

# Harassment, Discrimination, and Assault: The Unseen Crisis in Fire Service Professions

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## ABSTRACT

Fire service professionals put their lives on the line every day serving their communities and are expected to perform their professional duties with kindness and compassion. However, behind closed doors, harassment and discrimination are widespread. Probationary periods filled with hazing rituals are used to test the mental toughness of new members. In many cases, this hazing behavior continues in the form of harassment, discrimination, and assault often targeting females in the workplace causing lasting consequences.

This study evaluates the prevalence of harassment, discrimination, and assault in fire service professions including both firefighters and emergency medical service personnel. Participants (n=306) were asked to report on various workplace behaviors involving their experiences with sexual harassment, discrimination, and assault. Results show that harassment, discrimination, and assault, particularly sexual assault, are pervasive within fire service professions, disproportionately targeting female employees. Findings suggest that women were statistically more likely to report incidents of harassment, discrimination and/or assault to their employers, less likely to feel their reports were handled appropriately by administrative personnel, and more likely to experience workplace sexual assault than their male colleagues.

## **Introduction**

### Underrepresentation of Women

Women are significantly underrepresented in public safety professions, and the fire service has the lowest representation of women. Women have been fighting for entry and advancement in the fire service since 1973, when the first compensated female firefighter entered the profession (Floren, 2007). Recent research conducted by the National Fire Prevention Association estimated that, in 2018, women made up only 8% of the entire United States firefighter population. As of 2018, 4% of career firefighters and 11% of volunteer firefighters were female (Evarts & Stein, 2020).

There are several theories as to why women are underrepresented in the fire service, including recruitment, gender stereotypes, gender biased physical testing that is used to keep women out of the applicant pool, poorly fitting protective equipment, and sexual harassment (Hulett & Associates, 2008). In a study conducted by Hulett and colleagues, men and women were asked whether they were actively recruited by their fire departments. The results showed that 69.3% of men were recruited by their department, compared to only 35.6% of women (2008). Strikingly, almost twice as many men than women were recruited by their departments.

Gender stereotypes and gender biases play a significant role in women's underrepresentation in the fire service. One major justification that fire service professionals make as to why women are underrepresented is their supposed lack of physical capabilities or interest in the strenuous physical activity that accompanies being a firefighter (Danbold & Bendersky, 2020; Hulett et. al., 2008). However, when the physical capabilities of women cadets of the Milwaukee Fire Department were assessed, the average female firefighter cadet was in the 85th percentile of all

women within their age group. Furthermore, the strength of the average female cadet increased significantly over the course of their 14-week recruit class. At the completion of their physical training, their strength was 96% of their male colleagues. This study also showed that women who received proper physical training prior to their fitness testing had a 52.6% pass rate, while those who did not receive training only had a pass rate of 34.6%. This finding indicates that physical testing like the CPAT or other department-specific physical tests without proper training might not be the best screening process, especially for women (Hulett et al., 2008). Rather, departments should invest time and proper training in their potential candidates to allow them to be successful. In turn, this will likely increase representation of women in the fire service.

## Gendered Perceptions of Firehouse Culture

The culture of a firehouse is a unique atmosphere built on the concept of “brotherhood.” It is often compared to that of a fraternity house. Pranks and initiation rituals are commonplace and often involve harassment and discriminatory acts. One misconception among firefighters is that incorporating these behaviors into everyday practice builds the character and mental toughness needed to perform the job.

Several studies have shown that women are more likely to be victims of harassment and discrimination in public safety professions than their male colleagues (Janke et al., 2019; Hom et al., 2017; Moore & Kleiner, 2001). While men report significantly fewer incidents of harassment and discrimination, they are not immune to these behaviors. Rather, they are more likely than women to view them as an acceptable part of the initiation process when entering the fire service. The typical initiation process includes pranks, inappropriate jokes, hazing, and exclusion. These behaviors are viewed, especially by men, as rites of passage to teach the newcomer their “place” in the fire department hierarchy (Moore & Kleiner, 2001). Some examples of firehouse bullying, harassment, discrimination, and assault reported over the last several years include mixing a colleague’s mouthwash with urine (Bennett, 2007), sexual assault occurring after male colleagues fixated on comparing the sizes of their genitals (Wilks, 2021), and men repeatedly walking in on their female colleagues while they were changing (Dohr, 2021).

Importantly, firefighters’ interpretation of the behaviors associated with firehouse culture varies by gender. While studies indicate that the majority of firefighters do not perceive bullying or harassment as an issue within the fire service, women are significantly more likely than men to recognize differences in treatment based on their gender (Griffith et al., 2016). For example, in a survey, 52 of 112 total participants reported being treated differently based on their gender ( $p=0.45$ ). Of those responses, 79% of women reported they had been treated differently based on gender while only 14% of men did ( $p=0.000$ ). Furthermore, women showed decreased work satisfaction, likely related to the harassment and discriminatory behaviors directed at them and/or their female colleagues on the job (Griffith et al., 2016)

## Adverse Health and Safety Impacts

There have been several studies of firefighter fitness, safety, and cancer, but very few that evaluate the culture within the fire service and the impacts it has on employee mental and physical health. Experiences of harassment, discrimination, and assault can have deep and lasting consequences on the mental, emotional, and physical health and well-being of victims. In particular, when stress persists over long periods of time, learning and development can be impaired, perception can be reduced to one stimulus at a time, and decision-making may be delayed (Videbeck, 2011). In high-risk occupations like firefighting and emergency medical services, these distractions and narrowed perceptions can have deadly consequences.

Workplace harassment, discrimination, and physical and sexual assault cause stress for the victims both in the workplace and in their personal lives. When this discriminatory treatment is chronic, the resulting stress may result in severe medical conditions. Chronic stress elevates blood pressure, cortisol levels, and heart rate, putting the victim at a higher risk of stroke, myocardial infarctions, and hypertension (American Psychological Association [APA],

2018). Beyond this, decreased immune responses, increase or decrease in appetite, and migraines have been linked to chronic stress (APA, 2018).

Additionally, individuals who have experienced harassment, discrimination, and assault in the workplace are more likely to struggle with depression and anxiety, become dependent on alcohol, and contemplate suicide (Jahnke et al., 2019). Firefighters and EMTs are already at an elevated risk of mental health disorders including depression and PTSD and are more likely to die by suicide than any other profession (Heyman et al., 2018).

## Current Study

The purpose of this study was to: 1) Evaluate the prevalence of harassment, discrimination, and assault in fire service professions, focusing on both firefighters and emergency medical service personnel; 2) Determine the factors that contribute to these workplace behaviors; and 3) Analyze gendered differences in workers' perceptions of workplace culture

For the purpose of this study, "fire service professions" and "fire department" include both firefighters and emergency medical services personnel. This study was conducted in Wisconsin where fire departments are often employed by cross trained employees. Researchers are aware that this is not the case for every state.

## METHODS

### *Survey Design*

To analyze the prevalence of harassment, discrimination, and assault within the fire service, a web-based survey was created and distributed to fire and emergency medical services personnel to ascertain their personal experiences and daily operations in their workplace. In addition to the demographic characteristics, the survey asked participants about their perceptions of workplace culture and behaviors, including how often they had experienced or witnessed harassment, discrimination, or assault by a colleague while working as a firefighter or EMT.

### *Recruitment and Survey Distribution*

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and an approved press release was published through FireRescue 1 to recruit participants at a national level. Further, an IRB approved email template was distributed to Wisconsin fire chiefs requesting survey distribution to members of their departments. A non-random sample of current or former firefighters and emergency medical services personnel were invited to participate in the survey.

### *Participants*

306 participants completed the survey. Of those 306 participants, 211 were male, 87 were female, five were non-binary/third gender, and three preferred not to disclose. For the purpose of this study, only male and female participants were used for data analysis due to an insignificant number of participants identifying as non-binary or third gender. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55+, and the majority identified as white. Of the survey respondents, 93.6% of participants reported that they worked for fire departments and the remaining 3.4% of participants reported that they worked for EMS agencies or hospitals. Participants' demographic characteristics can be referenced in Table 1. Data only includes results from participants who had completed the study. Partial completion was not considered for demographic data. Hawaiian or Pacific Islander was included on the survey, however, no participants identified as such.

*Procedures*

Participants were required to submit an informed consent form prior to participation. After completing the consent form, participants were taken to the 13-question survey through Qualtrics, an online survey database that provided each participant with a unique identifier that could not be traced back to the participant, ensuring confidentiality. The first two sets of questions that followed the demographic data centered on participants’ daily workplace operations and crew dynamics. The concluding five questions asked participants whether they had experienced or witnessed harassment, discrimination, and/or assault from a colleague while on the job. Participants were given an opportunity to elaborate on these experiences through open ended explanation boxes.

*Data Analysis*

Gender differences in Likert-scale items were analyzed using a Chi-Squared Test. P-values below 0.05 were considered a significant finding. Items with dichotomous responses (yes/no) were analyzed using a Fisher's exact test. Significance was determined by a p-value less than 0.05. Qualitative data was analyzed to bring depth and nuance to victims’ perspectives.

**Results**

*Organizational Cultures*

To examine workplace behaviors ranging from healthy interactions to interpersonal violence within fire service professions and evaluate gendered perceptions of these workplace behaviors, participants were asked a series of questions

<b>Table 1. Participant Demographics</b>		
Variable	Male	Female
<b>Age, n (%)</b>		
18-24	19 (9.1)	14 (16.1)
25-34	23 (11)	19 (21.8)
35-44	60 (28.7)	19 (21.8)
45-54	74 (35.4)	26 (29.9)
55+	33 (15.8)	9 (10.3)
<b>Race, n (%)</b>		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1 (0.5)	0 (0.0)
Asian	2 (1.0)	0 (0.0)
Black or African American	4 (1.9)	2 (2.3)
White	199 (95.6)	82 (94.3)
Other	2 (1.0)	3 (3.5)
<b>Agency Worked For, n (%)</b>		
Fire Department	198 (93.8)	81 (93.1)
Government EMS Only Agency	8 (3.8)	2 (2.3)
Private EMS Company	3 (1.4)	0 (0.0)
Hospital	2 (1.0)	2 (2.3)
Other	0 (0.0)	2 (2.3)
<b>Authoritative Rank, n (%)</b>		
Probationary	7 (3.3)	5 (5.8)
Unranked (FF/EMT)	69 (32.7)	37 (42.5)
First Level Supervisor (Lieutenant or Captain)	45 (21.3)	27 (31.0)
Mid-Level Supervisor (Battalion Chief, Deputy Chief, Assistant Chief)	53 (25.1)	12 (13.8)
Chief	37 (17.5)	6 (6.9)

about their everyday experiences at work. Survey questions also asked about how often participants had experienced and/or witnessed harassment, discrimination, and assault on the job. Participants ranked these on a four-point scale of Never to Always. Responses for each category were analyzed using percentages and further broken down by gender.

**Table 2. Workplace perceptions on a scale of Never to Always**

		Never	Sometimes	Most of the Time	Always	p-value
<b>PROBATIONARY PERIODS</b>						
How often is a probationary member isolated from the rest of their crew during their probationary period?	Male (%)	62.74	31.53	5.10	0.64	<b>0.00000</b>
	Female (%)	50.55	38.46	8.79	2.20	
How often are pranks pulled on a probationary member at your place of employment?	Male (%)	15.63	74.55	9.38	0.45	0.15955
	Female (%)	24.18	60.44	9.89	5.49	
During my probationary period I felt anxious to return to work based on how I was treated by my colleagues.	Male (%)	62.74	22.61	8.28	6.37	<b>0.00067</b>
	Female (%)	45.05	29.67	15.38	9.89	
I have thought about resigning from my job during my probationary period.	Male (%)	78.27	10.86	7.03	3.83	<b>0.00005</b>
	Female (%)	61.54	16.48	15.38	6.59	
<b>WORKPLACE DYNAMICS</b>						
How often do you and your crew eat meals together while on duty?	Male (%)	4.91	24.55	29.02	41.52	0.54045
	Female (%)	2.20	30.77	40.66	26.37	
My place of employment focuses on employee health and fitness	Male (%)	6.70	37.50	37.05	18.75	<b>0.00062</b>
	Female (%)	20.00	45.56	26.67	7.79	
While in a work setting, I witness comments or behaviors that make others feel uncomfortable.	Male (%)	27.35	66.37	5.38	0.90	<b>0.00000</b>
	Female (%)	9.89	58.24	19.78	12.09	
While in a work setting, I experience comments or behaviors that make me feel uncomfortable.	Male (%)	46.64	50.22	2.24	0.90	<b>0.00000</b>
	Female (%)	14.29	57.14	19.78	8.79	
While in a work setting my colleagues make jokes that are sexual in nature.	Male (%)	18.83	64.57	12.56	4.04	<b>0.00065</b>
	Female (%)	9.89	56.04	18.68	15.38	
I think about resigning from my place of employment due to personnel issues.	Male (%)	77.93	15.32	5.41	1.35	<b>0.03406</b>
	Female (%)	50.55	35.16	8.79	5.49	
I have witnessed poor team dynamics negatively impact patient care	Male (%)	51.35	42.34	3.60	2.70	0.08664
	Female (%)	29.67	58.24	7.69	4.40	

\*p-values are bolded if values are statistically significant

Data analysis was conducted using Chi-Squared test. Response options “Never” and “Sometimes” were combined and “Most of the Time” and “Always” were combined to yield binomial data that could be easily evaluated. Percentages for individual responses are presented below along with the p-values resulted from the Chi-Squared test performed and can be referenced in Table 2. Responses that had a p-value less than 0.05 were considered a significant finding.

Gender differences were proven to be significant in nearly all of the survey questions shown in Table 2. There were no significant findings between genders when referencing the frequency of pranks pulled on probationary members, how often crews eat together while on duty, and individuals witnessing poor team dynamics negatively impact patient care. Female participants were more likely to believe probationary members are isolated from their crews, admit to feeling anxious about returning to work during their probationary periods based on how they were treated by their colleagues, and were more likely to have thought about resignation during their probationary period. They were also more likely to admit to witnessing or experiencing comments or behaviors that make them or others uncomfortable, think about resigning from their positions due to personnel issues, and were more likely to report that their colleagues make jokes that are sexual in nature.

Participants were then asked to rank statements about their workplace on a Likert scale of “Agree” to “Disagree” to evaluate their perceptions of workplace culture and norms. A Chi-Squared test was used to analyze the data that is shown in Table 3. “Neutral” responses were omitted from data analysis in order to yield binomial data (df=1) but are still shown in the table below.

**Table 3. Ranking statements on a scale of “Agree” to “Disagree” to better understand workplace culture in fire service professions**

		Disagree	Neutral	Agree	p-value
My place of employment is diverse.	Male (%)	15.35	35.35	49.30	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	23.26	32.89	43.85	
My female colleagues are treated differently than my male colleagues.	Male (%)	53.70	22.22	24.07	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	42.72	20.86	36.42	
I feel that my gender, race, sexual orientation, or age have prevented me from advancing my career in public safety.	Male (%)	82.87	5.09	12.04	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	38.37	17.44	44.19	
My company has a harassment and discrimination policy that is well known by employees.	Male (%)	10.28	14.02	75.07	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	29.07	22.09	48.84	
I believe there is a clear sense of appropriate and inappropriate behavior among employees at my company	Male (%)	11.63	29.77	58.60	<b>0.0005</b>
	Female (%)	27.91	33.72	38.37	
If I report harassment or discriminatory behaviors, I am confident it will be handled appropriately.	Male (%)	17.59	17.59	64.81	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	48.84	19.77	31.40	
My supervisor does not address complaints regarding harassment or discrimination incidents	Male (%)	74.42	14.88	10.70	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	35.29	30.59	34.12	

If a probationary member cannot handle traditional hazing they aren't meant to work in public safety.	Male (%)	69.16	17.76	13.08	<b>0.0084</b>
	Female (%)	90.70	6.98	2.33	
I believe probationary members need to "earn their spot at the table"	Male (%)	35.65	27.31	37.04	0.0902
	Female (%)	43.02	34.88	22.09	
I feel comfortable discussing tough incidents with my colleagues when we return from a call.	Male (%)	5.58	8.84	85.58	<b>0.0009</b>
	Female (%)	16.28	27.91	55.81	
Poor team dynamics can make it difficult to provide effective patient care.	Male (%)	16.74	13.95	69.30	0.1036
	Female (%)	6.98	17.44	75.58	
I feel that personnel conflicts within my agency are more stressful than the job itself.	Male (%)	34.11	21.96	43.93	<b>0.0198</b>
	Female (%)	20.93	15.12	63.95	

As Table 3 indicates, women were less likely than men to: 1) view their place of employment as diverse; 2) believe their company had a harassment and discrimination policy that was well known to employees; 3) believe there is a clear sense of appropriate and inappropriate behavior among employees at their company; 4) have confidence that if they report an incident of harassment or discrimination to their employer it will be handled appropriately; 5) think their supervisors address complaints regarding harassment or discrimination; 6) think that if a probationary member cannot handle traditional hazing they aren't meant to work in public safety and 7) feel comfortable discussing tough incidents with their colleagues when returning from a call.

Men were less likely to believe their female colleagues were treated differently than their male colleagues, feel their gender, race, sexual orientation, or age have prevented them from advancing their career in public safety, and less likely think that personnel conflicts within their agencies are more stressful than the job itself. Majority of participants agreed that poor team dynamics can make it difficult to provide effective patient care (p-value = 0.1036). Results regarding probationary members needing to "earn their spot at the table" was insignificant among genders (p-value = 0.0902)

### *Harassment, Discrimination and Assault*

The final section of the survey focused on harassment, discrimination, and assault and evaluated participants' level of comfort and experiences with reporting these incidents. This section included five questions that involved "yes and no" responses that were measured using a Fisher's exact test. Responses that had a p-value less than 0.05 were considered a significant difference. These results are demonstrated in Table 4.

**Table 4. Participant’s experiences with workplace harassment, discrimination, and assault.**

		Yes	No	p-value
I feel comfortable reporting incidents of harassment or discrimination to my employer	Male (%)	89.0	11.0	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	54.0	46.0	
I have reported sexual harassment or discrimination to my employer in the past	Male (%)	17.0	83.0	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	46.0	54.0	
If you have reported an incident in the past do you feel it was handled appropriately?	Male (%)	63.0	37.0	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	20.0	80.0	
Have you or someone you know ever experienced verbal harassment by a colleague while working in a public safety profession?	Male (%)	80.0	20.0	0.1820
	Female (%)	87.0	13.0	
Have you or someone you know ever been inappropriately touched by a colleague while working in a public safety profession?	Male (%)	13.0	87.0	<b>0.0000</b>
	Female (%)	55.0	45.0	

Results show a significant gap between male and female participants regarding experiences of harassment, discrimination, and assault in the workplace. However, majority of participants, both male and female, agreed that verbal harassment was experienced in their workplace and didn’t target a specific gender. Male participants were more likely to feel comfortable reporting incidents of harassment and discrimination to their employers and were more likely to admit that their complaints were handled appropriately. With that being said, female participants were 2.7% more likely to report incidents to their employers yet, 3.2% less likely to feel their reports were handled appropriately. Female participants were also over four times as likely to experience or know someone who has experienced sexual assault from a colleague while on the job and 75 individuals responded “yes” to this question.

*Qualitative Data*

Participants were invited to elaborate on their experiences with workplace harassment, discrimination, and assault. The qualitative data obtained from these sections were gathered to provide depth and insights to further support the statistical findings. Themes including barriers to reporting, poor incident management, fear of or experienced retaliation and exclusion, and experienced harassment and assault that was sexual in nature were common.

Barriers to Reporting

Barriers to reporting incidents of harassment, discrimination, and assault were a common complaint among participants. Some participants mentioned that the resources they needed to file a report were not readily available to them or that they were advised against contacting their human resources department. One participant mentions:

I feel comfortable reporting incidents to my direct supervisor (shift BC [Battalion Chief]) and Division Supervisor. All of our department employees have been told we are NOT to speak to the HR Director until we follow chain-of-command. This has effectively closed the HR "open-door-policy" for reporting within our organization.



If supervisors are participating in the harassment, discrimination, or assault or if the individual does not feel comfortable reporting to their direct supervisor, this policy would prevent the employee from accessing the resources they need to properly report their incidents. This is further supported by the following comments:

Employer is the one discriminating. And the direct supervisor occasionally harasses.

Certain supervisors openly participate in inappropriate commentary or joke when concerns are brought forward.

When I was a rookie I had a Captain that would make racial comments and use it as a downgrading remarks

...The officers who harass and discriminate in my organization are always protected. I feel that this issue has gotten better since I first started. However, I still have to prove myself and am fearful of making mistakes at most incidents...

These comments suggest that using the chain of command to report incidents of harassment, discrimination, and assault can prevent the incident from being reported all together. Further, the data obtained above highlights that some of these behaviors originate from and are tolerated, or even promoted, by the command staff.

#### Mishandling of Harassment, Discrimination, and Assault Reports

Over 35 participants who have reported harassment, discrimination, or assault in the past have commented on how they believe their reports were mishandled. As shown below, lack of confidentiality was a major concern among several participants:

I have witnessed backlash. Union involvement makes it worse. I have NEVER seen an incident stay confidential. Administrative staff and board talk about incidents disregarding any confidentiality.

There were several incidents and a continuation of discrimination at our station (I was a FF at the time) several of us decided to bring the issues to our administration and we were asked to write our statements. Admin, Union, HR involved. The captain was fired. After the incident, personnel in the field knew verbatim what was said in our 'confidentiality' statements. There was no confidentiality and side comments were made about throwing a brother under the bus and the discrimination was overlooked with - if you're too soft then leave the field. The firefighter that the discrimination was against- no one wanted to work with him and he was singled out by many in the field that were friends with the captain that was fired.

I feel there will be retaliation and/or lack of confidentiality.

Another common complaint amongst participants was lack of punitive action against the perpetrator or the minimization of the victims' concerns and complaints. One participant stated:

In the past, I have [reported incidents of sexual harassment or discrimination] and was branded as the "loud mouth". Another female reported an incident, case was dismissed by HR, she was forced out and the person accused became the fire chief.

This comment highlights inappropriate action taken for harassment or discriminatory behaviors ultimately ending up in reward for the perpetrator and punishment for the victim, demonstrating to the rest of the organization that these behaviors are tolerated and that little to no punishment will result. One participant mentioned that they had to file a

complaint with the police department because the fire department they were working for did not fully investigate the situation and blamed the incident on the victim. Unfortunately, many other participants had similar experiences with victim blaming and dismissed concerns. Some women even admitted to blaming themselves for the harassment and assault they endured by their colleagues.

#### Workplace Culture that Fosters Harassment, Discrimination, and Assault Against Women

The fire service is known for its “brotherhood” that promotes a family like atmosphere both inside and outside of the firehouse. This concept significantly eliminates boundaries between coworkers and can create a hostile work environment for women. Inappropriate behaviors including sexualized jokes, inappropriate touching, and pranking are pervasive in this line of work and over 20 participants attested to these behaviors in their qualitative survey responses. Some of these responses are shown below:

Women are ONLY meant for EMS. Females are not meant to be Fire Department Officers.

Comments in previous firehouse settings (not current) included women are only good in the kitchen or bedroom, constant sexual jokes, regular comments of inappropriate nature.

Comments about gender roles were popular suggesting that while women are fulfilling more positions within the fire service, their capabilities and sense of belongingness is still questioned by many. The over-sexualization of women in the workplace was shown to lead to sexual assault for several participants and the following two comments demonstrate this concept:

I was at an outside training with my coworkers, and a captain from an outside agency was extremely drunk at the social hour (after hours). We had met once at my gym, but I was not friends with him. He proceeded to smack/hit my butt extremely hard and told me how nice my butt was. This was in front of my coworkers. I backed away, said “don’t” or something very quickly and he continued to come after me and hit me twice more on the butt. He acted like it was all a funny joke, and I did nothing to invite this. I backed away and left completely. It was so out of line.

Ass grabbing and when addressed, told "Don't be so prude. You're being a bitch."

Frequent justifications for these actions and remarks were that they were performed in a joking manner and shouldn't be taken seriously. This attitude towards harassment, discrimination, and assault, was proven in several comments to be commonplace among both command staff and the firefighters/EMTs. This is one probable contribution to the mishandling of reporting that was previously discussed.

#### Consequences of Workplace Harassment, Discrimination, and Assault

When the integrity of this system is questioned, it can involve lasting consequences for the person voicing their concerns and frequently results in retaliation. One participant explains, “When you report about the brotherhood, you are quickly categorized as “not one of the guys.” This exemplifies how the “brotherhood” eliminates boundaries and accountability while promoting an over-sexualized culture that results in sexual harassment, sexual assault, and discrimination of women.

Women participants described their workplace cultures as environments that fostered and enabled gender discrimination. They repeatedly gave examples of being kissed on the neck, grabbed at the waist, hips, and breasts, and smacked aggressively on the butt. These incidents occurred in training, in the firehouse, and in social situations with co-workers. These actions are so pervasive that one participant explains that while she was at the International Association of Firefighters Center of Excellence: Rehab & Treatment Center every female she attended with shared

experiences of sexual assault by a colleague. Further of the 87 females that completed this survey 47 self-reported incidents of sexual assault. Some of their stories and perspectives are shared below.

Years ago as a firefighter/paramedic I was pushed up against a table as a co-worker walked past me. He then put one hand on either side of me and proceeded to grind himself up against my backside. There were other employees around who were completely astonished and didn't know what to say. So no one said anything and the man who did it made the comment of "well, that was fun, was it good for you?" And I was mortified, violated and felt humiliated. No one said anything but he was laughing and then just walked away. I didn't do anything about it because I was part time and wanted full time employment someday and didn't want to cause a stir. It bothers me to this day and still upsets me and has caused some mental anguish but I made it full time and moved up the ranks to Deputy Chief at another department. Still makes me angry and humiliated. Bottom line, had I reported it and made an issue of it I am very sure I would not be in the position I am today.

During a training exercise another member played the patient and "pretended" to be a dementia patient and was very handsy and inappropriately touching me. They claimed I needed to be ready to deal with that scenario. I feel they had no reason to act it out and it made me very uncomfortable and lose confidence in my team having my back.

I know a female colleague who was kissed unwantedly by a male colleague who was very respected and had a history of doing this at other departments he worked for. He was fired. However, there was a lot of gossip about the incident and it was torture for the female colleague. She eventually resigned and is no longer working in public safety. She was very good at her job and we lost a great asset.

I was made to stand in a closet in my sports bra and underwear while 2 guys with BMI calipers touched my body with their hands and calipers to tell me how "fat" I was.

These comments provide further evidence of a culture that makes women fearful of retaliation and/or the inability of advancing their careers if they report incidents of harassment, discrimination, or assault to their employers. This is likely caused by previous occurrences of women reporting such incidents and then experiencing retaliation and isolation as a result. Additionally, a couple of participants commented on quality firefighters/EMS personnel leaving the department or career altogether based on similar experiences, further contributing to the under-representation of women in this profession. Other consequences of harassment, discrimination, and assault include weakened trust amongst crew members, a hostile work environment, and poor team dynamics that negatively impact patient care. Each of these stories provide unique insight as to what goes on behind the doors of fire stations, yet they all have one thing in common: the violation and humiliation of women in the workplace. This culture will not change overnight; as one participant put it, "The fire service has a toxic culture that is so ingrained it's almost impossible to address without a complete overhaul."

### *Discussion and Conclusions*

The qualitative data demonstrate that incidents of harassment, discrimination, and assault are often not properly handled by administrative personnel. Participants noted that even after many years of working for their fire departments, they still felt unable to use their voices to stand up for themselves. In some departments, this was due to the reporting structure itself, where reports were required to be made according to the chain of command. For some respondents, this forced them to report to the very supervisors who were offending against them. In situations where reporting was

taken out of the chain of command, investigations by independent bodies did not guarantee confidentiality or accountability. As 39 respondents noted, retaliation against victims was not unusual and even if an offender was fired, the workplace culture often became so harmful to the victim that they were forced to leave the unit or the profession entirely.

Women were also hesitant to report incidents out of fear of backlash, missing out on a promotion, or no longer being accepted as part of the group. While participants used different words to describe these patterns, several used the legal term “retaliation,” suggesting that they were aware of its legal consequences but felt they could do little to pursue or enforce them. While verbal harassment was prevalent among both male and female participants, it often took on a distinctly sexist tone for women, including comments about not being fit for the role of officer and demeaning, aggressive, and sexualized comments by both their colleagues and supervisors. Participants noted the prevalence of victim blaming, and some even blamed themselves for the occurrences of the abuse and the inability to stand up to it.

Notably, researchers intentionally worded the question, ““Have you or someone you know ever been inappropriately touched by a colleague while working in a public safety profession?”” so as to potentially include both incidents of physical and sexual assault. Yet, nearly all participants described incidents of sexual assault when asked to provide examples.

The qualitative results further support the quantitative data that a culture of violence is prevalent within the fire service. Participants of both genders, especially women, reported high rates of verbal harassment, hazing, discrimination, and assault in the workplace. While this culture of violence can affect all firefighters, it disproportionately targets and inhibits the careers of women firefighters. Women were more likely to admit to isolation of probationary members, feel anxious about returning to work based on how they were treated by their colleagues, and had more frequent thoughts of resignation. They were also more likely to witness comments or behaviors that have made them or others uncomfortable and were more likely to report that their colleagues made jokes that were sexual in nature.

Participants reported that abusive and discriminatory behaviors were often tolerated, as offenders were seldom held accountable and victims were often blamed or retaliated against for reporting. Participants attributed this culture of violence, at least in part, to the hazing of probationary employees, a “joking” atmosphere, and a workplace culture dominated by men and assumptions of masculine strength and superiority.

### Limitations

Limitations of this study include a non-random sample that was distributed through various outlets on the internet including the IRB-approved press release through Fire Rescue 1 and the IRB approved email providing limited control over who participated in the study. Individuals who felt strongly about these topics were possibly more inclined to participate, which may constitute a form of selection bias. Further, uniform and/or legal definitions of harassment, discrimination, and assault were not provided to participants prior to the study. Thus, the behaviors were open to interpretation from each participant. This form of response bias was less problematic in the questions that were asked in this study because researchers asked specific behavioral questions including phrasing such as “being touched inappropriately” or “witnessing or experiencing behaviors or comments that make others feel uncomfortable.” The specificity of these questions left less room for interpretation of each question compared to questions asking participants if they have ever been “sexually harassed or discriminated against.”

### Future Action

While there is no simple solution to change this culture, there is evidence-based research that supports that educational programs surrounding harassment and discrimination can lead to lower rates of harassment and discrimination over time (Kulik and Roberson 2008). Further, these programs can allow individual biases to be addressed and can help individuals navigate through personal biases to prevent incidents of these behaviors (Burke 2013).

Currently, there are no national or local requirements in the firefighting and emergency medical services curriculum to educate students and/or employees about harassment, discrimination, and assault. National firefighter

and EMS curriculum should include a section on harassment, discrimination, and assault and should provide students the knowledge and resources they need to properly handle these incidents; including how to properly report incidents to their employers along with information on how access the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Further, teaching on how to acknowledge and navigate through personal biases to hopefully minimize them might be useful. Students should also be taught to look for warning signs of depression and suicidality in their colleagues and should be given a lesson on how to address such incidents. Training and development is also needed at the managerial level to educate employers on how to properly handle incidents of harassment, discrimination, and assault within their agencies. Further, perpetrators need to be held accountable for their actions rather than promoted to positions of power. Thus, systemic reform that centers on safety and justice by promoting qualified individuals who support culture change may be essential.

This project has brought critical insight to the prevalence of harassment, discrimination and assault in fire and emergency medical service professions and has been shown to primarily target women. It is believed that this study is the first to evaluate qualitative data that provided valuable insight to firefighter and EMS culture and behaviors. Future research evaluating qualitative data along with long term studies on the health and safety of firefighters who experience harassment, discrimination, and assault could positively impact the future of fire service professions.

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