

Women firefighters can improve safety, but department culture must change

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Credit: Drexel University

Incorporating new ideas from women can improve safety in traditionally male fire departments, but the hypermasculine culture in some can make female firefighters feel unwelcome and less likely to share their ideas,

according to a new qualitative study from Drexel University.

The Center for Firefighter Injury Research & Safety Trends (FIRST), run by Jennifer A. Taylor, PhD, associate professor in Drexel's Dornsife School of Public Health, conducted the study. Utilizing interviews and focus groups of female firefighters and leaders in various departments, the study sought to see what unique safety behaviors [women](#) bring to the job, how such practices might contribute to a safer fire service, and what cultural barriers exist to implementation.

Many women in the study said that they felt shunned simply for their gender. When that's the case, it makes it harder to engage in good safety practices because they could be frowned-upon by colleagues.

"[A] hyper masculine environment limits all firefighters' ability to speak up and, thus, address safety concerns," wrote Yasin Kahn, Andrea L. Davis, and Taylor in their article published in the *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*.

In spite of that, according to the study's participants, women firefighters are more likely to try more diverse ergonomic techniques when performing a task. It's important to note that tasks on the job can be challenging to anyone, regardless of gender, because of body size and biomechanics.

"We use better technique and lot of guys get hurt because they just try to muscle it or, God forbid, they ask a woman to help with a ladder," said one female firefighter with more than 15 years of experience.

"What we have heard loud and clear is that not every firefighter—male or female—has the physique of an NFL defensive tackle," Taylor said. "Fire departments need to be more diverse in their training academies to be sure people know of multiple strategies to apply to each task."

One of those strategies includes asking for help, which can be looked down upon as being weak, the study's participants indicated. As such, many women who already felt under the microscope, didn't want to give the impression of weakness, even if it meant risking injury.

"I'm afraid of [how] it looks to the public that, 'Oh look, that guy had to move in and left that cot for that woman because she couldn't lift it,' when that's not the case," a 15-year female firefighter said.

That goes hand-in-hand with reporting injuries.

"Participants explained that injury reporting was akin to asking for help," especially for men, the study's authors wrote.

"When [male firefighters] get hurt, they're going to go, 'I don't want to say something because that'll make me look weak and stupid,'" a 15-year female fire veteran said. "Whereas [women are] more like, 'I want to make sure I'm covered [by workers' comp] so if I really, truly get hurt, I'm going to be taken care of.'"

Sometimes leaving injuries unreported can be career-ending, the study found, so a willingness to speak up actually helps departments as a whole.

But what can be particularly damaging to firehouses are hostile cultures toward women.

When it comes to training, female fire service members recounted being put through "girl drills," which amounted to extra or harder training that only women had to complete. That included anything from extra ladder carry drills to something as dangerous as practicing fire calls with their oxygen packs being turned off.

On top of that, multiple participants in the study recounted sexual harassment as a form of hostility in firehouses they'd served in.

"My last straw there was a lieutenant that kept touching me and he finally slapped my butt," a female [firefighter](#) of five years said. "The chief told me, 'Oh, he's just joking. You got to learn to deal with that.' That was the answer for everything."

Taylor believes the study showed such harassment makes the actual physical part of the job more difficult to deal with, affecting the health of an entire firehouse.

"If you're not psychologically safe, you can't be physically safe," Taylor said. "Sexual discrimination and hostile work environments will not help you retain a diverse workforce that looks at problems from multiple perspectives. In today's fire service where budgets are growing tighter and the nature of the work is changing (to more EMS calls), we need that now more than ever."

So what can fire departments and firehouses do to make themselves more welcoming to women in their ranks?

Taylor laid out three things.

First, understanding that everyone, no matter their gender, have different biomechanics and physiologies.

"Make the job fit the worker, not the other way around," Taylor said. Second, historically and statistically, women have lower injury rates than men.

"Some of that can be explained by the types of employment men and women have traditionally held, but not all of it can," Taylor said.

"Women and men are socialized differently around risk. Men are told to embrace it, women are told to avoid it. Therefore, it is possible that women would look at hazardous work by weighing the risks and benefits more than their male counterparts." Lastly, having a zero tolerance anti-discrimination policy is important.

"Stick to it," Taylor said. "Don't re-victimize the victims. Is it, 'Do what we say, not what we do,' or 'Do what we say and watch us do it by example?' Establishing policy is not usually the problem but, rather, policy tends to break down during the implementation phase."

Such perspective "may move the needle on safety from less of a hope to more of a reality," Taylor concluded.

More information: Yasin A. Khan et al, Ladders and lifting: How gender affects safety behaviors in the fire service, *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/15555240.2017.1358642](https://doi.org/10.1080/15555240.2017.1358642)

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