women was 3.1%.

The highest ranking female firefighter is Dany Cotton, Assistant Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade.

United States

The first known female firefighter of the United States was a slave from New York named Molly Williams, who was said to be "as good a fire laddie as many of the boys," and fought fires during the early 1800s. In the 1820s, Marina Betts was a volunteer firefighter in Pittsburgh. Lillie Hitchcock was made an honorary member of the Knickerbocker Engine Company, No. 5., in San Francisco in 1863, and fought fires for some years after.

In the 1910s, there were women's volunteer fire companies in Silver Spring, Maryland, and Los Angeles, California. In 1936 Emma Vernell became the first official female firefighter in New Jersey.

During World War II some women served as firefighters in the United States to replace firemen who joined the military; indeed, during part of the war two fire departments in Illinois were all-female. In 1942 the first all-female forest firefighting crew in California was created.

There were all-female fire companies in Kings County, California, and Woodbine, Texas, in the 1960s. In 1971 an all-female BLM (Bureau of Land Management) firefighting crew fought fires in the wilds of Alaska during the summer of 1971, and an all-female U.S. Forest Service firefighting crew fought fires in 1971 and 1972 in Montana.

The first known female fire chief in the U.S. was Ruth E. Capello. Ruth Capello was born in 1922 and became fire chief of the Butte Falls fire department in Butte Falls, Oregon in 1973. She died at the age of 70 in 1992. Sandra Forcier, the first known paid female firefighter (excluding forest firefighting) in the U.S., began working in North Carolina in 1973; she was a Public Safety Officer, a combination of police officer and firefighter. The first woman to work solely as a paid firefighter (excluding forest firefighting) was Judith Livers, hired by the Arlington County, Virginia, fire department in 1974. The first female head of a career fire department, Chief Rosemary Bliss in Tiburon, California, became fire chief in 1993. In the United States in 2002, approximately 2% of all firefighters were female.

Terminology

Because of firefighting's historically predominantly male participants, firefighters as a whole were generally called firemen. Now, as more women join the ranks, 'firefighter' has become a widely used term that reflects the role and the various forms of gender participation. However the term 'fireman' remains popular amongst the general public.

Internet information

On March 11, 2016, The Age published a background analysis and comment by Royce Millar and Gina McColl titled 'Jane Garrett vs. the UFU: Political power play the real story behind firefighters' gender war'. The analysis looks at the political background to the dispute over increasing the number of woman recruits within the Melbourne Fire Brigade. The full text can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/jane-garrett-vs-the-ufu-political-power-play-the-real-story-behind-firefighters-gender-war-20160310-gnfrug.html>

On March 11, 2016, The Age published a report titled 'Metropolitan Fire Brigade and union face off over female firefighter intake'. The report details the possible effect of the United Firefighters Union legal challenge to the recruitment practices of the Melbourne Fire Brigade. The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/metropolitan-fire-brigade-and-union-face-off-over-female-firefighter-intake-20160311-gngsty.html>

On March 11, 2016, The Age published an analysis and comment by Royce Millar and Gina McColl titled 'Female firefighters take on the blokey culture of the CFA'. The report seems essentially to support attempts to have more women within Victoria's firefighting force. The full text can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/female-firefighters-take-on-the-blokey-culture-of-the-cfa-20160311-gngg1s.html>

On March 10, 2016, The Age carried a news report titled 'United Firefighters Union in court to block MFB bid to boost number of women firefighters'. The report details the action of the United Firefighters Union to stop the Melbourne Fire Brigade applying their diversity policy. The full text of this report can be accessed <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/united-firefighters-union-in-court-to-block-women-firies-20160310-gnfalo.html>

On March 10, 2016, The Herald Sun ran a news report titled 'Union applies to Federal Court to stop MFB push to hire more women'. The report details the action of the United Firefighters Union to stop the Melbourne Fire Brigade applying their diversity policy. The full text of this report can be found at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/union-applies-to-federal-court-to-stop-mfb-push-to-hire-more-women/news-story/4ba2307030ae550aca6f37ab476d494a>

On February 4, 2016, The Herald Sun published an opinion piece by James Campbell titled 'United Firefighters Union sparks outcry over quota campaign'. Campbell defends the quotas the Melbourne Fire Brigade (MFB) is seeking to adopt to raise its female numbers to 5% of the MFB workforce. The full text of this article can be found at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/james-campbell/united-firefighters-union-sparks-outcry-over-quota-campaign/news-story/19a31dd37dd315e85800feefba26225?memtype=anonymous>

On February 1, 2016, The Herald Sun published an opinion piece by Rita Panahi titled 'Sex quota undermines the women who get there on merit'. Panahi argues that quotas reduce the community's regard for those women who became firefighters in open competition with men. The full text of this article can be accessed at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/rita-panahi/sex-quota-undermines-the-women-who-get-there-on-merit/news-story/ae869b12b551390d8af30e5f94f1147f?memtype=anonymous>

On January 29, 2016, The Herald Sun published a news report titled 'Metropolitan Fire Brigade push to hire more women, minority groups angers United Firefighters Union'. The report details the UFU's opposition to the 'diversity policy' to be adopted by the MFD. The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/metropolitan-fire-brigade-push-to-hire-more-women-minority-groups-angers-united-firefighters-union/news-story/3fae25e06f524488569d124e244619c8>

On December 15, 2015, The Age published a news report titled 'Bullying in firefighting the next target for Human Rights Commissioner'. The report details the Victorian government's referral of the Melbourne Fire Brigade and the Country Fire Authority to the Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner. The full text can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/bullying-in-firefighting-the-next-target-for-human-rights-commissioner-20151215-glnrpb.html>

On May 14, 2015, The New York Post published a news report titled 'FDNY's new entrance exam will lower physical standards'. The report details a supposed relaxation in the entry standards for the Fire Department of New York City. The full text can be accessed at <http://nypost.com/2015/05/14/fdnys-new-entrance-exam-will-lower-physical-standards/>

On September 5, 2013, The Sydney Morning Herald published a news report titled 'Women graduates have a burning desire to end firefighter stereotype'

The report details a record female enrolment into New South Wales Fire and Rescue.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/women-graduates-have-a-burning-desire-to-end-firefighter-stereotype-20130904-2t5ls.html>

On April 17, 2012, The Guardian published a report titled 'Burning issues for female firefighters'. The report details the conditions of female firefighters in Britain.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/apr/16/issues-female-firefighters>

On April 11, 2011, The Daily Mail published a news report titled 'Fire brigade relaxes strength and fitness test to make entry easier for women'

The report details a supposed relaxation of selection standards in British fire brigades.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1375381/Fire-service-strength-fitness-tests-relaxed-allow-women-firefighters.html>

On March 27, 2010, The Herald Sun published a blog comment of Andrew Bolt's titled 'The plan explained: an African on every fire truck' in which he criticises the idea that the Melbourne Fire Brigade needs to be representative of the community it serves.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/the_plan_explained_an_african_on_every_fire_truck/asc/P60

On March 26, 2010, The Herald Sun published an opinion piece by Andrew Bolt titled 'Stop fighting gender wars'. The piece details the opposition from women within the Melbourne Fire Brigade (MFB) to some of the actions of the MFB's diversity development officer.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/archive/opinion/stop-fighting-gender-wars/story-e6frfifx-1225845492348>

On February 25, 2010 The New York Post published a background analysis titled 'Sorry, ladies, but I want a fireman' The piece suggests some of the problems associated with increased numbers of female firefighters.

The full text can be accessed at <http://nypost.com/2010/02/25/sorry-ladies-but-i-want-a-fireman/>

In October 2009 Cindy Branch-Smith submitted a thesis toward a Bachelor of Science (Psychology) Honours degree undertaken at Edith Cowan University. The thesis is titled 'A Qualitative Exploration of Women Firefighters' Experience in the Western Australian Volunteer Bushfire Service'.

The thesis draws on a wide range of relevant research to draw conclusions about the nature of women's participation in traditionally male-dominated service provision, focusing particularly on firefighting. This is a complex source, but repays careful reading.

Please note that copyright restrictions apply to its use.

The full text can be accessed at http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2399&context=theses_hons

(The thesis begins on the sixth page [page iv] of the document.)

On January 23, 2008, The LA Weekly published a detailed analysis of the situation of women firefighters in Los Angeles. The piece is titled 'Women Firefighters: The Gender Boondoggle'. It details some of the physical difficulties women firefighters confront.

The full text of the article can be found at <http://www.laweekly.com/news/women-firefighters-the-gender-boondoggle-2151639>

In 2007, the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC) at Latrobe University published a report of its research findings titled 'Volunteer firefighting: A Suitable Job for a Woman?'

The report looks at the conditions faced by women firefighters in a number of Australian states.

The full text of this report can be accessed at http://proceedings.com.au/tassiefire/posters_pdf/poster_jmclennan.pdf

A New South Wales Firefighters Recruitment publication focusing on encouraging women into the service.

The full text can be accessed at http://www.fire.nsw.gov.au/gallery/files/pdf/recruitment/profile_peta_doyle.pdf

Arguments in favour of setting quotas for female representation in firefighting

1. The current low representation of women in firefighting means a large recruitment pool is being neglected

There has been a general decline in the number of volunteer fire fighters in rural areas in Australia. A study conducted in 2007 by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire

CRC) at Latrobe University, titled 'Volunteer firefighting: A Suitable Job for a Woman?', found that changes in

employment patterns in rural Australia, including substantial unemployment, have resulted in many young men moving to cities and large towns making it difficult for volunteer fire fighting associations to maintain their numbers.

The researchers concluded that 'many rural regions are, effectively, ageing faster than the general community' and that the pool of potential fire fighters is therefore diminishing.

A Bushfire CRC study conducted in 2005 noted that volunteer fire fighting is a very gendered activity. Women accounted for between 11 and 25% of volunteer fire fighter numbers, with the majority of women volunteers serving in support roles (communications, administration, logistics) rather than in an active, operational fire fighting capacity. The 2007 Latrobe Bushfires CRC researchers, citing this earlier research, concluded, 'Thus, women represent an under-utilised potential source of volunteers, and an increase in their participation rate in fire service volunteering would ease pressures on agencies desperate to maintain volunteer numbers.'

Currently, only 3% of the state's operational Country Fire Authority (CFA) staff is women, and only 3.3% of the MFB's staff is women. Of the more than 35,000 volunteer firefighters in Victoria only 15% are female.

Recent recruitment patterns in some states have indicated the extent to which women can meet the need for additional firefighters. In an article published in The Sydney Morning Herald on September 5, 2013, it was noted, 'More than 40 per cent of the latest Fire and Rescue New South Wales graduates are women. It marks a major milestone for the organisation, where women only make up 4 per cent of full-time employees.' Ten of the twenty-four graduates were women. The number of women applying increased after a targeted recruitment campaign in 2012.

The Australia Capital Territory Fire and Rescue launched a push for more female firefighters at the end of 2015. It pledged that half of the 16 applicants accepted in the most recent recruitment round would be women. The number of female applicants rose to 144, compared to only 26 in the last recruitment round in 2012. The number of overall applications has also more than doubled, with 802 total applications, compared to 395 in 2012.

Increasing numbers of women applicants in both New South Wales and the ACT have been used to argue that women offer a solution to the need to attract more firefighters to this service.

2. Increasing the diversity of gender and cultural background in firefighting services would improve efficiency

Supporters of increased numbers of women in firefighting services would increase the range of skills and abilities the force can draw on.

Jim Higgins, the chief executive of the Melbourne Fire Brigade (MFB), has stated, 'We are seeking to increase diversity at MFB because it is proven to improve innovation, problem solving and decision-making and to ensure that we are equipped to deliver the best public safety outcomes for the communities we serve.'

New South Wales firefighter, Peta Doyle, currently working out of the City of Sydney Fire Station has been a firefighter for over three years. She came to firefighting after years of training as a professional athlete, having competed at state, national and Olympic trials and represented Australia at various World Cup Swimming Championships. After leaving swimming, firefighter Doyle was a qualified personal trainer and worked at her local swimming pool. Ms Doyle found it relatively easy to meet the physical fitness criteria necessary to become a firefighter; however, she argues that she brings more than this to the job.

Ms Doyle has stated, 'A reasonable amount of fitness and strength are necessary, but what is really important is an ability to think outside the box, learn quickly and take a very proactive approach to your work.'

Doyle has further stated, 'As a fully qualified firefighter I can specialise in other fields and I am keen to develop my rescue qualifications and to operate a Bronto (a 37 metre high ladder platform for high-rise rescues and firefighting) so I can help respond to major emergencies. In the future I'd also like to train new firefighting recruits and I think working as a station officer (who leads a team of firefighters and coordinates the crew at an incident) could also be rewarding.'

It has been argued that every member of a firefighting service comes with unique prior experience that is potentially of value. For some recruits this may be particularly the case in the area of interpersonal skills.

Alex Johnson, an operational group manager in Derbyshire, England, has stated, 'Women bring a different dimension to the fire service.' Ms Johnson expanded, 'Women can appeal to other women about safety in the home, for example, in a way men can't.'

A promotional brochure put out by New South Wales Fire Brigades stresses the range of qualities that any firefighter requires. The brochure states, 'Firefighting is a career which requires strength of body and character. It's a job where you get to make use of many skills, not just one. While physical strength and endurance are necessary attributes to do the job, a balance of additional qualities are equally as important to ensure your success as a firefighter.'

3. Quotas can be set for greater female inclusion without compromising safety

Those who support increasing the number of women in firefighting argue that this can be achieved without in any way endangering the public.

Supporters of increasing the number of women serving as fire fighters argue that often all that needs to be done is to conduct an advertising campaign so that women recognise that this is an area possibly available to them.

On February 23, 2016, The Canberra Times ran an article which claimed that a five-fold increase in the number of women applying to become firefighters in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) had been attributed to a massive recruitment drive and marketing campaign.

About one in five applicants for ACT Fire and Rescue's 2016 recruit college were women accounting for 144 of the 802 applications received compared to the last recruitment process in 2012 when just 26 of the 395 applicants were women. ACT Fire and Rescue are hopeful that the dramatically increased number of female applicants will result in a significant increase in the number of women firefighters in the service. However, ACT Fire and Rescue is intending to achieve this objective without lowering the fitness standard expected of recruits.

Richard Maloney, the ACT Fire and Rescue commander has claimed, 'There's been no change to the [recruitment]

process... or standards.'

The Melbourne Fire Brigade has also indicated that it will not be lowering its standards. Ken Latta, the former chief executive of Melbourne Fire Brigade, stated in 2010 'What is wrong with wanting more female...applicants? They won't get in if they can't pass the test and the test is not changing. Out of around 2,000 applications last year only 77 women wanted to be firefighters. Do women make good firefighters? Ask one; they'll tell you they do. It's just that many don't think it's a job that will suit them so they don't apply.'

Regarding the concern of Peter Marshall, the secretary of the United Firefighters Union, that the 'order of merit' will be compromised, supporters of the quota argue this will have no significant effect. The Melbourne Fire Brigade has set a quota of only 5% female representation within its ranks. These women are all required to have passed the Brigade's physical aptitude test. If a very small number - up to 5% - are accepted who are less able than some of the men against whom they were competing, that will have no significant impact on the competence of the Brigade.

James Campbell, writing in an opinion piece published in The Herald Sun on February 4, 2016, stated, 'The MFB will be able to hire anyone from the pool [of candidates who passed the selection tests] and one of their criteria will be gender diversity - but only to fulfil the aim of reaching the stratospheric level of 5 per cent.'

4. Including more women would break down the discriminatory and bullying culture within firefighting

Those looking to increase the number of female fire fighters argue that increased numbers of women in fire fighting services would shift the gendered culture and break down the discrimination women firefighters often face.

A study conducted in 2007 by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC) at Latrobe University, titled 'Volunteer firefighting: A Suitable Job for a Woman?', surveyed women firefighters in Victoria on the extent of the discrimination they had encountered. 38% indicated that they had faced verbal public derogation of their suitability for fire service volunteering. 30% said they had been given restricted opportunity to participate in fighting fires. 17% said they had been given limited opportunity to take on leadership roles. While 5% said they had been denied opportunities to undertake specialist training.

Discrimination has an uglier face in some firefighting services. In October 2009 Cindy Branch-Smith submitted a thesis toward a Bachelor of Science (Psychology) Honours degree undertaken at Edith Cowan University. The thesis is titled 'A Qualitative Exploration of Women Firefighters' Experience in the Western Australian Volunteer Bushfire Service' and draws on a wide range of research. Birch considers two 2006 studies of levels of sexual harassment experienced by women firefighters in the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory Rural Fire Service (RFS), with 16% of the RFS and 15% of the CFA participants reporting harassment of this nature. The main forms of sexual harassment were reported in both studies as offensive sexual innuendo, verbal abuse, unwanted sexual advances, and inappropriate touching.

It has also been suggested that there is a significant incidence of workplace bullying in fire stations. On December 15, 2015, The Age reported that the state government had asked the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, to examine gender equity and workplace bullying within the Melbourne Fire Brigade(MFB) and the Country Fire Authority(CFA).

The president of the MFB, Andi Diamond, has acknowledged there may be some problems. Ms Diamond stated, 'Anecdotally we do hear it's difficult and the industrial environment makes it difficult for women to come back to work. It is a difficult workplace culture; we need to build a constructive culture.'

It has been claimed that predominantly male workplaces tend to prompt negative attitudes toward female employees. The Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, has stated, 'We know that lack of women within an organisation often reflects systemic discrimination.'

5. Women have been integrated into a number of other traditionally male occupations

Supporters of increased numbers of women in firefighting services have noted that women have been recruited in far greater numbers into other traditionally male workplaces.

One instance often given is the increasing number of women within police forces in both Australia and overseas.

The Victoria Police 2013-14 annual report states there were 3607 female sworn police, including PSOs and recruits, or 24.7 per cent of a total 14,612 police.

A Victoria Police recruitment marketing manager, Rachel Brown, said excluding PSOs and recruits, the ratio of women police had slowly risen from 17.7 per cent in June 2003 to 26.2 per cent in January 2015.

In New South Wales, 35% of the total police workforce is women, with 27% of sworn police officers being women.

Thirteen superintendents are women and there is one female Deputy Commissioner.

The number of women in policing across Australia has grown markedly over the last 45 years. In 1971, women constituted just 1.8 per cent of police personnel. In 1996, 13.5% of police officers in Australia were female. In 2005, 20.9% of sworn police officers across Australia were women and by 2006 the number had increased to 23%. In 2011, the national participation rate had reached approximately 26 per cent.

Another traditionally male area into which women have gradually been integrated is Australia's defence forces. Women have served in Australian armed forces since 1899. Until World War II women were restricted to the Australian Army Nursing Service. This role expanded in 1941-42 when the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Australian Army and Royal Australian Air Force established female branches in which women took on a range of support roles. While these organisations were disbanded at the end of the war, they were re-established in 1950 as part of the military's permanent structure. Women were integrated into the services during the late 1970s and early 1980s and can now serve in most positions in the Australian Defence Force (ADF), including combat roles.

In the 1989-1990 financial year women filled 11.4% of permanent ADF positions. In the 2005-2006 financial year women occupied 13.3% of permanent positions and 15.6% of reserve positions. During the same period the proportion of civilian positions filled by women in the Australian Defence Organisation increased from 30.8% to 40.3%.

Arguments against setting quotas for female representation in firefighting

1. The same standards of physical strength and fitness will not be met if set numbers of women have to be recruited. Those who are opposed to targets being set for the recruitment of women into firefighting services are concerned that this will mean that the current level of fitness and strength required will be reduced.

At the moment those candidates accepted are those who score highest on a range of measures of strength and physical fitness including a physical aptitude test (PAT). A key component of the PAT is the shuttle run or Beep Test. This is a test of speed, fitness, and agility. It requires a person to sprint between two parallel lines at an increasing pace and after each interval is achieved, a new level is announced and the aim is to reach the highest level possible. A base level, normally a score of 9.6, has to be achieved if a candidate is to be considered as a firefighter. However, recruitment tests are competitive and it is currently those who achieve the highest scores above the cut off point who are selected.

Critics of the mandatory inclusion of a certain number of women in each intake of firefighters are concerned that women who do not score as highly as some male candidates will displace them purely on the basis of their gender.

Peter Marshall, the secretary of the United Firefighters Union has stated, 'The Melbourne Fire Brigade wants to lower the standard for new firefighters, and to scrap the "order of merit" which ranks applicants in order of ability.' Defenders of quotas for women claim that the physical aptitude test will not be made easier to allow women into the service; however, if critics like Marshall are correct and 'order of merit' is no longer the sole basis for selection then the result will be a lowering of the standard of physical fitness.

Critics of gender-based quotas have also looked to developments overseas, where the absolute standard of physical fitness required has been dropped so as to allow a predetermined number of women to be taken on.

On April 11, 2011, The Daily Mail reported that British fire chiefs had made the 'ladder lifting' tests that all new recruits must go through easier to allow more women and less-strong men into the service. Previously, potential firefighters had to extend a 100kg ladder by themselves in 20 seconds to qualify. However, now they are only required to lift a 30kg weight over their heads.

Strenuous runs, where candidates had to complete increasing fast sprints have also been scrapped, along with having to carry a 75kilo person 90 metres in less than a minute.

A government study comparing new and old firefighter tests confirmed that standards had been altered with less emphasis now being placed on fitness and strength.

In December, 2014, the New York City Fire Department also altered its selection procedures. Under the new process recruits will be admitted on the basis of their combined score on the physical aptitude test and a test gauging knowledge of procedures. Formerly, all probationary officers had to pass the physical competence test. In addition, the physical competence test has been scaled back. The number of exercises that simulate pulling down a ceiling has been reduced. The Department is also having supervisors use videos to evaluate trainees not on the time it takes to perform tasks, but on 'a minimally acceptable pace of performance.' Critics have claimed that this lowering of standards has occurred so that more women firefighters can be hired.

2. Gender quotas mean safety will be compromised and female firefighters' health may be put at risk

Critics of gender quotas promoting the entry of women into firefighting services argue that such quotas will create safety risks.

In 2008, LA Weekly published an extensive report on women firefighters in Los Angeles which concluded that the vast majority of candidates applying to join the service were simply not strong enough safely to perform the tasks required of them. The article notes, 'Firefighters pull heavy lengths of hose, climb stairs while wielding giant power tools like chain saws, and lift 180-pound, 35-foot wooden ladders - akin to carrying a concrete lamppost.'

On February 25, 2010, The New York Post published a report critical of the physical prowess of a number of the women firefighters the city had employed. The report quoted New York's Deputy Fire Chief Paul Mannix, a vocal opponent of quotas. Mr Mannix stated, 'They don't have women and men compete head-to-head in something as trivial as the Olympics. And when it comes to safety, that's what they want to do.'

The Deputy Fire Chief went on to state, 'I'm worried about the women who live in New York City. They deserve the best Fire Department we can give them. If we continue to reduce standards, we're not going to have that.'

Some male firefighters have also expressed concern about their own safety if they have to depend on female fellow workers who are not strong enough to meet the demands of the job. Another male firefighter quoted in the February 2010 New York Post article stated, 'I have a family. I can't count on a 110-pound female to carry me out of a burning building.'

The same concern regarding a majority of female firefighter candidates not being strong enough to meet the real operational demands of the job have also been expressed in Victoria.

Peter Marshall, the secretary of the Victorian United Firefighters Union has stated, 'Community protection will be compromised.' Marshall has further stated that requiring firefighting services to enlist a fixed number of women will result in 'potential danger for the community, the new recruits, and their fellow firefighters'.

The same view has been expressed by a Victorian professional firefighter, Rachel Cowling. Ms Cowling has stated, 'Firefighters must have confidence in each other, and the community must have confidence in the fire service. The recruitment of firefighters must be about ability and merit, not politics.'

It has also been noted that firefighting poses particular health risks for women and thus it is unwise to encourage more women to become firefighters.

According to research by Cornell University scientists undertaken in 2009, the toxic chemicals all firefighters can face every time they respond to a call might be especially dangerous to women responders, because many of the chemicals are known to increase the risk of breast cancer. The chemicals to which firefighters are routinely exposed have been shown to be mammary carcinogens in animal toxicology studies and warrant further study.

A 2013 Canadian study of the health of female firefighters examined their higher incidence of physical injury and psychological conditions and concluded, 'Female firefighters are exposed to increased risk of injury due to the psychological and physical occupational stressors in firefighting.'

3. Current female firefighters do not want the entry standards lowered or quotas applied

Critics of quotas to encourage the entry of women into firefighting argue that these measures diminish the achievement of those women who have become firefighters in equal competition with men.

In an opinion piece published on February 1, 2016, Herald Sun commentator Rita Panahi stated, 'Whether it's the boardroom, the police force or the fire department, the desire to increase workplace diversity seems to be having some unintended consequences, including undermining the women who got there on merit alone.'

Referring to the response of some members of the firefighting community to the prospect of quotas to prompt the admission of women into firefighting services, Panahi stated, 'Several women who won their positions as firefighters by beating hundreds of mainly male applicants were aghast that they could be working alongside those who were selected because they ticked a minority box rather than being the very best available candidates.'

Victorian firefighter Louisa Cannon has been quoted in The Herald Sun defending the current selection criteria and the manner in which they are applied. Ms Cannon stated,

'Not everyone can be a firefighter or a brain surgeon or an AFL footballer. Firefighting is a job which demands physical, intellectual and psychological rigour ... of course, we want a fire service that reflects contemporary Australia, but not at the cost of standards and community safety.'

There is concern among some that a quota system would undermine the position of women already in the firefighting service, who would be seen as having entered via a less rigorous process.

Referring to this potential injustice, Peter Marshall, the secretary of the Victorian United Firefighters Union has stated, 'Women firefighters currently in the CFA and MFB earned their place on ability. In some cases their brother or husband applied and was not successful.'

In an interview published in the Age on January 29, 2016, career firefighter, Rachel Cowling, said she did not want crews' safety put at risk by affirmative action for female recruits.

Ms Cowling stated, 'When it comes to performing the job under pressure, this isn't a job for everyone...

It's a job for a certain type of person, and a certain type of female ... changing the selection processes just isn't the right way to get female numbers up.'

Ms Cowling said she had to train every day with a personal trainer before she first passed her physical 11 years ago.

Cowling stated, 'I only have three people on my truck ... and if we have a house fire, I need to know that everyone has the fitness and the strength to do things correctly.'

4. Fire fighters do not have to be representative of the communities they protect

Critics of quotas designed to ensure that women and minority ethnic groups are represented within firefighting proportionately to their occurrence within the communities they serve argue that firefighting is not like representative government.

There is, opponents claim, no logical reason why, for example, women should be represented within firefighting up to a level commensurate with their numbers within the community they serve.

According to this line of argument, firefighting is not a community service industry comparable with the police force.

Police officers have to engage with members of the public in a wide variety of contexts. There is a legitimate reason for wanting to have a police force which reflects the community it serves both in gender and ethnic balance. Such a police force would be better able to serve its community in a manner sensitive to community composition and concerns.

Opponents of quotas assert that this argument does not apply within the firefighting service where the quality that determines suitability for the job is not community awareness, but the physical strength and stamina needed to perform the job.

In a comment published in his blog on March 27, 2010, Herald Sun columnist Andrew Bolt used exaggeration to highlight what he sees as the absurdity of trying to create a firefighting service that reflects the composition of the community. Bolt asks, 'Is the plan to set up rival ethnic services, so Muslims can ring their own Muslim fire service, Africans theirs, Jews theirs and so on?' Bolt then counters the need for a representative firefighting service by asking whether it might not be easier if a community accepted that when receiving emergency assistance 'it's all in together'.

5. Non-firefighting roles are available to women

Those who argue that only a very small number of women will be physically capable of being a firefighter also often note that there are other roles that women who wish to serve in emergency situations can fill.

Within firefighting, there is a wide range of what are referred to as 'nonsuppression roles' that a much larger number of women are able to carry out. Women attached to fire brigades can take part in fire prevention services, inspection, arson investigation, communications and public education. Within fire departments there are also administrative and clerical

roles that women without the physical fitness to be firefighters can perform. Rural communities dependent on volunteer firefighters also require the support of their local communities in terms of supplying food for firefighters and helping to fundraise. These are areas where women can supply valuable service irrespective of their level of physical fitness. Other emergency service roles include being an emergency medical officer or paramedic. Emergency medical officer training allows certificate holders to render specialist assistance in an emergency situation normally occurring within the workplace.

Other related services include being a park ranger which can also involve fire prevention activities. The bushfire prevention page of Parks Victoria's Internet site states, 'We work year round to prepare parks and reserves to reduce the potential impact of fire through planned burning and other fuel reduction. The \$21 million Melbourne Fire and Emergency Program is improving the fire preparedness of our urban and fringe parklands.' Under the 'Response' heading, the Parks Victoria site states 'Around 70 percent of Parks Victoria staff are trained in specific fire fighting roles. Each summer, many rangers and office staff are deployed to fight fires in parks and forests across the state.' (It should be noted that statistically many more men occupy these roles in this service as well and it has been suggested that gender bias is at play.)

Further implications

It is difficult not to agree with those commentators who argue that lifting the number of women in the Melbourne Fire Brigade from 3.6% to 5% is unlikely to have a significantly detrimental effect on the efficiency of the service.

The larger concern is that the quota principle may ultimately undermine firefighting services. In some places around the world, meeting quotas has been achieved by lowering selection standards. If the goal becomes to have 15 or 20% of the service comprised of women, then it may be necessary to make the selection criteria less rigorous in order to achieve this level of female participation.. Those commentators who argue that firefighting services need to reflect the composition of the communities they serve do not seem to realise that there are some service sectors that have highly specialist requirements.

Though firefighting requires a wide range of skills, it has to be acknowledged that fundamentally it requires a significant level of physical strength. The archetypal instance that is usually given is that a firefighter has to be able to carry a large person out of a burning building. Any reduction in standards that would make it impossible for this basic rescue task to be completed is obviously not acceptable. Any quota that is set cannot be allowed to dilute this fundamental requirement. That said, many of the physical demands currently placed on firefighters could potentially be reduced. The requirement that firefighters be tested on whether they can repeatedly lift a long extension ladder above their heads, as occurs in some jurisdictions, seems excessive. There are many features of firefighting including hoisting ladders and hoses which could be managed with mechanised supports. For example, there are robotic devices in development which could perform many of the tasks now undertaken by firefighters in a way which would allow firefighting and rescue to be undertaken at much less risk to human firefighters.

However, the greater mechanisation of firefighting is also likely to be divisive. For paid firefighters (as opposed to volunteers) it would represent a threat to their employment. What such developments will do, however, is decrease the reliance on physical strength and so open up firefighting to a much larger range of potential applicants, including more women.

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

Herald-Sun: February 4, 2016, page 24, comment (on women / female firefighters and sexual discrimination, equal opportunity) by James Campbell, 'Crazy union sparks outcry'.

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/james-campbell/united-firefighters-union-sparks-outcry-over-quota-campaign/news-story/19a31dd37dd315e858000feefba26225>

The Age: March 12, 2016, page 10, background (photo of female firefighter) by Millar and McColl, 'Female firefighters take on the blokey culture of the CFA'

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/female-firefighters-take-on-the-blokey-culture-of-the-cfa-20160311-gngg1s.html>

The Age: March 11, 2016, page 2, news item (ref to union and Fair Work hearing on hiring of more female firefighters - ref to claims of sex discrimination) by Royce Millar et al, 'Pressure on union over hiring women'.

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/pressure-on-maverick-union-over-women-firefighters-20160310-gnfmzg.html>