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# Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination in Wildland Fire Management Must be Addressed

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# Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination in Wildland Fire Management Must be Addressed

## **Abstract**

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination are behavioral patterns not uncommon in the many varied settings of wildland fire. Whether in the classroom, on the fireline, in a government or non-governmental organization office, women and men are subjected to and are targets of sexual harassment and gender discrimination on a daily basis. The prevalence of this issue, its causes, its impacts, and potential solutions are the foci of this Association for Fire Ecology (AFE) position paper.

## **Keywords**

management, must, wildland, gender, fire, harassment, sexual, addressed, be, discrimination

## **Disciplines**

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## **SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT MUST BE ADDRESSED**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Sexual harassment and gender discrimination occur in workplaces around the world. While they affect both women and men, they appear to affect significantly larger portions of the female than the male workforce.
- Our survey confirmed that they are found in the wildland fire vocation as well.
- Of 342 respondents, 32% reported observing incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace while 24% reported having experienced it.
- Additionally, 54% reported observing gender discrimination of others in the workplace and 44% reported personally experiencing discrimination.
- These figures may be an underestimate, since sexual harassment and gender discrimination are typically underreported.
- The majority of respondents who experienced sexual harassment (64%) or gender discrimination (60%) did not report it.
- Reporting harassment experiences often does not improve and sometimes worsens the outcomes for the reporting person.
- Our survey indicated that those who reported being sexually harassed were supported by their manager 58% of the time and by their organization 53% of the time, but rarely by external agencies or legal intervention.
- Those who reported gender discrimination received even less support, with managers being supportive only 28% of the time, and organizations being supportive only 25% of the time.
- Respondents described numerous impacts from the harassment and discrimination they experienced, including: negative repercussions for their career; feelings of depression, anger, or anxiety, and even mental health breakdowns; and substance abuse.
- We, the Association for Fire Ecology, are committed to promoting awareness about the issues revealed by this study among our members, the public, and the mass media.
- We strongly recommend additional training of fire management personnel and supervisors beyond what is currently provided on gender discrimination and sexual harassment.
- We strongly recommend the establishment of arm's length reporting centers that are removed from the chain of command, where affected persons can report sexual harassment and gender discrimination, free from backlash within their working units.

## Introduction

*Sexual harassment and gender discrimination are behavioral patterns not uncommon in the many varied settings of wildland fire. Whether in the classroom, on the fireline, in a government or non-governmental organization office, women and men are subjected to and are targets of sexual harassment and gender discrimination on a daily basis. The prevalence of this issue, its causes, its impacts, and potential solutions are the foci of this Association for Fire Ecology (AFE) position paper.*

The management of wildland fire has in the past been viewed as a male occupation with a male-dominated workforce and masculinist culture. The emulation of military culture and terms in wildfire suppression (e.g., fire fighting, combat, aggressive suppression, initial attack) further intensifies the association of wildland fire with masculinity and machismo. However, women work side by side with men in all aspects of managing wildland fire, from direct suppression to research and development, outreach, and education. The incorporation of women in this workforce is the result of multiple factors that vary by country and region.

However, to date, the wildland fire vocation is not different from society at large in its need to confront, analyze, and solve the issues of sexual harassment and gender discrimination that affect women and men working in this field. This position paper is an organization-wide initiative with two objectives: to determine the prevalence of these two issues throughout the profession, including management, education, and research; and to provide a set of principles and actions that are strongly recommended for implementation in order to foster organizational cultures of respect, equity, and parity.

## What Are Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination?

Sexual harassment in the workplace can take the form of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other conduct of a sexual nature that affects an individual's employment, interferes with work performance, or creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive work environment (EEOC 2016). Targets of this behavior often find it threatening to their well-being, and feel that they do not have the resources (in terms of emotional, financial, or other support) to address the harassment (McDonald 2012). Gender discrimination is a broader term referring to any action that specifically denies opportunities, privileges, or rewards to a person (or a group) because of gender. Unfair inequalities across groups can result. Gender discrimination is often caused by attitudes unconsciously maintained that have become deeply embedded in systems and institutions over time (Flood and Pease 2009). Because discrimination can be deeply entrenched in institutions, seemingly normal ways of doing things (such as practices and policies) can either consciously or unwittingly promote or sustain advantages for some people while causing disadvantages to others (Tator and Henry 2006).

## Prevalence

The issue of sexual harassment, for both women and men, is prevalent in workplaces across the globe. Within the general workplace population in the US, 40% to 75% of women and 13% to 31% of men have reported being sexually harassed (McDonald 2012). In a similar study from Australia, 33% of women and 9% of men experience sexual harassment in their lifetime, while 13% of people have witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace (AHRC 2012). In Canada in 2013, 17% of disputes received by the Canadian Human Rights Commission were due to sexual

harassment (CHRC 2014). Research indicates that most allegations of sexual assault are made in good faith, and that deliberately false allegations are rare (Flood 2014).

Statistics also indicate that gender discrimination is common. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) reported upwards of 26 000 cases of gender discrimination in fiscal year 2015 (EEOC 2015). In Australia, 21 % of all complaints to the Australian Human Rights Commission are filed under the Sex Discrimination Act, and 88 % of those complaints pertain to gender discrimination in the workplace (AHRC 2007)

Discrimination due to gender has been studied within the structural firefighting community, in which firefighters respond to building fires. In the US, 84.7% of women and 12.4% of men reported experiencing differential treatment as a result of their gender (based on 675 male and female respondents from 48 states). Fourteen specific problems associated with gender discrimination or sexual harassment, ranging from shunning or isolation, to hazing, sexual advances, or sexual assault, were provided to the respondents to choose from. An average of 27% of women and 2% of men indicated having experienced at least one of these problems in the workplace (Hulett *et al.* 2008).

Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that there are deeply embedded issues of sexual harassment and gender discrimination, mostly against women, in the wildland fire vocation (Enarson 1984, Desmond 2007, Pacholok 2013, Eriksen 2014, Eriksen *et al.* 2016). However, unlike the structural firefighting service, the scale and magnitude of the problem is largely unknown. During the summer of 2015, AFE developed and circulated an online survey in an attempt to gain a better understanding of this problem within the international wildland fire vocation. The survey was a combination of multiple-choice as well as open-ended questions. We received 342 completed survey forms, 63 % from wom-

en, 36 % from men, and 1 % self-identified as "other," with the largest number of respondents from the United States (83 %), followed by Canada (8 %), Australia (6 %), Spain (2 %), and Mexico (1 %). A wide variety of disciplines within the wildland fire vocation were represented: 26 % held the title of researcher, 25 % were managers, 15 % were classified as "other," 14 % were firefighters, 7 % were students, 7 % were professors, and 3 % were in fire logistics.

Of these respondents, 32 % reported observing incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace (a number considerably higher than the 13 % figure reported for Australia) while 24 % reported having experienced it. Additionally, 54 % reported observing gender discrimination of others in the workplace and 44 % reported personally experiencing discrimination.

While these results reveal a serious problem in the wildland fire vocation, they may be a conservative assessment of the real scale of the issue. For example, research indicates that, when interviewed, individuals frequently minimize behaviors that may constitute sexual harassment, and women avoid defining their experiences as sexual harassment in order to be viewed as competent or team players (McDonald 2012). It is estimated that between 5 % and 30 % of people who experience sexual harassment or discrimination file formal complaints, and less than 1 % advance to legal proceedings (McDonald 2012). Under-reporting of sexual harassment and gender discrimination is more prevalent in organizations with larger power differentials such as the military. Likewise, under-reporting is more problematic in blue-collar, male-dominated settings and occupations, such as firefighting, in which jobs are typically highly physical and cultural norms associated with sexual bravado may prevail.

In our survey of wildland fire professionals, the majority of respondents who experienced sexual harassment (64 %) or gender dis-

crimination (60%) did not report it. Factors that inhibited reporting included: fear of job loss (especially for temporary or seasonal employees), fear of retribution or retaliation, being viewed as a victim or as overly sensitive, belief that the harasser will not be penalized, lack of knowledge regarding rights, and accessibility to external supports (e.g., mental health or legal counseling services).

Research has shown that reporting a harassment experience often does not improve and sometimes worsens the outcome for the reporting person (McDonald 2012). Results of our survey indicated that those who reported being sexually harassed were supported by their manager 58% of the time and by their organization 53% of the time, but rarely by external agencies or legal intervention. Those who reported gender discrimination and requested support, reported less support than those who reported sexual harassment, with managers being supportive only 28% of the time, and organizations being supportive only 25% of the time. Some respondents indicated that gender discrimination was difficult to prove or was so entrenched in the culture that “nobody will give [it] credence.”

### *Impacts*

Significant negative psychological, health-, and job-related outcomes have been associated with being subjected to sexual harassment and gender discrimination (McDonald 2012). The various mental and physical health consequences range from irritation and anxiety to anger, powerlessness, humiliation, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Some of the gravest psychological outcomes have been associated with harassment that is perpetuated by a supervisor (rather than a co-worker), involves sexual coercion, occurs cross-racially, takes place over a long period of time, or occurs in a male-dominated setting (Abrams 1997).

Respondents in our wildland fire workforce survey indicated that they cope with sex-

ual harassment and gender discrimination by: 1) trying to ignore the issue or avoid the perpetrator; 2) resigning (sometimes with negative repercussions for career); 3) working harder and focusing on goals; 4) feeling depressed, bitter, isolated, angry, stressed, or anxious, (at least one respondent reporting a mental health breakdown); 5) reaching out to colleagues (especially female colleagues) for advice; 6) speaking directly to the offender; 7) seeking assistance with mental health support; 8) engaging in meditation, yoga, or prayer; 9) using legal intervention; and 10) engaging in substance abuse.

### *Root Causes*

The root causes for sexual harassment and gender discrimination are many, with researchers claiming that they may arise from entrenched patterns of male dominance. Sexual harassment may serve to entrench masculine norms in the workplace (McLaughlin *et al.* 2012). Under this perspective, sexual harassment is less about sexual desire, and more about broader patterns of discrimination, power, and privilege (Schultz 1998). Some researchers argue that an exclusive focus on sexual harassment cases pursued in court ignores the more subtle ways male dominance is normalized and preserved (Fiske and Glick 1995). In addition, research has indicated that women in authority may appear to elicit a threat-to-power response, especially from those in subordinate positions (Golden 2002). The same forces that exclude women from management positions continue to operate even after they have obtained supervisory authority. For some, the level of harassment actually increases with increases in supervisory status. Men who do not fit cultural expectations of masculinity have also been targeted in some work settings. On the issue of workplace sex ratios, women in predominantly male industries report significantly greater harassment.

Sexual harassment and gender discrimination have been linked to long-running percep-

tions of male privilege in the form of a patriarchal and male-dominated management structure within operational fire management (Selmi 2005, McLaughlin *et al.* 2012). Gender tensions seem to revolve around two issues: 1) masculinity within fire management culture, which aligns the physical body with a particular understanding of gender; and 2) the patriarchal gender order within organizations, which favors men over women in the process of decision making (Eriksen and Waitt 2016). Studies have shown that female leaders in typically male-dominated roles have been evaluated less favorably than their male counterparts when all other characteristics are held constant (Wright 2006, Paul 2011, Pacholok 2013). Beyond generalized notions of gender, the expression of gender amongst wildland firefighters is ingrained and complicit. Bravado or hyper-masculine behavior inadvertently acts to sustain the masculinity of the organizational culture; however, it is sometimes frowned upon by both male and female colleagues, who may view it as being unnecessarily aggressive (McDonald 2012, Eriksen 2015).

### *Addressing the Issue*

Attempts at addressing the issue of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace have taken many forms and have had variable success. Numerous statutes have been implemented, such as Title VII Civil Rights Act case law and policy guidance by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the US, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom, and the 1984 Discrimination Act in Australia. Recently, in Australia, National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines were released that serve as an example of a strategic and proactive way to build gender-sensitive approaches (Gender and Disaster Pod 2016). However, based on the incidence of reported cases of gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the courts as well as reports in the media

(Langlois 2014, 2016; Joyce 2016), it would appear that guidelines and legal safeguards are not a sufficient deterrent for perpetrators. Workplace-based sexual harassment workshops, policies and guidelines, and grievance procedures are standard features of the human resources landscape, but they too appear to have limited success. Further research to determine and confirm levels of success for procedures is needed.

Given the results of our study, we need to increase reporting of cases of sexual harassment and gender discrimination through avenues that reduce retribution for those who report it. In addition, we need to pursue and ensure severe penalties for offenders, as well as ongoing support for survivors. This will mean breaking the cycle of non-reporting due to fear of reprisals or suggestions that the target is somehow responsible for her or his harassment or discrimination. Perpetrators need to realize that failure to attenuate behavior will have real and negative consequences.

A model recently implemented in Canada may provide a template for the wildland fire fighting community. A 2015 study conducted by an external reviewer to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) found that the cultural value and functional necessity of maintaining the chain of command in the Forces contributed to stifling of incident reporting, lack of awareness on the part of senior leaders, and subsequent inability of senior leadership to act effectively (Deschamps 2015). This same study noted that “dismissive responses” regarding sexual harassment and gender discrimination were present within leadership, and were no longer tolerated. In direct response to this report, in September 2015, the CAF created an external Sexual Misconduct Reporting Centre, which removed the initial reporting for sexual harassment and discrimination from the chain of command (National Defense and CAF 2016). It is staffed with professionals who are familiar with the working systems of the CAF and who offer counseling, and can liaise with other

local, national, and emergency resources as well as assist in navigating the reporting system within the CAF.

Workplace leadership also needs to address significant failures in creating a harassment- and discrimination-free workplace in which those responsible for harassment or discrimination are held accountable for their actions by those in supervisory or leadership positions. Increased training at all levels, with regard to unacceptable behavior and what processes and policies are in place for reporting and support, will also assist in changing cultural perceptions.

From a human rights perspective, the right to a life free of discrimination, and free of violence that is based on discrimination, is not only a right of people but an obligation of the State, and public and private institutions. Thus, creating mechanisms that enable these conditions fulfills those obligations.

#### *Association for Fire Ecology's Position*

The Association for Fire Ecology's position is firm: as a professional organization, we cannot and will not condone sexual harassment or gender discrimination in any form, from any source, or in any setting. Further, we take this position regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation (i.e., female, male, transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer). In addition to making a strong stand, AFE proposes to address these two issues through a coordinated communications and education process. Our position will be publicized through social media as well as through select print media outlets (opinion pieces in newspapers in Australia, Canada, Central and South America, Europe, Mexico, and the United States). We will also encourage public media outlets such as the Australian Broadcast Corporation in Australia, Canadian Broadcast Corporation in Canada, and National Public Radio and Public Broadcast System in the USA to address the issue, its causes, and solutions for the future.

The AFE encourages its members to work within their respective institutions to promote policies and regulations that enforce a work environment that is non-discriminatory and non-violent. The Association for Fire Ecology's code of ethics prohibits "harassment of or any form of discrimination against another participant, staff member, volunteer, or others; actual or threatened violence toward any individual or group; conduct endangering the life, safety, health, or well-being of others." Those violating this code may be reprimanded, censured, expelled, or otherwise disciplined as per the organization's bylaws.

Association for Fire Ecology recommends that wildfire agencies might benefit from establishing arm's length reporting centers similar to the CAF in Canada, following the emerging best practices, in order to: 1) facilitate reporting via an arm's length body, and 2) provide much-needed support to victims. Having such an external center reduces the considerable stigma and personal cost often incurred by those reporting sexual harassment or gender discrimination within the chain of command. These centers could still be affiliated within the structure of the organization, in line with the CAF model, but not be within the chain of command or supervisory reporting structure.

In addition, we recommend that the National Wildfire Coordinating Group develop modules to be embedded into existing Incident Command System leadership training courses. Content for these modules can come from any number of existing courses on the subject area in use by other command-and-control type environments such as structural fire, police, or the military. The wildland fire management community can take a leadership role by delivering training that will educate personnel on acceptable and unacceptable behavior, policy, process, and consequences. This proactive approach, as opposed to a reactive approach, will help to prevent incidents before they occur and help leaders to deal with incidents that do occur in a responsible and timely manner.



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