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Keywords

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Title

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Running Head

Gendered Dynamics of Wildland Firefighting

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This paper examines the gendered dynamics of wildland firefighting through analysis of employment statistics and in-depth interviews with employees of the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales, Australia. The statistics suggest increased gender equality for women following the affirmative gender politics of the 1990s in a previously male-dominated workplace. However, we argue these statistics mask how some patterns of practice surrounding fire management continue to reproduce a gendered workplace. Turning to the concept of hegemonic masculinities, we explore the ongoing gendered assumptions of this workplace and identify those that prove most resistant to change around bodies, masculinity, leadership and parenting. This focuses the spotlight on gender equity. The article considers respect of gender difference in relation to wider questions of mentoring, training and leadership.

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Introduction

The wildland firefighting profession is not dissimilar from other male-dominated workplaces, including structural firefighting and the construction industry (Wright 2008; Denissen and Saguy 2014), in raising critical questions about the limits placed on women. Unlike structural firefighting where gender discrimination is more widely reported (Women in the Fire Service 1997), the scale and magnitude of gendered inequity is largely unknown in wildland firefighting (Langlois 2014). Yet, a 2015 survey of the wildland firefighting profession starkly revealed the gender discrimination at work internationally (AFE Forthcoming). Fifty-five percent reported observing gender discrimination of others in the workplace, and 45% reported personal experience of gender discrimination. On the topic of sexual harassment at work, 32% of respondents reported observing incidents, while 25% had personal experience. When asked if these episodes were reported, the majority of respondents

answered 'no'. More than half of respondents held particular concerns about sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the wildland fire vocation. The study concluded that opening up discussion on how those in privileged groups reproduce gendered inequalities is an important first step towards making the wildland fire profession stronger and more equitable (AFE Forthcoming). This conclusion aligns with studies that position natural resource management, and in particular wildfire management in North America and Australia, as a definitive example of the institutionalisation of patriarchy that benefits some men (Childs 2006; Davidson and Black 2001; Desmond 2007; Enarson 1984; Eriksen 2014a; Pacholok 2013). In addition, a body of scholarship recognises how division of labour, decision-making and responsibilities are linked with a history of narrowly defined masculine and feminine identities through the gendered character of risk exposure (Enarson 2012; Eriksen et al. 2010; Whittaker et al. 2015). Studies of gendered practices of firefighting entrenched in a heroic masculinity reveal not only men's exposure to and responsibility for managing risks, but also the suppression of emotional distress (Pacholok 2009; Yarnal et al. 2004). A related discussion of masculinised practices of firefighting configures the presence of women (and femininity) as a 'problem' (Ainsworth et al. 2014; Eriksen 2014b; Eriksen and Waitt In Press; Maleta 2009).

Following the call for an open discussion on how to move beyond a narrow masculinised practice of firefighting, this paper examines the gendered character of wildland firefighting within the New South Wales (NSW) National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Australia.¹ Affirmative action in the NPWS dates from the 1990s through advertisement of ranger positions earmarked specifically for women to create a more gender-balanced workforce. These positions were not a legal requirement but rather aligned with broader public movements for social justice in Australia in the wake of the passage of state anti-discrimination laws and federal sex discrimination and affirmative action legislation in the 1970s and 1980s (Gorton and Brewer 2015). This mirrors affirmative action taken during the same decades in the United States Forest Service (Eriksen 2014a). It begs the question: to what extent did

¹. The NPWS is part of the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH). It manages more than 850 NSW national parks and reserves, covering over 7 million hectares of land (<http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/about-npws>)

affirmative action policies advocating for gender equality² facilitate a process leading toward the abolition of gender hierarchies and greater gender equity³ within wildland firefighting?

The paper is divided into three main parts. The first section outlines Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity to investigate the gendered dynamics of firefighting, and how this concept enables us to explore masculinities and femininities as configurations of practices that are socially constructed, embodied, unfold and change over time. The second section provides an overview of the research methods. The third section presents the results in six sub-sections that offer insights to the gendered workplace dynamics – from affirmative policies, wildfire management, mentoring, leadership, role-exclusion and change, and motherhood. The wildland firefighting profession is demonstrated to be a powerful site for reinforcing gendered organisational expectations about bodies, masculinity, leadership and parenthood. We conclude that the most tangible way to challenge gendered assumptions of firefighting is through affirmative action *and* an acute awareness of how affirmative action is often countered by gendered norms that continue to shape domestic and professional life.

Gender and Firefighting

Men and masculinity are a key consideration for studies of firefighting culture (Desmond 2007; Eriksen and Waitt In Press). Such a focus seeks to better understand how this privileged group reproduces inequality within a male-dominated workplace. Pease (2010) quells any optimism for affirmative action until male privilege is questioned. As discussed by Eriksen (2014a) and Pacholok (2013), gender inequalities remain persistent within firefighting in part because men have not been positioned as part of the problem.

To address this oversight, recent literature investigates how the marginalisation or domination of particular masculinities occurs within firefighting institution. For example, Desmond (2007) put to

². *Equality* concerns the condition of being equal, sameness, and evenness.

³. *Equity* is concerned with moral justice and rights.

good use Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* to study the way young 'country' men deploy their bodies. He explores how a general country-masculine habitus transmutes into a specific wildland firefighting habitus. This work pays attention to individual habitus, as well as ways of thinking about and acting in the world. These are conceived as non-conscious dispositions rather than as norms or conscious intent.

Eriksen (2014a) applies Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinity* into conceptualisations of firefighting. Working within a structuralist paradigm, hegemonic masculinity considers the configuration of gender practice. Connell (2005) explains this configuration as the embodiment of 'acceptable' behaviour in response to the problematic legitimacy of patriarchy. This behaviour secures the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Hegemonic masculinity was initially discussed to problematize universalising claims about men and helped to untangle gender hierarchies, plurality of masculinities, and struggles for dominance (Connell 2005). Eriksen's (2014a) work underscores how gender inequalities are reproduced through a range of practices that sustain a hegemonic firefighting masculinity, from everyday language around operational terminology (such as war euphemisms), choice of uniforms, office layouts, the desirable skills listed in job advertisements and the number of men and women on recruitment panels, to consultation and briefing styles.

The literature supports arguments that affirmative policies alone do not address workplace gender inequalities. Indeed Fordham (2004, 182) argues, 'even when stated policy appears gender aware, institutions reproduce the prevailing values of society more often than they challenge them'. As a result, prejudice and sexism remain firmly embedded in social structures, albeit often latent or disguised in equal opportunity policies. Investigating gender relations within the NPWS is therefore an imperative given the elements of optimism provided by affirmative policies in an otherwise institutional context with a historical weight of socially admired masculinities defined by a firefighting patriarchy.

Building on the work of Eriksen (2014a) to interpret the organisational culture of the NPWS, we draw on hallmarks of Connell's (2005) gender framework. We explore how hegemonic masculinity: (a)

occupies a dominant way of being within a patriarchal society, (b) naturalises men's dominance over women while being open to change, (c) and positions men as a source of inspiration for change. The concept of hegemonic masculinity draws attention to the structural dimension or gender order of organisational socialisation. From this perspective Connell (2008, 242) reminds us that, 'without even being named as gender, a socially-defined masculinity may be built in to the very concept of management or organizational rationality'. Our analysis demands first careful consideration of the gendered organisational decision-making of the NPWS, alongside wider society-wide gendered practices (Messerschmidt 1995). We remain alert to the ways in which certain masculinities conferred by particular patterns of practices are more socially validated than others (Sabo and Gordon 1995).

Methodology

This research project had two parts: the first involved semi-structured interviews with 27 NPWS employees during July-August 2011 and August 2013; the second part gathered NPWS employment statistics. Recruitment materials inviting participation in an interview about the gendered aspects of the workplace were extended via e-mail from the lead-author to the NPWS Head Office. In turn, this e-mail was forwarded to Regional Officers who were asked to distribute the invitation to all firefighting staff. Interested parties were instructed to contact the lead-author directly to ensure confidentiality. To uphold organisational third-party confidentiality rights, the number of personnel who received an e-invitation is unknown. The interview sample included 19 women and eight men ranging in age from late-twenties to late-fifties. Of these, at least 13 women and five men have children.

As part of its charter, the NPWS is responsible for managing fire on all lands it controls.⁴ The 27 participants represent a diversity of wildland firefighting capacities, which are an essential part of their everyday roles as regional officers, project managers, rangers, field officers and administrative

⁴ For more detail on NPWS fire management, see: <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/fire/mngfireinnswnatpks.htm>

personnel.⁵ Roles and responsibilities during firefighting operations differ from everyday operational structures and are instead determined by firefighter training and experience (reflected in the roles outlined in Table 2). For example, the NPWS maintains aviation-trained firefighting crews specially trained for working in places hard to access, which can include both rangers and field officers. The length of service of most participants ranged from 8-18 years, while one participant was a recent recruit and three had been in the service for more than 25 years. Participants include employees with and without gender equity concerns in their workplace. The 27 participants are not a representative sample of all wildland firefighters or employees of the NPWS. Rather our study upholds the principles of qualitative research, which acknowledges that as part of dynamic interviews, participants construct one of a number of possible perceived versions of their lived experience and practices through a process of anecdotes, synthesis of events and recall of stories. How participants spoke-up about their experiences of gender in the workplace is bound to their individual and collective identities. This paper celebrates the diversity of perspectives that exist amongst employees within the organisation.

The interview questions were designed to guide the conversation along three themes: 1) why participants chose a career in wildland firefighting; 2) how participants negotiate everyday gender relations, traditions and identities; and 3) to what extent gender politics and policies have changed during their time in the workforce. The gender, positionality and conduct of the interviewer (the lead author) may influence the answering of questions by participants depending on shared knowledge, cultural differences, and trust. Hence, a semi-structured ethnographic style interviewing approach discussed by Riley and Harvey (2007), Riessman (2008) and (Eriksen et al. 2011) was employed to create possibilities for sharing alternative, humanized narratives.

Interviews occurred at a location of the participants' choosing to ease any potential discomfort or concern relating to discussing workplace issues or emotionally charged stories. They lasted between

⁵ Regional officers and project managers are in charge of organizational and operational policies and practices. Rangers report to regional officers; they coordinate, implement and supervise projects and staff (including field officers), and implement the functions, policies and legislative requirements of the OEH. Field Officers are on the front line and do everything from fighting fires and supervising pest programs, to maintaining walking tracks and bush regeneration.

45 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The next stage involved thematic analysis of the transcripts using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) NVivo v.10. To gain insight to the gendered dimensions at play, the primary focus of the data analysis was to highlight similarities and differences across the three *a priori* conversational themes that guided the interviews (outlined above), as well as emerging themes, such as parenthood, aviation and mentoring. Bringing together the authors' respective interpretations of the transcripts and cross-referencing their themes ensured trustworthiness of the analysis. The interview quotations are exemplar responses that illustrate the patterns of gendered practice in the workplace.

Results and Discussion

Affirmative Policies

There was an element of optimism in how many participants spoke of a generational shift that signalled the abolition of gender hierarchies. These changes were attributed to a previous generation of women. For example, one female ranger explained that:

There was a group of women before me in National Parks who broke down a lot of the barriers for women in National Parks, not just in firefighting, but generally. They're very strong women. They basically had to beat the men at their own game. They had to be as tough as any other man and because they were the ones that came through and broke down all the barriers, it was a lot easier for my generation who came through after. (Female Ranger, Aug. 2011)

Participants identified conscientious, long-term efforts at an institutional level to unsettle a patriarchal workplace by a range of measures, including the banning of pornographic magazines and nude calendars, alongside increased job-sharing opportunities for women returning from maternity leave, and the introduction of female uniform sizes. One fire management officer outlined why uniforms became a priority:

When I first started firefighting we had uniforms – overalls – and I don't know how many times the helicopter circled me doing a pee in the bush because it was funny, you know? You'd learn not to look up. You'd leave your helmet on and look down because then they didn't know who it was, other than it was a girl. The agency addressed that; they actually went, "We need to give them pants" and when the uniforms came out they said females, as a priority, get pants because they had to stage it over a few years. (Snr. Female Ranger, Aug. 2013)

Given affirmative action policies, gender equality was discussed as an inherent attribute of a new generation of firefighters. All participants, regardless of gender, expressed that women had a role to play in all aspects of wildland firefighting – management, fireline and operational. Yet, male participants often configured this role with essentialised gendered assumptions. For example, participants expected women to bring more balanced decision-making and more nurturing teamwork. As two long-serving employees stated:

There's no reason and there's no role that precludes one sex from the other in any of those roles. The fact that it is so intensely male-dominated, I think that gender balance would be terrific. I think we'd get better decision-making. (Male Project Manager, Aug. 2013)

I think in Parks there's less of that machismo and more of that acceptance and nurturing process [than in other organisations]. I'm not saying "nurturing" in a condescending way, I'm just saying that there is that process. I think that's really important. (Male Ranger, Aug. 2013)

Looking back, all participants could identify gender inequality, and were optimistic of "generational change" driven by an ageing workforce and an influx of new staff.

There's still the old school people here but we have had a new input of younger people into the system and that definitely changes the dynamics. (Female Ranger, Aug. 2013)

The optimism participants expressed about gender equality is in part reflected in the increasing total number of women employed in the NPWS (Table 1)⁶. However, there are notable differences for women employed in ranger positions in comparison to field officer roles and senior management positions. Likewise, the optimism participants expressed for gender equality is troubled by the ratio of men and women in firefighting and Incident Management Teams (IMT) (Table 2). The greatest proportion of women is assigned to IMT support and officer roles, while men continue to be assigned the greatest proportion of senior operational roles (Divisional Commander (DC) and Incident Controller (IC)).

INSERT TABLE 1

INSERT TABLE 2

These statistics mirror how, upon greater reflection during the interviews, the initial optimism surrounding gender parity within the workplace usually turned out to be more complex. Often participants linked the assignment of IC roles to a naturalised gender order. For example, two female participants explained:

If you're in the Incident Control Centre, often the girls get put in the admin roles or the communication roles ... but I think it really depends on who you're working with and how the team goes 'cause if there's someone particularly bombastic there then you have to be able to stand up to them. (Female Ranger, Aug. 2013)

I do think it's changing. It's the norm now to have quite a reasonable percentage of females in training roles, in IMTs. Not that often in Incident Controller roles in, you know, the bigger

⁶ Each individual table reports samples of particular roles contained within different employment categories. The total sample population is therefore not the same across Tables 1-3.

fires but certainly it's becoming a bit more common in hazard reduction burns, Class I fires and stuff. (Snr. Female Ranger, Aug. 2013)

Despite affirmation policies, quite different gender expectations still remained. This is consistent with arguments that women who desire to gain inclusion into the ranks must meet men's perceived firefighting practices, such as non-emotional risk-taking behaviours (Desmond 2007; Eriksen 2014a; Yarnal et al. 2004). This raises questions of lingering gendered expectations, which restrict women from certain roles.

Wildfire Management

The gender challenges faced by men and women working in fire management seem to revolve around two issues. The first is the notion of a patriarchal gender order that positions men above women in the process of decision-making (as illustrated in the two preceding quotes). The second is a particular style of firefighting masculinity, which aligns gender with a particular naturalised understanding of the body. For example, one ranger's description of collegial acceptance rests on hegemonic firefighting masculinity tied to bodily proficiencies that involves skilful use of a rake hoe:

I became more competent than them. I would get in and muck in a lot more. I think that's partly my farming background. I remember a couple of the guys that I'd work with telling the other guys "She's alright, as opposed to the rest of them". But it wasn't actually just about women. It was about rangers compared to field officers. It's almost like it's a blue-collar, white-collar tension. So when these guys would say, "She's alright", it was 'she' as a woman but also 'she' as a ranger. "Oh, she's got a degree but oh, she can still use a rake hoe".
(Female Ranger, Aug. 2011)

In this example, acceptance as a ranger is based on reproducing the hegemonic gender norms through the physical training of bodies for strength. It highlights how gendered assumptions amongst wildland firefighters are embodied. Regardless of gender, firefighters may start to reproduce the hegemonic

norms of a firefighting masculinity through physical training for strength and endurance (Desmond 2007). In turn, the muscled, fit body functions as a renewed symbol of firefighting masculinity. However, cultural assumptions that prioritise physique fail to recognise technique. Firefighters with skilled technique can perform alongside the strongest of colleagues. The problem is that technique, as an alternative to strength, is not materially apparent to the unknowing eye until observed and recognised as such. The privilege given to body shape, stamina and size is one of the key reasons why, as one female participant remarked, “As a woman you are on the back foot before you have even started”. The privilege given to the material body obscures the competence of many women firefighters and undermines some men’s confidence in the abilities and leadership of female colleagues (see also Eriksen 2014a; Agostino 2003).

Confidence in the firefighting competencies of self and others is central to how women and men perform and experience gender and relate to others on the job. Participants described having to “prove oneself” to gain respect, responsibility, opportunity and equality. It is therefore disappointing, after 20 years of affirmative action, that women and men continue to describe that gender equity was absent in relation to firefighting activity. The need for women to “prove” themselves as competent, trustworthy firefighters before they could gain the respect of their colleagues and superiors was particularly evident in discussion of, for example, operating heavy machinery and remote area fieldwork. Narratives were also framed in terms of female firefighters needing to “prove everyone wrong” by “keeping up” with male colleagues in their crew, usually in terms of strength and stamina. One ranger illustrates how hegemonic masculinity informed her firefighting practices:

There were a limited number of us winched in [via helicopter to a remote area wildfire]. We had a particular job to do and in that situation I felt really conscious that I didn’t want to be seen to not be doing as good a job as the males involved because I thought, if I was them and given there’s so few of you, you need everyone to pull their weight properly. So I think I probably massively overcompensated . . . [knowing] if I don’t do this someone else is going to have to pick up after me and we can’t get out of here until we’ve done the job. So I worked my

butt off because I thought I don't want to be seen as not, you know, a fully useful member of the team when I was winched in. (Female Ranger, July 2011)

For some women, practices of reshaping their body to conform to conventions of hegemonic masculinity was important so as “not to let the team down”:

My time doing a lot of remote work, I was also doing personally a lot of fitness stuff. I was something of a gym junky and concentrating a lot on strength and that sort of thing. But it's really important for that role. ... Blokes don't necessarily think about it as much, particularly field officers, they have a physical job. They're out there doing physical work every day. Going out to a fire is not necessarily that different. Coming from a mostly office position and then being out doing the physically demanding work, you need to have the confidence in your own fitness and endurance to do that. But also then being maybe the one female in a crew of four or six blokes, you also feel, "I don't want to let the team down," from a fitness or keeping up perspective. (Female Project Manager, Aug. 2013)

These narratives reveal how patterns of physical training are linked to hegemonic masculinity amongst those young women who felt compelled to demonstrate their firefighting credentials in relationship to men via embodied strength and fitness. The social structures that align femininity with physical weakness may heighten these women's awareness of their gender in the context of remote fieldwork. In Connell's (2005) terms, those women who train exclusively for strength to counter perceived weakness of female bodies are complicit with the hegemonic masculinity of the organisational culture (in firefighting and other professions). Echoing Desmond's (2007) discussion, male and female participants who were most able to comply with gendered expectations about bodies and masculinity developed self-esteem, confidence and respect, as one participant explained:

I go in a bit surer of myself and don't feel I need to prove myself. Because I've been around long enough, I know I can deal with issues and problems, and if there's a new person in that I

haven't worked with before, I don't need to prove myself to them. They'll get to know me working with me. Whereas before I think I did go in a bit – probably a bit more pushy and abrupt and trying to assert myself a bit more. (Snr. Female Ranger, Aug. 2013)

Only once social reputation was achieved, that they could live up to male colleagues, did these women no longer express the necessity to prove themselves by becoming, at times, 'pushy', 'abrupt' and 'assertive'.

Mentoring

Participants consistently identified mentoring as being key to challenge hegemonic firefighting masculinity. For example, one training coordinator challenged hegemonic firefighting masculinity by emphasising practices the prioritised technique over strength:

The base training that we do for firefighting involves working with pumps and being able to start pumps. They're [women] quite intimidated about how much effort it takes to [manually] start a pump. ... I've found that generally if you spend a little bit of time with them and show them the right techniques they don't have any problems. ... I think it's just a self-conscious thing that most females think, "I'm not physically as strong as what's going to be required". Once you show them the right techniques they realise that it's not about strength. It's about the actual way that you do it. It's the technique that you use rather than the strength that you've got. (Snr. Male Ranger, Aug. 2013)

This senior ranger's tactic of mentoring around technique challenges the dominance of men's bodies over women. This is important because technique is divorced from the institutional and society-wide alignment of firefighting masculinity with physical strength. Female participants, in particular, emphasised the important role of their mentor(s) in creating opportunities for public displays of acknowledgment that confirmed their identity within fire management. Mentors, and mentoring, are a

strong counteract to the blatant disregard or disapproval of new ideas by some members of dominant groups, which delays cultural change. Without mentors, gendered inequalities are likely to persist.

Leadership

They [women] come to you the night before and go, "I don't want to put myself out there." So you talk them around and the most amazing thing happens almost every single time. They've got a particular skill set for working with people. They've already got the three Cs: command, control, and coordination. They've got the coordination. They've got control. But they don't necessarily play in that command role. Behind the scenes they [women] probably do. They're the drivers in a lot of the areas and when they finally have a go at it, you uncover these gems of Incident Controllers. (Male Project Manager, Aug. 2013)

This quotation illustrates how one male project manager draws on essentialised white middle-class ideas of femininity that position women as both ‘naturally’ demure and organisers. This participant offers an element of optimism that women adopting leadership roles become part of the process towards the abolition of gender hierarchies. Yet, women in our study reflected on how gender relations, socially constituted through patterns of leadership practice, do not undermine patriarchy. They asserted that, as women, they are often criticised if too assertive in their style of leadership communication, whereas it is considered the norm for men to behave this way:

As a woman, if you express an opinion freely, you are often seen as being overconfident or arrogant or a bitch, whereas men are viewed very differently for expressing things the same way. (Snr. Female Ranger, Aug. 2011)

This narrative reveals the highly gendered practice of leadership, despite the demonstrated ability of female participants as strong and capable leaders. For those women who do not comply with the normative gendered behaviour, their social status in the organisation is questioned with words such as “overconfident” and “arrogant”. However, for men assertive leadership styles were ascribed positive

social status, described as being “self-assured” and “confident”. The negative connotation attached to women adopting an assertive leadership style marks a fine line of negotiation between institutional condemnation and praise.

Narratives about the assertive leadership styles configured by the bravado of firefighting masculinity illustrate the dynamics of masculinities. Some questioned the hegemonic masculine patterns of leadership:

Sometimes, in the fire control centres, I guess the best analogy is ‘Battle of the Silverbacks’. A lot of it is about the inter-relationship between the men involved and, you know, that’s really worried me at times in terms of how that affected the actual decisions that were being made. (Snr. Female Ranger, Aug. 2011)

Likewise, one Project Manager noted how hegemonic gendered assumptions around the decision-making process operate not only to exclude many women but involve risk-taking:

The “command” is something I find fascinating, that so many women aren't given the opportunity perhaps in that role and in that environment. I do think the decision-making process would be a lot better because I think males have that blind spot, which pushes the safety boundaries all the time. (Male Project Manager, Aug. 2013)

His experience underlies how hegemonic masculinity helps understand men’s bravado or risk-taking firefighting behaviour (see also Desmond 2007) and continues to shape the career paths of men and women in the NPWS.

Role Exclusion and Change

Without prompting, participants consistently described the aviation branch as a “boys club”. This aligns with employment statistics that suggest little progress toward gender equity in the position of

aviation-trained firefighters. Ninety-nine percent of trained NPWS Aviation Specialists (n=89) in 2013 were men. A Project Manager explained the pattern of gendered practice that discriminates against women seeking employment in the aviation branch:

[Interviewer: You mentioned the stonewall that she [female aviation pilot] faced when she first arrived. How does that play out in the everyday work environment?] Observationally, I don't think she's given the same respect as the other people of the same skill set or experience are given. It's a harder road. She has to prove herself. When I think about how there was a male and a female start at the same time. Watching their supervisor put them through the paces and do the training, the treatment to her was more robust, let's say, and harsher, to be honest. So she had to do many more briefings and practises before she was allowed to do it for real than her male counterpart. [Interviewer: Without any apparent reason?] Oh, in fact, it panned out that she is a much better operator than her male counterpart, who was let go early and was found wanting. So he's got back under supervision. [Interviewer: It's kind of ironic, isn't it? The fact she was grilled longer would mean that she was more prepared once she was deployed.] It is. Yes, I think you're right. Had the male counterpart gone under the same regime, I think that he would have been all right. (Male Project Manager, Aug. 2013)

This participant suggests that women's experience of securing employment within the aviation branch is 'harsher', 'harder' and that they are not 'given the same respect'. These practices illustrate how men's dominance over women is allowed to continue. Anyone who assumes that men are better positioned to undertake the work of aviation specialists (or any other firefighting role) than women, are reproducing hegemonic firefighting masculinity.

Equally, there are some men who are subordinated by dominant cultural assumptions of gender often associated with field officers. One ranger explained her experience:

I've always felt it's an advantage to be a woman. It feels like you're playing it both ways somehow. If you're a male ranger dealing with field officers there's certain expectations of them, which is probably as difficult to deal with as maybe the lack of expectation of the females. So in some ways as a female, I've always felt you have a bit more freedom. You can kind of jolly them along and yet still get to do what you want to do. I don't know how that works for the male rangers, whether they really have to fit in with the guys and behave a certain way. (Female Ranger, July 2011)

These words echo Desmond's (2007) discussion of firefighting: men also have to 'fit in' with the hegemonic masculinity. "Boys clubs" can be as exclusive to some men as they are to all women, as the enactment of privileged masculinities not only enables most men to dominate women, it also enables some men to dominate other men (Pease 2010; Pacholok 2013). Connell (2005) refers to the benefits men get from the subordination of women and men who do not live up to the ideals, as patriarchal dividends. This is manifested in the somewhat messy reality of the everyday gendered identities and interactions within the NPWS, described by participants with terms such as "the swinging pendulum of discrimination". For example, participants explained there are strong cultural assumptions still made about how employees should perform gender in particular roles, and indeed how promotion operated through these cultural expectations. A "tap on the shoulder" was described by several participants as the unofficial method used to single out staff to temporarily act in higher positions or be shortlisted for competitive positions, such as on aviation crews. This promotion process narrows understandings of *real* firefighters to outdoorsy men, that can reproduce the 'venerable rural myth of rugged individualism' configured by strength, stamina and heterosexuality (Campbell et al. 2006, 2). Some men who fight fires can thereby be as constrained by hegemonic masculinity as women, as they navigate the socially constructed, historically situated, and narrow expression of firefighting masculinity.

There is nevertheless evidence that hegemonic masculinity within wildland firefighting can change. An example of where hegemonic masculinities may be changing is in patterns of fitness test

requirements to qualify for remote area firefighting that are less aligned to physical strength. Instead, qualification is achieved by what one participant called a “modified arduous” demonstration of the fit, rather than muscly, body:

Every year in order to be competent to participate in firefighting you have to undergo this fitness test. There are a number of levels: arduous, moderate or light – and those different levels are assigned to different roles in firefighting. In order to do remote [area] firefighting you have to do the arduous test ... carry over 20 kilos on your back and walk 12 times round a standard athletics oval, within a certain amount of time. So if I wanted to do the arduous I was alongside men that were over 6 foot tall, big muscly field officers... People were getting in within a couple of seconds of the limit, particularly the shorter people. There are some guys that are in the same boat, who are shorter than me and about the same weight, and they were literally doubled over. In the last two years they brought in a modified arduous for people that are 68 kilos and under. You do the same distance, the same time but you only carry 15 kilos. So that was a concession that really supported women, but there are men that do the modified arduous as well. They weren't saying you have to be able to carry 20 kilos on your back to do remote bushfire work. What they're saying is you need to be this fit in order to do that. So the fact is that those people are that fit, they're just not as heavy and bulky as the bigger guys.
(Snr. Female Ranger, July 2011)

The demonstration of the fit body, as described by this participant, is not understood as being aligned to hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, the conventional gender order is often reinstated by gendered assumptions about motherhood, as discussed in the following section.

Motherhood

Maternity leave and juggling the multiple demands of motherhood, childcare and firefighting were identified by a number of male and female participants as barriers to women's career progression:

I've seen the change I suppose as we've had females come into the organisation. They've started to progress through their career. They've either got married or they've gone off and had children, and then they have a hiatus in their career. ... Then you see them come back again, three – five years down the line. That's probably one of the biggest barriers to women moving more quickly through the levels that we have, especially in incident management: that a lot of them have that break in their career, and then they've got to pick it up and feel comfortable that they've skilled themselves up before they can move forward again. Whereas the males will generally, if they stay, they progress through the different levels all the time.
(Snr. Male Ranger, Aug. 2013)

For several female participants, the gendered care practices of being a mother was linked to their firefighting career going “backwards”:

It's mostly men [in firefighting] because there are not enough of us because we've all had babies and then you go backwards. My husband, his life has hardly changed. So I still know my place as a woman at work and in the family! (Female Ranger, Aug. 2011)

I've recently gone for a few management positions, and I think my lack of experience, you know, because I hadn't done much firefighting in the last five years... I know in one instance that was what put me second rather than first, because the other person just pipped me at the post with their fire experience. The world's best-crafted answer couldn't beat that because ... they're male and have been soldiering on, and had it all under their belt. So it's sort of hard. I think that is just a reality for women; you either make a decision to have a real difficulty, juggling family life where you step out or you have to put things on hold. (Female Ranger, Aug. 2013)

Participants' narratives of gendered practice of childcare reveal the tension between expectations of gender equality at work and gendered familial division of childcare. Most often women become

primary carers for children. Table 3 illustrates how the gendered pattern of mothering practices play out in terms of the total number of women and men in permanent versus temporary positions, as well as full-time versus part-time work.

INSERT TABLE 3

Conclusion

Participants' work narratives suggest that gender continues to be a major influence in the context of wildland firefighting. This supports the opening call for an open discussion on how those in privileged groups perpetuate gendered inequalities (AFE Forthcoming; Pease 2010). Underpinning the patterns of firefighting practices are those that still allow hegemonic masculinity and men to dominate over women (and femininity). While all participants condoned equal opportunities, the gender gap in wildland firefighting participation continues. Strong society-wide gendered norms about parenting still impact on the working lives of firefighters (Eriksen and Waitt In Press). Amongst women with young children in this study there is still a cultural expectations to put their careers on hold. Within the NPWS, the power of hegemonic firefighting masculinity still frames acceptable and unacceptable firefighting practices. For example, some women appropriate models of masculinity in their leadership style that includes at times being pushy and abrupt with colleagues. Yet, stigma is often attached to such behaviour given the mismatch with communication practices conventionally associated with 'being a woman'. Women who take up the seemingly masculine traits or attributes of a firefighting masculinity are arguably complicit with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Pacholok 2013). Women in our study who reproduced the gendered assumptions and hierarchies of hegemonic masculinity consistently negotiated a fine line between condemnation and praise among their peers. The challenges many firefighters – particularly women – face when striving to gain recognition for their firefighting competencies are intimately linked to the naturalised idea of a hegemonic firefighting masculinity and the consequent (often subliminal) behaviour by colleagues. These are colleagues who in theory may condone equal opportunities in the workplace but have never questioned the ways in which their own practices reproduce inequalities and sexism.

Our findings align with other studies that suggest the need for wildland firefighters to continue to strive for affirmative action (Enarson 1984; Pacholok 2013; Eriksen 2014b). However, our conclusion differs in its emphasis on the need for a focus on gender equity rather than equality. In male-dominated professions, equality tends to equate to women becoming like men, whereas equity is respectful of differences. Some participants' narratives paint a bleak picture of a process leading toward gender equality. In the context of firefighting, too often women believe they have to be like a man, as by "becoming one of the boys" acceptance is granted by reproducing the hegemony of firefighting masculinity and all its inequalities. It is because of the pre-existing subordinate position in society, also highlighted by Connell (2005), that a distinction is made between equality and equity. This follows Fordham's (2004, 181) argument for 'equitable inequalities' that reflect the needs, strengths and relative power of the various groups rather than equality amongst groups of people. As our study indicates, achieving 'equitable inequalities' is a challenging task given that firefighters' bodies are embedded in diverse and competing gendered discourses around not only practices of risk-taking, firefighting and leadership within the NPWS but also wider practices of parenting and care. That said, institutions can destabilise the gendered dimensions by officially sanctioning messages about firefighting that problematise how bodies, danger and risk become gendered. Our study shows that crucial to unsettling the gendered hierarchies of firefighting are practices of mentoring and training that challenge how physical exertion is gendered. An important part of abolishing gender power differentials is how training practices can negotiate alternative discourses that prioritise technique and fitness over physical strength and aggression assertiveness. Any alternative to hegemonic firefighting masculinity will also need to consider how firefighter capacities can be boosted through mentoring programs rather than gendered relations of mateship networks. These ideas, as expressed by participants in our study, point to possibilities to assist with gender awareness and equity in the lives of wildland firefighters.

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Table 1. Percentage of women employed in different NPWS staff classification types in 1988, 1994 – 1995 and 2013 respectively (source: Davidson and Black 2001; NSW OEH Human Resource Information Section).

Staff classification types	1988	1994 – 1995	2013
	Percent women out of total employees per classification type		
	(n=22)	(n=38)	(n=163)
Regional Officer/Project Manager	15%	30%	22%
Snr Ranger/Ranger/Cadet Ranger		19%	41%
Field Officer	unknown	4%	5%

Table 2. NPWS firefighting and IMT roles by gender in 2013 (source: NSW OEH Human Resource Information Section).^{1,2}

	Female		Male	
	(n)	(% of total n)	(n)	(% of total n)
Crew Member (CM)	251	21%	953	79%
Crew Leader ³ (CL)	107	15%	624	85%
Divisional Commander ⁴ (DC)	30	10%	257	90%
IMT Support role ⁵	173	42%	235	58%
IMT Officer Class 1 ^{6,7}	167	35%	306	65%
IMT Officer Class 2 ⁸	106	33%	215	67%
IMT Officer Class 3 ⁹	62	33%	125	67%
Incident Controller (IC) Class 1	35	16%	186	84%
IC Class 2	14	11%	111	89%
IC Class 3	2	5%	35	95%

¹ Fire ground roles data from corporate training database (Aurion), extracted 27/8/13; IMT and IC data compiled from Regional responses to data request (IRIS data capture), compiled Jan 2012.
² Fire ground roles data is the number of staff trained in this role (not all trained staff maintain currency in the role). IMT and IC are non-accredited roles; not all staff are formally trained in these roles; data are of staff with experience performing these roles.
³ A trained CL is also counted as a CM.
⁴ A trained DC is also counted as a CL and CM.
⁵ IMT Support includes Situation Officer, Liaison Officer, Resources Officer, Media Officer, GIS Specialist, Fire Behaviour Analyst.
⁶ IMT Officer includes Operations Officer, Planning Officer, Logistics Officer.
⁷ Class 1 = A fire under the control of the responsible fire authority, whether or not incidental/low assistance is provided by other agencies.
⁸ Class 2 = A fire which, by necessity, involves more than one agency and where the Bushfire Management Executive has appointed a person to take charge of firefighting operations.
⁹ Class 3 = A major wildfire(s) where an appointment has been made or imminent under provisions of Section 44 of the Rural Fires Act, 1997.

Table 3. Gender ratio of NPWS employees by permanent, temporary, part-time and full-time employment status in 2013 (source: NSW OEH Human Resource Information Section).

(% of total n)	Female	Male
	(total n=595; permanent n=469, temporary n=126; full-time n=383; part-time n=212)	(total n=1160; permanent n=970; temporary n=190; full-time n=1111; part-time n=49)
Permanent/Full-time	25%	75%
Permanent/Part-time	81%	19%
Temporary/Full-time	30%	70%
Temporary/Part-time	81%	19%