

**Durham University**

**MA in Research Methods (Social Policy)**

**Dissertation**

**‘Speak up, Speak Out’.**

**The Lived Experiences of  
Female Firefighters who are also  
Trade Union Representatives’**

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Combating fires and being at the forefront of operational rescue incidents is often perceived as masculine, portraying “an example of the masculine standards of aggressive heterosexuality, physical and mental strength and stoic discipline” (Baigent, 2001, p19) Firefighters are indeed masculine. However, many of those firefighters who are acting out this masculinity are female. (Baigent, 2008)

The culture in the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) is one where a firefighter’s masculinity is defined by the type of work that they do; “physical, dangerous, demanding and operational tasks” (Baigent, 2001, p47).

Firefighting is one of the most sex segregated professions in the world of work and the task of developing a more gender balanced fire service is at the core of the challenges of the modern FRS. Indeed the FRS has been described as one of the last bastions of white, male, laddish culture, where sexual discourse about women using stereotyped terms is prevalent (Kehily, 1997). This is illustrated by the following two comments; firstly this comment from an Equality and Diversity Advisor in one FRS:

“When I got here I was told that there are two types of women in this organisation. There are lesbians and there are fire tarts. That’s it. Take your pick”

(Wright; 2008; p8)

Secondly, this comment is reported as being made in 2000 about female firefighters by the former Chief Inspector of a national Fire and Rescue Service:

“The lack of female firefighters could be blamed on women’s ability to park fire engines and those women’s’ brains made them better suited to jobs such as answering telephones community education or media relations”

(Hilpern 2001; p9)

The research undertaken for this study focuses on female firefighters in England who are in a gender –atypical role and their experiences of working in a male dominated environment and also, more importantly, their role as a Trade Union representative on the Fire Brigade Union’s (FBU) National Women’s Committee ([www.nwcfbu.co.uk](http://www.nwcfbu.co.uk)). The FBU National Women’s Committee is the women’s section of the Fire Brigade Union and represents over two thousand women members.

The everyday experiences of women in the FRS is a salient topic at this time as nationally, the FRS is involved with recruitment drives to employ more female firefighters.

The history of women as operational firefighters in the FRS has a very short time frame; Women were recruited as firewomen into the National Fire Service on a voluntary unpaid basis in 1938 but they were not allowed to carry out the role of firefighter. Instead they were involved in other duties such as taking fire calls and mobilising fire appliances. A small percentage of women carried on being involved with these types of duties in the national Fire Service until it was disbanded in 1947.

The first operational female firefighter was not officially appointed on an equal footing to men until 1982. This appointment to the London Fire Brigade (now the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority) was as a result of equality issues being pursued by the Greater London Council.

Since 1982, women have been hugely under represented in the FRS. This under representation is despite the government’s aim to make the FRS more diverse. In 2000, the agreed recruiting target was a minimum of 15% of new applicants into the operational sector to be women by 2013 (CLG 2000).

In 2000 the percentage of female firefighters was 1.2% of the total number of firefighters in England. In 2005, this percentage had risen to 2.5% and in 2010, this percentage stood at 3.9%.; this figure is 11.1% short of the 15% target set by the government for female firefighters in 2013. In order to achieve this 15% target, approximately one thousand females would need to be recruited for the next three years. Last year there were only 151 female recruited as wholetime firefighters (CLG 2010).

This under representation can be explained by the fact that the gender of the current post holder (s) can define to a large extent the gender of any future postholder. Firefighters may promote their own role to their own gender, whereas women may only consider the job of firefighting when they see recruitment adverts or witness the FRS in action

The reason that the National Women's Committee was introduced by the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) in 1999 was to identify, resolve and promote all issues affecting women in the FRS, to focus on effective measures to combat discrimination at work and to progress equality and diversity issues in the workplace by addressing these issues.

The National Women's Committee have played a massive part in the promotion of equality and fairness in the FRS They have been pushing for years to achieve more inclusive working practices for women, such as good maternity provision and return to work good practices, family friendly practices, job share where this is possible, equal pay and work/time off practices and a positive recruitment process for women that accurately reflects the job.

My interest in the experiences of female firefighters and how they address the issues of inequality in their Service, originates from my personal experience of working with Service personnel in the FRS over a period of three years as a training advisor for the training and development of operational firefighters. I am also a female working in a non traditional role in a male dominated environment.

I have been able to work alongside these operational personnel and to talk to female firefighters about the challenges that they face in their operational role and as part of an organisation that is facing massive organisational change. All of these elements combine to make the Fire and Rescue Service a fascinating context in which to explore the everyday experiences of operational female firefighters.

## **Structure of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters, of which this is the first.

Chapter Two provides a brief context of the FRS and also the work of the National Women's Committee, drawn from an analysis of documents produced by the FRS by the FBU and the National Women's Committee.

Chapter Three provides a detailed review of the literature in relation to studies on women in non traditional work, with particular reference to women in the FRS and women who are Trade Union representatives.

Chapter Four provides a detailed breakdown of the research methodology and the methodological concerns that shaped the study.

Chapter Five highlights the findings of this research by establishing links to the literature in Chapter Three.

Chapter Six provides critical reflections on the research and concludes by discussing the relevance of these findings in order to answer the research questions above.

Some recommendations for further research into the experiences of female firefighters are also proposed, together with some issues raised by female firefighters in interviews that are policy relevant and indeed may be of interest to Fire and Rescue employers in considering equality policies.

For the ease of reading the terminology used in the FRS, please see footnotes which are explained in the glossary of terms (Appendix A).

## **Chapter Two: The organisational context: The Fire and Rescue Service**

This chapter provides some context to the findings outlined in Chapter Five by outlining the structure of the FRS and giving the framework for the equality initiatives undertaken by the Fire Service as well as the role of the FBU National Women's Committee.

This material is drawn from an analysis of the Fire Service, government and union documents and from key informant interviews carried out in July 2010 with individuals representing a range of Fire and Rescue Services: an equality and diversity officer, two Senior Fire Officers and a Member of the FBU National Gay and Lesbian Committee.

### **The Structure of the Fire and Rescue Service**

The FRS, now more than ever, is under threat from ongoing massive cuts in the public sector.

“Our Fire and Rescue Service faces the most serious attacks in living memory. The cuts proposed by the Government would decimate our Service and would hugely increase risk to Firefighters and to the public”

(Matt Wrack, General Secretary of the Fire Brigade Union 2010 ([www.fbu.org.uk](http://www.fbu.org.uk)))

The traditional structure of the FRS has been one that responds quickly and effectively to emergencies (Bain, 2002) but The Fire and Rescue Act 2004 legislated a greater emphasis on the prevention of fire and the subsequent loss of life and damage to property, the rescue of people from road traffic accidents and providing other a specialist service in the event of major flooding or terrorist attacks.

These new legislative responsibilities are the legacy from the settlement of the national dispute by the FRS in 2003 over pay and conditions. The organisational structure of the FRS is a complicated interwoven set of roles and responsibilities of the organisations involved with the FRS including those of the Office of the Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser and the National Joint Council.

There is an individual Service approach to policies such as recruitment, equal opportunities and personnel development but there are many common features that apply to all Services which tend to work together on common policy issues for the sake of good practice.

Throughout the Fire and Rescue Service personnel are divided into three groups; operational personnel, control room personnel and non uniformed support personnel. The largest of these groups is the operational firefighters and officers who are the whole time and part time operational personnel. All Fire and Rescue Services outside London have a system of part time operational firefighters (male and female) who are known as The Retained Duty System and who are a fully trained operational resource that can be mobilised at any time to attend operational incidents. However, this dissertation only focuses on whole time operational personnel.

In the current structure there are three roles below officer level and these are mainly responsible for the physical work of firefighting, operational rescues and community safety work. These roles are Firefighter, Crew Manager and Watch Manager. The Watch Manager has the additional responsibility of the daily management of a watch and to manage the watch at any operational incident. The role above the role of Watch Manager is known by a range of titles in individual Fire Services but is responsible for managing operational incidents of a small scale and Fire Stations; The senior strategic roles are Group Manager and Area Manager who manage major incidents as well as their strategic managerial role. The role of Chief Fire Officer is the head of a Fire Service.

All FRS operational personnel work a standard forty-two hour week that is made up of different shift patterns depending if an individual is working on a Watch or in another role. The Watch System is derived from Royal Navy terminology and consists of two day shifts, two night shifts (this is called a "Tour of duty") and followed by four days leave (known as "rota" days)

The FRS is a mechanistic, bureaucratic organisation that relies on top down communication with clear roles within a hierarchy. However, there is a move towards a more transformational way of managing the Service rather than the traditional autocratic way.

## **Equality in the Fire and Rescue Service**

The increasing focus on equality and diversity within the UK Fire and Rescue Service was a direct consequence of the 1999 McPherson Enquiry into the death of the young black teenager Stephen Lawrence. This report found that the Police Force suffered from institutional racism and there had been a “collective failure to provide an appropriate professional service to people because of their colour, culture and ethnic origin” (McPherson, 1999)

One of the enquiry’s recommendations was that government inspectors would have full and unfettered powers to inspect police services to ensure an equal and fair organisation that met the needs of diverse communities.

The FRS was also seen as another white male dominated public sector organisation that should be part of this inspection process. The government led Thematic Review of Equality and Fairness in the FRS (1999) resulted in concerns that the profile and working practices of the Service’s workforce was not representative of the diverse community it served as stated in the Fire Service Inspectorate Thematic Review, 1999.

All FRS were subject to government set targets that aimed to increase the representation of women and black ethnic minority personnel in its workforce through positive action measure, thus making the Service reflect the community it served. However this was an impossible task given that the time frame for the objectives would not allow for the massive culture change required for minority groups to be integrated successfully into the Service.

It is important to acknowledge that public sector organisations have “deep rooted” cultures which often hold back change and modernisation agendas (Rose and Lawton, 1999). Giddens (1984) states that despite structural constraints, individuals do have the ability to bring about change and to make a difference, an opinion that Bagilhole, (2002) debates (see Literature Review Chapter Three).

The “Positive Action” measures had an extremely negative effect on the relationships between men and women within the Fire and Rescue Service as it was perceived by FRS personnel that white males were to be excluded from the Service until the female quota had been reached.

It is now accepted that there was clumsy handling of publicity campaigns about recruitment into the FRS. One Service was accused of pursuing a policy of legal discrimination after it



excluded white males from part of a recruitment drive where only women and people from ethnic minorities were allowed to attend.

The FRS then amended its recruitment to include all social groupings as it was realised that open, across the board recruitment was the only way to have an application process that would enable the best person to take the opportunity of a place in the Fire Service.

Positive action undermined the hard work already done by serving female firefighters as there was the feeling that the physical standards of entry were going to be lowered to increase the number of applications by women. This then suggested that perhaps those women already “in the job” had been given “special treatment” and their worthiness and ability were again questioned. Certainly it has become very difficult to encourage serving women and other minority groups to act as positive role models at positive action events.

An equality officer interviewed for this research confirmed equality and diversity policies had been badly communicated throughout the Fire Service and equality and diversity was seen to be about “ticking boxes” with little consideration of how these policies could work in an operational environment.

The belief that the Fire Service is lowering standards to facilitate the entry of women is pervasive whether this is untrue or not it is likely to have an effect on women’s acceptance and progression within the profession. There needs to be more open discussion regarding this issue as the long application process may be off putting for non-traditional candidates who are lacking in confidence.

These issues of equality and diversity highlighted the view of some in minority groups that who were concerned that additional attention may not help minority groups fit in with the majority culture.

## **The Fire Brigades Union and the National Women's Committee**

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) represents whole time, Retained Duty System and Control Room personnel in the Fire Service and has about 92% membership among eligible personnel (Representative of the FBU National Gay and Lesbian Committee interviewed for this research). The union has actively been pursuing equality issues over a number of years and their contribution was commended in the Fire Inspectorate's Thematic Review on Equality and Fairness in the Fire Service (HM Fire Service 2000).

The National Women's Committee has been a formal committee of the FBU since 1999 although it started as an informal group in London in the late 1980s. In 2004 it gained representation on the union's Executive Council and the Women's Section of the union has a full structure of national, regional and brigade committees that can submit resolutions to the union's national conference. It also organises an annual National Women's School open to women members where women are encouraged to take part in personal development that build structures to sustain the confidence gained in an experience that they describe both as "enlightening" and "inspiring" (operational firefighter and member of the NWC 2010).

The modern FRS still lags behind other public institutions on equality, fairness, recruitment and representation throughout the service. In response to the Equality & Diversity Strategy of 1999, two new sections of the FBU were formally recognised. Firstly, the National Gay and Lesbian Committee was formally set up to represent advise and support gay, lesbian and transsexual firefighters. This section has a parallel structure to the National Women's Committee, with a seat on the Executive Council of the FBU (FBU National Gay and Lesbian Committee Rep)

Secondly, the Black and Ethnic Minority (B&EMM) group was set up to represent, support and advise under-represented ethnic minority members. This section also has a parallel structure to the National Women's Committee and has a seat on the executive council of the FBU.

The interviewees representing the National Women's Committee and the National Gay and Lesbian Committee all commented on the disillusionment felt by many members towards the FRS as employers in matters regarding equality even though it was an important issue.

“It goes without saying that there continues to be cultural changes taking place within today’s Fire and Rescue Service but I personally feel that by taking on the role of a Trade Union representative that I am here to put forward a perspective that has perhaps not yet been considered”

(Female Firefighter and Member of the National Women’s Committee interviewed for this research in July 2010)

### **Networking Women in the Fire Service**

Networking Women in the Fire Service (NWFS) was established in 1993 and offers support for career and personal development to women in the Fire Service. It is useful to have an overview of its role for operational female firefighters but this dissertation focuses on the FBU National Women’s Committee and its members which are a part of a recognised Trade Union. The NWFS receives support and backing from the Chief Fire Officers Association but it is not an organisation that can negotiate on behalf of female firefighters. (Operational Firefighter and National Women’s Committee Member)

The ongoing organisational change of modernising the FRS to represent the society that it serves is a constant challenge to the people who serve in it; a majority of whom wish to have equality that is compatible with an operational environment. “Equality needs to be at the very heart of the development and modernisation of the FRS, not just an “add on”

(Female Firefighter and Member of the National Women’s Committee interviewed for this research in July 2010)

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

There has been significant research into gender and women working in non - traditional occupations (Bagilhole, 2002, Connell, 2003) but not about women and their “lived experiences” as operational firefighters in the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) in the United Kingdom. As the FRS is a male dominated organisation; or put another way, a non-traditional occupation for women this study seeks to fill a gap in the research literature.

The FRS was chosen as a particularly interesting example of the challenges of women working in a non – tradition occupation in a male dominated environment; “a masculine hegemony that is organised in the main by consent, by identification with the status quo and as a belief of common interest” (Cockburn, 1991, p205). The women that are the subject of this dissertation also have the added challenge of carrying out the role of a trade union representative; their remit being to address the inconsistencies and equalities that women face in this male dominated occupation.

In order to explore the lived experiences of female firefighters who are also trade union representatives, a search for relevant literature found materials on gender and work with specific focus on women in non- traditional occupations. Key themes that emerged from this literature included: patriarchy, knowledge and power, social interaction, the role of discourse and lastly literature on the role of female trade union representatives. For conceptual clarity these key themes have been separated out for discussion in the next section. However, in reality they interact with and reinforce each other when viewed in the context of the various research studies that focused on women working in non-traditional occupations. They are also present in my own research that is discussed in Chapter Five, applied to an organisation.

#### **Gender and work**

A large body of literature has developed on gender and work which considers the reasons for the different patterns of participation in the workplace of men and women and explores gendered inequalities which continue to exist (Adkins, 1995, Bagihole, 2007, Oakley, 2003, Walby, 1988)

Occupational segregation by gender has been a focus of much research, in part because it is a principle cause of the persistent pay gap between men and women (Equalities Commission 2001, 2004). However, occupational segregation also operates to create,

maintain and reinforce traditional assumptions about male and female roles and abilities.

Most cultures socially construct gender by labeling occupations, activities and goals as either masculine or feminine and these binary gender divisions polarise gender characteristics to advantage men (Connell, 2000, Walby, 1990)

Women who enter male dominated careers experience a series of gendered related barriers to success as their presence challenges the supposed “naturalness” of the association of these traits with masculinity. As Reskin and Padavac (1993, cited in Bagilhole 2002, p56) ask “How can a man’s work serve as a rugged test of manhood if women are able to do it?”

Women can be viewed as honorary men or flawed women for attempting to participate in fields traditionally dominated by men. They have to act like men if they wish to be successful in a male dominated culture, or they have to leave if they are not adaptable to this culture, or remain without behaving like men and then maintain unimportant positions (Pechter, 2001).

Kanter (1977) described how women as a minority group in non-traditional occupations are known as “tokens” and are forced to permit the majority cultural expressions of the dominant group in their presence. Women can respond to these boundary heightening activities by challenging them and risking possible exclusion from informal socialisation or they can attempt to become insiders; “one of the boys”.

McDowell (1997) argues that gender is not a given but a performance “We create and reinforce our gender identity by the performance we put on” The performance of gender is demonstrated in women through the strategies that they adopt for coping in a male dominated environment”, (McDowell 1997, p247). Women’s behaviours are stereotyped in organisations into certain roles such as “the mother figure, the seductress and a mascot for men”. The final role is that of the “iron maiden” if they do not fit into any of the previous three roles. It takes considerable effort by women and may cause much stress for women not to be stereotyped in an organisation. Kanter (1977, p238)

Butler (2004) states that women who are breaking barriers by entering male dominated areas may perform their gender in a particular way in order to gain male acceptance. If they

actively perform masculinity in order to gain acceptance, their gender is then disqualified as a condition of their success in that arena.

For some women, fitting into a male dominated environment does not come easily if they cannot fit into the dominant culture of such an organisation. They must continuously manage the tension between personal and professional identities that may be at odds with each other. The choice is to leave this culture or consciously or unconsciously silence their complaints and surrender their female identity. In other words, for a woman to be successful in such an environment they have to deny aspects of themselves and to become more like men even though through systematic inequalities, their experiences cannot be the same.

De Beauvoir (1949) concluded that gender, as distinct from sex, is not biological, psychological or economic but socially constructed. Butler (1990) has maintained that the ramifications of de Beauvoir's deconstruction of gender are far more reaching. This separation of sex and gender may loosen restrictions on social roles; however physiological inequalities between men and women ensure that their experiences cannot be the same. Women are constituted as different kinds of workers because their bodies are sexualised to a degree that mens' bodies are not.

Halford et al (1999, p27) describe the womanly, reproductive body being "literally ruled out of place" in organisations that make few provisions for dealing with menstruation, premenstrual tension and pregnancy. This perspective is useful for examining an organisation such as the Fire and Rescue Service where I have found that both the uniforms and facilities accommodate the male norm.

Gender theory has established the issue of gender as an important aspect of organisation theory (Gheradi, 1994) Organisations, despite their claim to be a neutral are not only gendered but are reconstructed in these ways on a daily basis.

However, gender is difficult to deconstruct due to the multiple of masculinities and femininities within gender. As Butler (1999, p18) points out. "The construction of "men" does not just belong to the physical body of males or mean that women will interpret only into female bodies"

This review focuses on some key themes; patriarchy, power, social interactions and discourse; all of which underpin the lived experiences of female firefighters in their male dominated environment.

## **Patriarchy**

Gender inequality cannot be understood without the concept of patriarchy, the social system organised around economic and cultural advantage. Walby (1990) argues that the central feature of the patriarchal system is men's domination over women through organisational hierarchies. This system of gender hierarchy created and perpetuated by men dominates women and can restrict women by giving cause and effect that gender division is a natural order.

Men support this sexist belief as they benefit from belonging to the privileged group and because they want to protect their higher status (Jackman 1994, cited Becker 2010)

The hierarchical interdependence between masculinity and femininity treats the "male" as superior and the "female as "deviate" or other. This systematic domination over women includes the use of sexual identity as a means to control; even using lesbianism as a category with which to control heterosexual women. In McDowell's (1997) study of City of London investment banks, women found their sexuality a constant issue at work with one woman commenting that " if you are seen as feminine or desirable they think you' re available and if you are not they call you a dyke" (McDowell,1997, p141). This negative association of sexual identity gives rise to some women in non traditional jobs not wanting to label themselves as feminists even though they support feminism and the goals of the women' s movement (Hall and Rodriguez 2003 cited in Ramsey et al 2007) This could be due to the negative stereotypes of feminists in our society being unattractive and aggressive (Aronson 2003, cited in Ramsey et al 2007)

## **Power and Resistance**

The hierarchical structure of the Fire Service offers a natural dynamic of resistance between the firefighters and the officers. The firefighters see the need to defend firefighting from management organisational change which believes that firefighters should be cost effective rather than service effective.

This view may also explain why all firefighters behave so similarly in resisting the structures that control how the fire service operates despite working in isolated islands of resistance. It could be that the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) is the reason because they are a unifying voice in the Service but the paradox is that much of the unity that the FBU provides is in the way that male firefighters resist its policies on equality.

The cultural pattern in the FRS is powerful as the power of this is culture is believed (Baigent, 2008). Giddens (1979) refers to unintended consequences of power when individuals have to prove that they belong to a culture and then the combination of human action and structure reproduces the culture:

“How the system uses rules and resources to reproduce itself in interaction” (Giddens 1979, p66) Baigent (2008), however, points out that culture can and does change and people are capable of breaking free of cultural ties. The Fire and Rescue Service is a context where there is the influence of formal power through rules, rites and rituals or informally through processes of socialisation and socialising. This interaction may be a hostile situation for members of non dominant groups as they cannot always predict whether they will be accepted or not (Goffman, 1959).

The concept of the relationship between formal and informal knowledge and power in an organisation is described by Foucault as the method through which power relations of inequality and oppression in an organisation are dispersed and operate discursively through freely adopted social practices.

Official rules within an organisation are only part of the story; there is always ongoing tension between the formal and informal ways of working in an organisation; where policies and procedures are unclear the informal rules of everyday interactions reinforce the division of gender. “Power is a strategic terrain; the site of an unequal relationship between the powerful and the powerless; where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault, 1981, p 92)

## **Teamwork**

Literature on teamwork has always emphasised the importance of effective communication in teams, shared decision-making and supportive and participative relationships but does not consider the gendered nature of teamwork Female sensitivities in teams and the



identification of feminine qualities have been underplayed and ignored in contemporary writings because theorising has been underwritten by masculine traditions of organisational research (Metclafe, 2003)

## **Discourse**

Discourse embraces a range of discursive practices including language, humour and symbols. The language that people use at work is an important part of the workplace experience. As a vehicle for power, discourse is an important medium through which sexual minorities understand how they are considered by the dominant group (Fairclough, 1989), p91)

The use of humour in organisations has been theorised in terms of resistance (Collinson, 2002) but also in subtly undermining others. Humour is, however, seen as an essential part of reducing stress for FRS personnel as it helps to overcome the unpleasant things that individuals have to cope with in their operational lives. It is also a test of belonging to a culture as joking and banter is used to test new recruits and it helps to relieve the boredom that stems from a job that involves a lot of waiting for a call to an emergency.

The Fire and Rescue Service is laden with symbols that reinforce its stereotypical, masculine values. The uniform provides the illusion of the firefighters masculinity and the metaphorical uniform they wear to prove this it (Baigent, 2001) The role of the uniform is a double sided symbol of gender as it hides gender, represents cohesion and subsumes individual identity, yet it appears as sexual imagery in lesbian gay and bisexual culture (Hassard, Holliday and Wilmott,1999).

The other images such as the fire bell, the sirens and the blue lights all represent the emergency “life saving” aspects of the service and the clearly visible fire stations represent the high public profile that the service enjoys as heroes in the hearts and minds of the public.

The fire station building is a physical structure that divides the “space” of the firefighter from the “space” of the individual civilian outside and the symbol of the ringing fire bell at a fire station is the physical symbol that moves people from the casual, informal, passive “space”

to the “space” of the formal, structured, active performance where all differences are put aside and getting the job done overrides all other considerations.

Bourdieu differentiates between the practices that take place in particular space and more significantly in time; his notion of the “habitus” derives from the routine of habit and habituation rather than consciously learned rules and principles (Jenkins, 1992). Bourdieu explains in Wacquant’s “Towards a Reflexive Sociology” (1989):

“Times of crisis in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted constitute a class of circumstances when indeed “rational choice” often appears to take over” (Wacquant, 1989, p 50)

The imagery of the firefighter “hero” is traditionally that of the “masculine” and this masculinity is living out a particular gendered identity that is physical, courageous in control and capable. How firefighters see their masculinity would be inevitably damaged if females are shown to be doing their work thus possibly feminising it (Baigent, 2001)

The imagery of being a firefighter is a role that women take part in yet but are not represented in popular imagery although there is a trend for women being pictured as sexual objects – as highly sexualised – in Fire Service photographs that have been produced in the United States and Australia. ([www.firefighters.com/au](http://www.firefighters.com/au) and [www.americafemalefirefighters.com](http://www.americafemalefirefighters.com))

## **Women in Trade Unions**

Although identifying a feminine based trade union agenda has not been the prime concern in some of the recent literature, there has been a growing focus on this concept (Colgin and Ledwith 1996)

Cunnison and Stagemen (1993) argue that because of the diversity in women’s employment experiences, it is overly simplistic to talk of women’s interests as such and there are clearly a number of issues that have a particular significance for women.

“Women also have distinctive needs and priorities. Feminising the trade union agenda means extending it to include these needs and priorities” (Cunnison and Stagemen1993, p220) Against the weight of gendering within which women negotiate their working lives it is recognised that the political demands of millions may speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices.

De Beauvoir’ s view is that political transformation through social organisation is the final and most important strategy for women to take part in and she urged women to act as agents of social change in a world “that is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (De Beauvoir, 1988, p175)

Looking forward, women may be the key to the future of trade unions. Faced with increasingly hostile governments and employers and political cultural changes, there are several reasons why women continue to hold the key to the future of the union movement. Union growth among women has outpaced men over the last few years (Clawson, 2003); women are more disposed to joining a union and there is potential to increase union membership amongst women. It is critical to the transformation in unions that they differentiate between the individual requirements and identities of their members.

## **Social Policy**

Policy orientated research has also been undertaken for the Home Office (2000) into the experiences of women in various Fire Services with the aim of improving the recruitment and career experience of women firefighters This research recommends the introduction of information events, advertising and ongoing dialogue with the FBU National Women’ s Committee.

Other unpublished research has investigated the masculine culture of the Fire and Rescue Service (Baigent, 2001, Penn, 2002). Baigent himself a firefighter for thirty how firefighters construct their masculinity through the job (Cockburn 1991). He also shows the importance of fitting in with the informal hierarchy of an organisation that remains dominated by white working class heterosexual and able bodied men.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

This chapter sets out the reasons for choosing qualitative research methods, relating this both to the appropriateness of the method to the research questions and the theoretical principles that underlie this approach.

Methodological issues surrounding feminist research are considered, an explanation given of the suitability of the research design for the objectives of the research and the practical and ethical issues considered.

### **Qualitative Methods**

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research primarily because it is the most appropriate method for attempting to answer the type of research questions that have been defined. These seek to explore the reasons “Why women join the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS)?”, “Their experiences in the job”; specifically the gender specific issues that emerge for them working in a male dominated culture and organisation” “The impact of employer actions on the experiences of female firefighters” and “Women’ s strategies for coping in a male-dominated culture”. All of these questions require answers that cannot easily be quantified, but aim to understand how these women perceive their own experiences and the meanings they attach to these.

Qualitative research has a variety of approaches, but Ritchie and Lewis (2003,p3) note a consensus that “qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social worlds”

This method is particularly suited to understanding the complexity of peoples’ experiences, “One of the challenges of carrying out investigations in the real world is in seeking to say something sensible about a complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally messy situation (Robson 2003, p3). It also allows an understanding of the context in which people act and think (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). For this research on women working in a gender atypical role in a male-dominated occupation, understanding that context is important. To focus on the individual experiences in this research, the method of ethnography was utilised in the form of long term participant observation; this is a blanket term encompassing many

and varied methods and techniques. In many ways it is more than a methodology; as it insists that “People and actions cannot simply be observe, logged and counted, but require interpretation, understanding and empathy” (O’Reilly,2005,p6)

Utilising participatory experience has parallels with ethnographic research traditions where there is a detailed description of a way of life in which “the researcher has participated and has also talked with informants in their “native language”, thus generating a rich knowledge base” (Skeggs, 2002, p130).

Participant observation was achieved through the researcher being part of the settings, people and organisation in order to execute this research. This experience helped to establish my status as an inside researcher and therefore enabled my access as to speak with people in the organisation. I was able to speak their language and my shared understandings provided a common identity (Watts, 2006)

The use of reflexivity in this research is an important area of qualitative research methodology as reflexive knowledge provides insights into a particular working world and insights on how that knowledge came about. Feminist methodological approaches have stressed the need for researchers to remain in a flexible dialogue with their research subjects in order to preserve a sense of the researchers own subjectivity within the process, whilst nurturing the relationship of a mutual exchange of information (Bott, 2010).

It also allows the researcher to reflect on their actions and values during the research; whether producing data or writing accounts (Seale 1998).

However, it must also be considered that when reflexivity “as one must accept that all researchers are positioned... the extent to which influences are revealed or concealed when reporting data is circumscribed by the paradigms and disciplines under which we train, work and publish” (Chisheru –Strata,p115).

## **Feminist methodology**

This dissertation took a feminist approach as this approach aims to seek understanding of the experiences of women in an environment where they are a minority, and commonly experience discrimination. Feminist writers have highlighted how women’s experiences in social settings are “different not deferential” (Harding, 1996, p10). Adopting a feminist

epistemology concerns the lived realities of women's lives so that their experiences can be told from their perspective. (Denzin, 1998)

Within that, this research also throws further light of the experiences of an often ignored and under-researched group of women; those working in a gender atypical operational role in the FRS so contributing to an understanding of the heterogeneity of women's experience. Feminist research also tends to be associated with phenomenological and constructionist positions, with many practitioners seeking to understand the ways in which gender differences are constructed by society (Harding, 1996).

Feminist methodology has taken on the debates around epistemology, criticising the exclusion of women from what is considered to be legitimate knowledge. Instead it calls for researchers to be aware of how to be accountable for their partiality and subjectivity. Denzin and Lincoln advises that "research and interpretation are inextricably entwined" (2005; p1027). Any feminist researchers take a flexible position on their choice of methods depending on the topic and scale of study in question. However, more recently feminists have argued that there is no ontological or epistemological position that is distinctively feminist (Harding, 1996; p3), with feminists interacting with a range of positions (Ramazanoglu, 2002). However, what is distinctive about feminist methodology is that it is "shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women's experience and in this way researchers cannot escape their ideas, subjectivity, politics, ethics and social location" (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p16). This is in contrast to the set "textbook" methods of social science that assumes a predominantly masculine model of sociology and society. This has no personal meaning and makes it difficult to understand women's participation in social life. (Oakley, 2003, p7)

### **Choice of Qualitative Methods**

In summary, a qualitative approach, using both in-depth interviews and some documentary analysis, was selected as most appropriate for: providing data to answer the research questions; the researcher's epistemological standpoint (tending towards a social constructionist view of the world); the researcher's political perspective (a feminist position); and accessing the research sample (heterosexual and lesbian women). Therefore, the methodological approach taken seems consistent with the ontological position of the researcher and the research aims.

## Research Design

To understand and compare the daily experiences of women working in an atypical gender role in a male dominated occupation and their role as trade union representatives the following research design was adopted:

**Six semi-structured interviews** with female operational firefighters who are also members of the FBU's National Women's Committee from different Fire and Rescue Services. Data from these interviews was used in the research analysis.

**Key Informant interviews** with one Equality and Diversity Officer from a FRS and three Senior Fire Officers. These interviews provided a valuable context by giving a perspective on Service policy in relation to equality issues, as well as offering a view on the changes that are taking place nationally in the Fire Service. Data from these interviews was not used in the research analysis; it was for background information only.

There was also a pilot interview with a female firefighter to assess the suitability of the topic guide. The data from this was not used as this person was not a trade union representative.

**Documentary Analysis:** it was useful to study policy related to equality issues produced by the government, the FRS and the FBU It is considered useful to study the papers, policies and documents of the organisation when studying its organisational behaviour (Silverman, 2000). In the case of the Fire Service, documentary material can contextualise some of the issues raised in interviews.

## Sampling strategy

The interviews with the female operational firefighters who are also members of the National Women's Committee provide the core of the data needed to address the research aims. This sample was four female firefighters who were also the FBU National Women's Committee trade union representatives for the four brigades in a particular geographic area. They also had a range of personal and professional backgrounds. This was felt to be sufficient to offer a range of experience and allow comparison of their individual experiences in their daily activities and trade union duties but also in context for this particular dissertation research.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that certain key criteria were covered and that sufficient diversity within these criteria was represented (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In this case, the criteria that the sample was designed to include related to: a mix of sexual orientation and personal relationship status, a range of ranks within the professional role of firefighter, a range of employers, and an involvement with the National Women's Committee.

Access to the female firefighters was initially sought through the FBU National Women's Committee. This was facilitated by the researcher's initial links with one representative who meant a certain level of trust had been established.

It was thought to be important to include women working in county and metropolitan

(These are different local government authorities) FRS as it was expected that the metropolitan fire authorities might have more developed equality policies that could influence the experience of women in the job. A spread of women working in metropolitan and county areas was achieved through the access routes described above.

### **Qualitative interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a way of providing detailed descriptions of the interviewees' own experiences in the job, allowing flexibility for interviewees to identify issues of importance to them, while also covering the particular themes pre-determined by the research questions. A topic guide was devised for the interviews (see appendix F) covering the research questions and areas suggested from reviewing the literature, such as reasons for choosing the job, experience of initial training, working relationships, being a woman in the job, career experience and prospects for future promotion, the impact of the job on relationships outside work, support strategies for women, employer policies and trade union activity.

In designing the topic guide an "appreciative enquiry" approach (Liebling et al, 1999) was drawn upon. This seeks to encourage "social actors to reflect explicitly upon their most positive experiences" (ibid, p75) and was seen as valuable for use in a sensitive organisation where staff had been exposed to much negative criticism. While not exclusively using this approach, some questions were introduced to the topic guide for this research which were intended to encourage reflection on the positive aspects of the job, rather than focusing only on difficulties or problems at work.

The topic guide was piloted on an experienced female firefighter, following which some changes to terminology were made. The topic guide was further refined as interviews progressed, consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

To answer the research questions it seemed that qualitative individual interviews were the best choice for exploring the lived experience of operational female firefighters to also include their experiences as trade union representatives. The interviews were open ended to facilitate free expression but semi structured. Interesting issues that arose were explored to allow important themes to emerge and comprehend the key issues as identified by the interviewees themselves. The interviews took about one hour and were on the telephone due to the operational commitments of the sample group.



Negotiating an appropriate time for interviews was a key concern as the participants were in a twenty four hour emergency service and convenient times had to be negotiated with the individual interviewees. This was done through email and telephone to arrange a suitable time. These times were normally at night (about ten pm) Night time is re relaxed than the day shift. . There is individual free time for paperwork and study after tasks have been completed. However, there is always the pressure of the likelihood of an interviewee being called out to an operational incident at any moment and this was a prevalent “presence” during our interview, especially as the conversation was very “reflective” at times. There was certainly disturbance to our interviews due to activity at the Fire Station which was a constant reminder of the interviewee’s working environment.

Interviews generally lasted around an hour and were carried out after the researcher had received the written consent of the interviewee.

### **Data analysis**

In general terms, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used in the approach taken to analysis and themes that emerged from the collected data were analysed rather than testing any particular theoretical construct or model. However, a number of possible themes were identified from the literature review which then influenced the design of the topic guide, as well as the index of themes used in data analysis as it progressed.

Ritchie and Lewis’ s (2003) analytic method framework was adopted and an index of themes was used to classify interview transcripts according to emerging themes. These were based on the topic guide but modified as data analysis progressed, (Appendix E). Thematic charts were then created, summarising and bringing together the experiences of all interviewees concerning a particular theme.

### **Ethical issues**

#### **Confidentiality and anonymity**

There was no need to use a covert approach to gaining data (Baigent, 2001) and the participants were all made aware of what the research was for and how it may be utilised.

However, the issue of confidentiality is important in such research studies as the careers of participants could be affected by what is reported especially where they may be critical of their employer. Individuals involved with the research have their anonymity maintained.

To maintain the women’s anonymity, it was also necessary to keep anonymous the names of the FRS that they work for.

## **Consent**

Participants in the research were informed about the research aims and methods in the first instance either directly by the researcher or by a representative of the FBU National Women's Committee. The support of the FBU National Women's Committee helped to vouch for the researcher and assisted in women agreeing to come forward. In the course of phone calls or emails arranging the interview time and date, and at the start of interviews, participants were reassured about the purpose of the study, the questionnaire's content (Appendix B), the methodology as well as informed consent (Bryman, 2004, Mason 1996, May 2001). The process of gaining informed consent was not a single event. Due to the sensitive nature of the issues being discussed consent was negotiated with every interview and follow up telephone calls during the write up of the dissertation to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

## **The researcher's role and responsibilities**

Feminist research has placed the position and responsibilities of the researcher at the forefront. Oakley (1981) challenged conventional advice on interviewing that sought to remove as much "bias" as possible by setting the researcher apart from the interviewee. She believes that "personal involvement is more than a dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (ibid, p58). As this was an open ended interview environment which used telephone communication between the interviewer and the interviewee, this created a more private scenario than a face to face interview for the interviewee and it seemed to contribute to the willingness to answer questions if asked in the context of the conversation.

All of the interviewees were interested in the research findings, and it was agreed to distribute a summary of the findings to all of the participants.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

This chapter sets out the main findings of the research and refers back to the literature in Chapter Three. The findings are mostly drawn from the qualitative interviews with the female firefighters who are also trade union reps for the Fire Brigade's Union National Women's Committee. Three pilot interviews were undertaken in June 2010 with key informants and data from these interviews is included in the research. The interviews with the female firefighters who are also trade union representatives took place in July 2010.

Firstly, the sample is introduced. This is followed by an account of the findings as they relate to the research questions set out in Chapter 1: "Why do women join the Fire and Rescue Service?", "Their experiences in the job (specifically the gender specific issues that emerge from them working in a male dominated culture and organisation)", "The impact of employer's actions on the experiences of female firefighters" and "Women's strategies for coping in a male dominated culture",

### **The sample**

The female firefighters were interviewed are introduced (using pseudonyms), giving some biographical and professional information including their age, length of service, rank and type of brigade.

### **The participants**

Fran is thirty eight years old and has been a female firefighter for twenty years in two different brigades (Metropolitan and County). She went into the FRS straight from college and is currently a Watch Manager in a County Brigade. Fran is married with three children under ten years of age and has been a representative of the FBU National Women's Committee for ten years.

Jane is thirty five years old and describes her sexual orientation as lesbian. She has been in a County Brigade as a firefighter for five years after doing a variety of community based jobs, including working for a FRS as a non uniformed employee. She lives with her partner and they have three teenage children. Jane also is a career for an elderly relative. She has been a representative of the FBU National Women's Committee for five years.

Amy is thirty one years old and has been in the FRS for eight years. She is a firefighter. in a Metropolitan Brigade. She was formally in the armed forces and has a partner and one child who is under the age of five years. She has been a representative of the FBU National Women's Committee for one year.

Rachel is thirty one years old and was a part time firefighter as well as working for local government, before applying to be a whole time firefighter and has been in the FRS for ten

years. She is currently a Crew Manager and to date has been in the same County Brigade. She is single. She has been a representative of the FBU National Women's Committee for two years.

All of these women have been the only female firefighter working on various watches for most of their career.

The sample contained four women from a particular geographic region who are also trade union representatives for the FBU National Women's Committee. All described themselves as being white, reflecting the low numbers of ethnic minorities employed in the FRS. (See Chapter 2)

The sample comprised of women who had served as firefighters for between five and twenty years. One woman identified her sexual orientation as lesbian and the remainder of the sample, heterosexual.

Within the sample (four women) two were in the role of firefighter and two were in more senior positions on a watch; one in the role of Crew Manager (who is a deputy to the Watch Manager) and one in the role of Watch Manager who is in charge of a watch.

Half of the sample had experience of working in a Metropolitan Brigade (which cover both urban and rural areas) and half had experience of working for County Brigades (which cover both town and rural areas).

All women had an educational attainment of a level three qualification (A levels or equivalent) and two were currently completing level four management qualifications.

## **Reasons for becoming a firefighter**

### **Attraction of the job**

The participants were attracted to the job of firefighter for the following reasons:

the physical and varied nature of the job, the teamwork element, a wish to do something that was

challenging and different as well being in the public services.

"I joined as it was different, dangerous and to give something back" (Fran)

Working in a non traditional role for women in a male dominated environment was not seen as a potential difficulty by these women as they have all been brought up in an environment where they were used to socialising with males in a variety of circumstances.

"I always found men much easier ... and I'd got along with them in the armed forces so I was used to it" (Amy)

Three of the women had some connection with firefighters before they made an application, although these people were men. There were also outside influences to the choice of career such as the TV programme "London's burning" in the 1990's.

Amy decided to apply to the Fire and Rescue Service when family circumstances meant that she had to leave the armed forces and there was no recruitment in the Police at the time.

"It was not intimidating for me. It sounded like a really good job and I was used to working in a male dominated environment that was challenging"

Jane worked in a non uniformed post in her FRS and wanted to join the operational side of the Service.

"I thought why not?. "If I can play rugby, I should be able to do that if I want to and I liked what I saw of the job"

All of the women said that they had following characteristics; determination both physical and mental, a good sense of humour, they were outgoing and articulate and they also agreed that they were interested in equality issues.

None of the women had joined the FRS because of pay or the pension; in fact one was joining just at the time of the 2002-2003 industrial action that led to the new pay structure. "I was too young to care really about the security and pay but now I realise that the pension is a good deal" (Amy)

All of the women agreed that the recruitment process for the FRS takes a long time and is a tough process of physical and mental challenges. They had to be committed to being physically fit and available to take part in the recruitment the process for up to one year. Many applicants of both sexes have to apply several few times before being accepted as the selection standards are so rigorous.

All of the women agreed that they were thrilled and relieved that they had been successful in gaining a place to be a firefighter. Amy had an interesting experience.

"It was a strange time as I had been rejected and then a place came up the week before the new trainee's course started as a male could not accept it. What did that mean? Was I good enough or was it a numbers game? I had the impression that the Service wanted me to stay in my non uniformed post with them which I was good at and give the place to someone else. Was it convenient to give the place to someone in the same brigade or was I

the best reserve?. I was the *girl* (interviewee's emphasis) that was picked at the last minute" (Amy).

The variety in the backgrounds of the participants, their reasons for wanting to do a non traditional job for a woman and the fact that they were not afraid of having a role within a male dominated culture shows that it is important not to categorise the experiences of women into one homogeneous group. (Harding, 1987). De Beauvoir's (1949) conclusion that gender is socially constructed is also relevant to women in a non traditional occupation.

## **Training**

Women as trainee firefighters are just as paradoxically invisible and extra visible in their initial training whether they want to be or not and they constantly have to deal with their recruitment being viewed as favouritism not merit.

"If I did something right it was just ok but if I did something wrong then everyone knew about it" (Amy)

Every male on a course experiences the course from a majority point of view but females are always in the minority as there are normally only one or two on a course.

All of the participants relished the physical challenges of the training but thought that the pettiness of the rules were unrealistic in a modern day organisation. They had differing experiences of acceptance during the course, although it should be noted that Fran joined earlier than the others at a time when women in the FRS were even more of a minority.

"I felt that some people did not want me there because I was a woman and that included the instructors and officers" (Fran)

The feeling of isolation of the minority in a dominant culture is one of the gender barriers that women experience when they enter a male dominated environment where men consider women to be interlopers into their rugged male world. (Bagilhole, 2002)

## **Experiences on the Watch**

All of these women joined busy fire stations as the first female firefighter on their watch and in one case the first woman in her Service. This is not an abnormal occurrence in the FRS due to the low number of female applicants that are successful in the selection process.

"They were a bit cautious to begin with but I had my first meal with the watch on Christmas Eve. They had a word with one particular man who had a problem with it [me being on the watch]. Your experience good or bad is down to the way that a watch is run" (Jane)

"I started in 2003 at the time of the National Strike and there was a lot of agro..." I said that I was there to fit in and work hard" (Amy)

“I was so blown away that I was through training school and there was so much to get on with. My first job was at a major national murder enquiry so I hit the ground running. I had to” (Fran)

“My age was a disadvantage as I was young and there was a lot of interest in my personal life which I don’ t think would have happened if I had been male but I just got stuck in!” (Rachel)

Joining a culture that is built around male solidarity and masculine behaviour is a common experience that female firefighters have to deal with. Miller’ s view (2002) is that if even if a woman is seen to act like a man, they are still perceived to be a woman, thus gender is still linked with sex in reality.

## **Experiences on the Watch**

### **Image of masculinity**

All participants were grateful and proud for the positive image that the FRS has in the eyes of the public and feel that this is justified. Rachel commented on the irony of the masculine heroism that is so prevalent in the FRS.

“To the public when you are at an operational incident they could not detect if a firefighter was male or female so are we all heroes until we look like women?!”

The image of the “fireman” heroism and the masculinity of this image is explained by Fran.

“When I am in the supermarket stocking up on food for the station (we do this on a rota) I am always asked about my job, I guess because I am a female in uniform.

When I say that it’ s not much really, any male colleague will say to me afterwards, “Don’ t say that, people think we are heroes.you’ re letting us down”

The imagery of the Fire Service and the heroism of the masculine are socially constructed by the men who really believe in it. The presence of women in this role makes a contradiction of this image as a woman cannot be a “hero” as they are not male. (Baigent, 2001)

## **The People**

In the FRS it is very important that the watch is an operationally effective team as their role is often at live saving emergency incidents. However there is a downside to this pressure to “fit in” and individuals may not always be accepted if they do not conform to the way that people behave on the watch.

“It is difficult to describe as there are so many different characters in the brigade. You can have strong blokes, outgoing blokes and there are some smaller, weaker blokes. There are all types of characters. It takes all sorts to build a good watch and that includes women” (Rachel)

All participants said that socialising is seen to be important for team bonding in the FRS but being able to take part depends on peoples’ responsibilities outside work or if the individual really wanted to go along to a social event.

“It’s a matter of choice sometimes. Do I want to go and watch football in a pub? No” (Fran).

Language can be a positive social interaction on a watch but it can also be used to demean people and all of the participants knew when people “were crossing the line”

“Humour is one thing but when it gets personal and nasty then that is a problem for women and for men” (Fran)

Being treated as if they are “outsiders” is still a problem for women in the FRS; there are those men in the Service who still say that it is no place for a women and this can be expressed in hostility through to harassment and bullying (see the section on sexism below) This systematic, domination of women is described by Walby (1990) as the concept of patriarchy and shows that gender is reconstructed in organisations on a daily basis (Gheradi,1994). Goffman, (1959) refers to the social exclusion of individuals who are a minority group in an organisation through subtle methods such as ignoring them or excluding them from group activities.

## **Facilities and dignity**

An obvious way to make women feel out of place is the failure to provide them with sleeping, changing and toilet facilities in a lot of fire stations; also the failure of uniforms that fit the female form. The FBU National Women’s Committee is very frustrated at the slow progress in getting uniforms to fit and concern about whether the uniform is actually “safe” as they have not been tested on female bodies. It was not until 2008 after years of campaigning by women in the FBU asking for a female form mannequin, that the UK FRS recognised that women firefighters should receive the same level of health and safety protection as their male counterparts (‘Siren Magazine’)

Whilst there are communal sleeping facilities, dartboards and snooker tables on fire stations and no suitable female toilets, proper facilities for changing or proper uniform, the FRS will



be a working environment that will continue to attract traditional applicants and potentially put off more diverse applicants.

“We have millions of pounds worth of operational kit and when we ask for suitable changing facilities they just roll their eyes and look at me as if I am asking for the earth” (Fran)

Amy also tells of experiences of being at an operational incident for several hours and having nowhere at all to go for toilet facilities (Brigades do set up toilet facilities at very large incidents but these are rare)

“It is not feasible for a woman to relieve herself in public as it is a man – it is the same with using sanitary products... it’s all about dignity... a lot of men don’t like having proper toilet facilities out there either when we are out for hours”

This use of space in fire station by males, as means of establishing routine for an individual or a social group is described by Bordieu (1981) as “habitus” where people have a routine of certain habits in certain places. The struggle of women to have proper facilities and uniform can be seen in the relationship between power and resistance (Foucault, 1981)

## **The job**

The job as a firefighter is split into routine and operational activities that have specific responsibilities depending on your role. The routine activities such as training, paperwork and maintaining and testing equipment are carried out by everyone on the watch on a daily basis.

“What do we do on a watch? Cleaning, testing equipment, training, cooking and fire safety education ... and in the middle of all this go out to fire calls!” (Fran)

All participants agreed that their operational experience to date had depended on the frequency and type of incidents that they attended. They all agreed that they did thrive on the elements of danger and risk otherwise they would not be doing this job.

“Bravery in the face of danger is what we do. It suddenly clicks into place, the importance of training and being skilled” (Amy)

“You have to have the confidence, stability and the capacity to stay calm in stressful situations and work with accuracy and speed” (Rachel)

All participants agreed that having the necessary skills was vital and that experience and training was very necessary to being a good “firefighter”

However all of the participants expressed a view that there were women who did not pull their weight or who had been promoted despite their ability and this caused a problem for equality and for other women.

“Any woman that is “carried” by their crew is criticised by men and makes the rest of us look bad. It makes it harder for us to get along...no slackers please!” (Jane)

Butler's view on women being successful in an organisation but having to deny their gender can be seen in the focus by these female firefighters on the being good at the skills that are non traditional for women and used by men. The view that it is a negative situation for other women if a woman is “carried by their crew” is because men can ostracise women in a male environment if they let their behavior slip to reflect more feminine values (Miller 2002)

### **The stress of the job**

All of the participants agreed that there is physical and mental stress for both women and men in this job and upper body and aerobic fitness is vital (however techniques to use this are equally important).

“One minute you are eating your meal and then within ten minutes, you are at a house fire so the stresses on the body are huge...Your body does not adjust from lack of sleep. I cannot sleep through the night ” (Fran)

“You have to be in the zone when you are at work. I am in one zone at work and one zone at home... but it’ s possible. ” (Jane)

“I have seen some dreadful things at incidents and it makes me want to hold onto each and every day and the experience of life” (Fran)

The physical strength needed for this job was seen as being physically fit but also having the techniques of strength.

All participants agreed that being a firefighter was an equally hard, challenging job for both men and women, thus contradicting the traditional assumptions about male and female roles and abilities (Connell, 2000).

### **Sexual Discrimination and Harassment**

The attitude of men towards women in a culture that is built around male solidarity and masculine behaviour can lead to and sexual harassment and bullying on a watch.

Women firefighters are likely to be vulnerable to sexual harassment and bullying due to their minority status in the FRS and women often feel the pressure to deal with any problems themselves and not take it outside the watch (Baigent, 1996)

The participants in this research confirmed that they had experienced bullying and discrimination due to their gender. Examples of this were men’s porn magazines left in the

female toilets and men fowling their toilets. The participants had either dealt with this themselves or asked for advice from their union although there had been no formal proceedings.

Rachel had experienced problems with a BA (breathing apparatus) mask that did not fit her face, causing her physical problems in smoke. "It took a lot of constant badgering to get one that did fit and no one wanted to know. Surely it's not just me that has a narrow face. I do not accept that I should just go away and make the best of it – it's a hazard"

Later in her career, Rachel applied for a post as a Breathing Apparatus Trainer. "It would have been real progress for female trainees and firefighters to have a mentor type figure" However, she was not chosen for the post even though her performance was good and she thinks it is a missed opportunity for change. "Sometimes you need to have someone different in there to make change happen"

As trade union representatives, the participants have also had to deal with numerous cases needing informal and formal advice and formal representation for other women.

However they were all aware of numerous problems in the FRS nationally and this was not just because they are union representatives. In 2010 Kate Ellis won an out of court settlement for direct sexual discrimination, sexual harassment over a period of years and constructive unfair dismissal.

"I was singled out and isolated, I spoke to Crew Managers, Watch Managers and Group Managers who just did not listen to my concerns" ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk))

The potential isolation of a woman in a male dominated culture is not an easy existence and these experiences voiced by women show that women who attempt to participate in traditional male environments have very challenging experiences and some do leave.

"Sometimes you just cannot go on anymore; it is like being in a fog that is swallowing you up" (Fran).

## **Employer actions and their effect on female firefighters and their role as trade union representatives**

### **Families**

All participants condemned the lack of good practice for maternity pay and working conditions for women who are pregnant. Only three FRS have taken up the good practice for maternity pay and good practice working conditions set out by the FBU National Women's Committee and there is no legal obligation for them to do.

“I was robbed of my pregnancy because of inept Managers who did not know what to do with me” (Fran)

“The FRS allows me the time to be a Mum but I cannot afford to have another child as I am the higher wage earner and the loss of pay and other costs would be crippling”

(Amy)

All participants agreed that negotiating the tightrope between work commitments and home commitments was an issue for most women and some men and were worried that the shift system that currently allowed four days leave after four shifts would be changed in the future by FRS managers. ([www.fbu.org.uk](http://www.fbu.org.uk))

There was a consensus from the participants that the entrenched, cultural attitude of the management in the Service was a negative problem. The reluctance and slow progress of the Service to provide suitable working conditions such as proper facilities for females, the provision of family friendly training courses, uniforms and maternity pay, lay at the door of these Managers (both uniformed officers and non uniformed managers).

“Money is blamed all the time but that is not the real reason, it is the entrenched cultural views” (Fran)

This “entrenched cultural view” is also shown in the following situation:

“I am frustrated by Service Managers who are disrespectful of female firefighters. At a recruitment chat at the station, I was in the office and heard a manager say to a male potential recruit”. “Make sure you say that you are used to working with women as they are looking for that sort of thing”. “It was obvious that the potential recruit thought, “What kind of place is this?” (Rachel)

The participants all stated that they loved their job but that managers in the FRS from the top down had made it difficult for them carry out their job at various times. All of the participants were aware that their position as trade union representatives may have influenced the attitude of the Service Management towards them.

“There are many people in management who pay lip service to [equality and] diversity. When I challenged one manager about something, his response was.

“Who do you think you are talking to?” “I’ve got an MBA. I know more about people than you do. ”. There needs to be better understanding and listening instead of white, straight, male managers knowing what’s best for me” (Fran)

The challenge in this situation is exactly what Kanter (1977, p237) referred to in her description of women being labeled as “iron maidens” if they are assertive.

## **Trade Union activity.**

All of the participants, no matter how long they had been trade union representatives said that they enjoyed their role even though they had to spend a lot of time both at meetings and representing female firefighters. It gave them personal determination to have a full and active career and be a role model within the Service. It was also a positive experience being part of a strategy to educate, reassure and inspire women and to challenge existing inequalities.

“I am full of admiration for [name removed] who fights on after all these years and stands up for others even though she knows that she will be torn apart and [name removed] of the National Women’s Committee who is amazingly articulate, intelligent and so dedicated to equality on all levels; they are my strength, belief and courage” (Fran)

Women are key to the future of the union movement as they are still a minority in union membership so future membership is important for finance and support for union policy (Clawson, 2003) The need to focus on issues for women in a union is of importance but what is also important is the need for union executives to take note of the diversity of women when addressing issues on their behalf (Colgin and Ledwith, 1996)

## **Conclusion**

“We encourage what we permit to happen but there is sometimes little choice for people in the Fire and Rescue Service (Baigent, 2008, p21). The findings from these interviews with female firefighters who are also trade union representatives confirm the above statement.

These very personal stories describe why they joined the Service, their experiences of working in a male dominated culture and organisation, the impact of the actions of employers on their work experiences and how they cope in a male dominated culture. All of their experiences show how women in a non traditional occupation can “ signal a more fundamental change in which non -traditional occupations are organised and practiced” (Bagilhole, 2002,p175)

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### **Critical reflections**

This chapter shows that the chosen methodology was, overall, successful in generating the data required to answer the research questions posed at the outset. Some limitations of the sample interviews achieved are discussed here, together with lessons learned from the use of the research tools and the method of analysis employed. Finally, this chapter also brings together the main points of analysis in summary

### **The research question**

In general, the chosen methodology succeeded in producing the data required to allow a consideration of the research questions posed. It was originally intended to be an analysis of the experiences of female firefighters but the volunteers for this research were also trade union representatives and from different brigades so it was therefore decided to have a research question exploring the everyday lives of female firefighters who are also trade union representatives and who are all from different brigades.

### **The sample**

The dissertation set out to explore women's experiences of working in a non traditional occupation for women and to challenge the presumed homogeneity of their experiences. It was decided to conduct a set of key informant interviews with FRS employees (one Senior Officer, One Equality and Diversity Officer and one female firefighter who is a representative from the FBU Gay and Lesbian Committee – this person did not want to be in the sample for the research but was happy to talk to me in this way) This was for background information only and not used in the data. There was also a pilot interview with a female firefighter to see if the topic guide was suitable. The sample was the four female firefighters who had different personal and professional backgrounds and who were all from different FRS as well as being trade union representatives.

It is not possible to know whether this sample is representative of women who work in the FRS so whilst this research can compare the experiences of female firefighters who are in the categories of different sexual orientation (heterosexual and lesbian) and trade union representatives, there are other groups of women whose experiences have not been reflected in this research.

The sample lacks representation from bisexual female firefighters who are representatives of the FBU National Women's Committee, thus it was not possible to explore their experiences.

There is also no inclusion of a sample of female firefighters who are non activists in the FBU National Women's Committee. The inclusion of non activists' experiences may have added some perspective to the research even if they were not part of the research question.

All of the women in the samples (key informants and female firefighters) are described by themselves as white, reflecting the low proportions of ethnic minorities in the FRS. While it was not the intention of this dissertation to discuss issues of race and ethnicity, it is worth noting that this sample lacks ethnic diversity (there was one key informant who is in the category of ethnic minority). If there was future research in organisations with small non – white populations, specific efforts would need to be made to ensure a more diverse sample.

### **Research tools**

The female firefighters completed a questionnaire over the phone. In all cases the topic guide worked well in terms of covering the areas that it set out to include, although there seemed to be too many specific questions and it was found to be more successful to focus on the broader questions that allowed the participants to cover themes in a less directive way. In retrospect it can be seen that the topic guide covered a fairly broad range of issues, and in fact the interviews collected more material than could be fully analysed in a dissertation of this size.

In the interviews with the female firefighters, the use of the appreciative enquiry approach (Liebling et al, 1999) to introduce questions that reflect on the positive aspects of the job worked quite well. However, all the female firefighters told the researcher in the interviews that they found the questions to be emotionally challenging as the discussion led them to reflect on the frustrating (and unnecessary) challenges they faced living and working in a male dominated environment.

### **Analysis**

The use of Ritchie and Lewis's (2003) framework method for analysis was used in the pilot interview and also in the interviews with the sample of the female firefighters. It was not used in the key informant interviews which were for background information only.

This method was experimental for the researcher, but proved a useful way of organising the data collected and for identifying links between themes and the interviewees' experiences. It was found at the pilot interview that the original thematic index had too many detailed categories which made the labeling difficult from the interviewee's transcript. The thematic index was then refined to make a more manageable index. .

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This dissertation set out to explore the everyday experiences of women working in a non-traditional occupation with specific focus on female firefighters who are also trade union

representatives. It describes and compares their reasons for choosing a traditionally male occupation, their everyday experiences as female firefighters, the impact of employer actions on their experiences and their strategies for coping in a heavily male dominated culture.

These women have chosen to go into a non traditional occupation for women in a heavily male dominated environment as they wanted to have a career that is physically and mentally challenging and one that makes a difference to society. Their past experiences before becoming female firefighters demonstrate their independence of mind and determination to “be what they want to be” and their family background was very supportive of their individual choice.

Their experiences both in the application process and training have all been a challenging experience as they have strived to overcome the in their particular challenge of being in a minority and they have had to address the challenge of constantly being in a minority that is within the FRS but not in society (ie being female).

Female firefighters face two conflicting sets of constraints. The discourse of their everyday lives has led them to have a double identity. Firstly, their identity outside the FRS organisation where they are able to be individuals and secondly, their identity within the FRS organisation where it is a requirement to “fit in” to the male culture.

The employer’s’ actions are limited in responding to the inequalities experienced by the women. For example very few provide facilities geared to women’s needs that have inconsistent standards; uniform and fire kit that is ill-fitting and as yet untried on female bodies and there is an inconsistent and negative approach to menstruation, pregnancy, and maternity pay.

Employer’s policies to deal firmly with bullying and harassment are often unsuccessful in encouraging people to report problems as individual’s fear that they will be seen as a “troublemaker” by colleagues. Some individuals feel the pressure to sort out problems for themselves.

The action taken by employers, such as “positive action” to invest in the recruitment of women, in order to increase the number of female firefighters is inconsistent with an organisation where women have an ongoing challenge to succeed on an equal basis to men when they in the same job as evidenced in the last chapter through the women’s narratives.

The trend towards ever greater inclusiveness in the FRS and the speed of this change is accelerating (CLG 2010) Female firefighters may be a threat to the way that male firefighters perceive the job of firefighting, themselves and women in general (Baigent, 2001, 2008).



## **Strategies for coping in a male - dominated culture**

There are both informal networks for women such as their own personal networks within the FRS but the main formal network accessed by women to help them with any advice and support is the FBU National Women's Committee. This organisation advises and supports over two thousand female members on issues such as sleeping, changing and toilet facilities, uniform issues, maternity issues and bullying and harassment. That this organisation has to advise on so many cases, demonstrates that there is very little and inconsistent provision of basic working conditions and policy for women in the FRS.

The existence of a trade union to address issues that are experienced by female firefighters in a male dominated culture helps to provide this minority group with a culture of resistance towards the dominant group. Resistance, like power, is not simply a trait which people possess. Resistance is dependent on the actions and responses of individuals; it is exercised through a social network and makes a positive transformation of negative experiences.

Looking to the future, it seems that female firefighters have three choices; to continue to fit in with men and continue to bury their identity as women; leave and give up the opportunity to serve or resist the Anglo male culture. These female firefighters in the sample have chosen the latter and now represent over two thousand female firefighters; the very fact that they have to do this tells a very different story of how difficult change in the Fire and Rescue Service (Baigent, 2008)

The key themes from the literature in this research act as a "backdrop" of thematic knowledge and confirmation of the everyday experiences of these women in their role as female firefighters and also trade union representatives. Their daily experiences are a huge challenge within a patriarchal society; their interaction within the daily discourse of a dominant male environment as they seek their own identities amidst the symbolic masculinities of the Fire Service. They do "stand up and speak out" despite their lack of space, of facility, and against the subtle power and resistance of the Service.

## **Recommendations for policy and practice based on the findings from this research:**

### **Further Research:**

This research has raised some issues that it would be interesting to investigate further:

Comparative research into the Police and FRS or the armed forces and FRS regarding lived experiences of women.

Comparative research into the lived experiences of female firefighters who are not activists in the FBU National Women's Committee with those who are.

Comparative research into women's experiences of and desire for promotion in the FRS, as there are indications from this research that women may see promotion as a strategy for surviving this male dominated culture.

### **Implications for the FRS**

As an "observer as participant" in the FRS for a relatively short timeframe, it would be premature to suggest answers to the well-known difficulties of the lived experiences of women in the FRS. However, some issues raised by interviewees may be of interest to employers in considering their equality strategies:

Complaints procedures - procedures for making complaints, particularly regarding harassment and bullying, should make allowances for the complainant to understand and feel included in the process. There are cases of women who have made such a complaint feeling that this did not happen and this compounded the sense of powerlessness that they already felt as a result of the harassment.

Priority of equality training - it is recognised that any emphasis on equalities may run the risk of highlighting minorities to their detriment. However a more effective approach to equalities training, where the issues are addressed as a routine part of management or recruit training, is preferable to training being introduced only when there is a problem within the organisation.

Skills and experience - ensure that skills and experiences gained in previous work experience are more valued and that there is more recognition of the importance of prior learning and skills that the FRS is attracting in terms of education and professional experience.

Placing women together - this policy of trying to place women on watches or stations with other female firefighters has resulted in higher retention rates for women. This approach is supported by the experiences of women who have been placed with other women by chance on a watch. They have gained support and benefited from the fact that the men have already adjusted to working with a woman.

Facilities and Dignity - It is the right of every individual working for an organisation to be provided with suitable facilities for their work under the legislation of 'Dignity of women at work' as required by the European Union (Equal Opportunity Review no.41, 1992). Legally and morally women are entitled to feel safe at work and should be provided with the same equal facilities, equipment and treatment as their male colleagues in the course of their work.

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## Appendix A

### Glossary

<b>Brigade</b>	All Local Authorities called their Fire Services Brigades before 2004. The title Brigade is still used and understood by the public as being a title for the Fire and Rescue Service. Individual Fire and Rescue Services are still referred to as Brigades.
<b>Chief Fire Officer</b>	The most senior officer in a FRS. Normally one who has come up the ranks from a Firefighter. However this is not always the case in FRS today. The post may also be titled Chief Executive if the holder is non - uniformed.
<b>CLG</b>	Communities and Local Government Department which is the central government department responsible for all local authority fire and rescue services. It was has been previously termed The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister/The Home Office.
<b>Control</b>	Section of the Fire and Rescue Service responsible for receiving emergency 999 calls and mobilising fire appliances
<b>Facilities</b>	These are locker rooms, toilets, showers and changing areas normally in the same area of a Fire Station. However facilities for female firefighters may be dispersed into a variety of locations due to building constraints.
<b>Fire Appliance</b>	Known publicly as 'Fire Engines' but termed Fire Appliances within the Fire and Rescue Service.
<b>FRS</b>	Fire Brigade until 1999 and the government's modernisation agenda. In 2004 the Fire and Rescue Service's Act of 2004 titled the organisation the Fire and Rescue Service.
<b>Firefighters</b>	Formally known as Firemen and Firewomen until the term Firefighter was introduced to cover both male and female operational personnel.

<b>FBU</b>	Fire Brigades Union is the trade union for all operational personnel in the Fire and Rescue Service.
<b>NWC</b>	National Women's Committee is the branch of the Fire Brigades Union for Women
<b>Non Uniformed</b>	The posts that are held by support staff in the Fire and Rescue Service. They have different terms and conditions of employment to operational personnel.
<b>Operational Personnel</b>	Covers all personnel in the Fire and Rescue Service who are firefighters, officers and control staff.
<b>Positive Action</b>	Government Initiative since 1999 that publicises recruitment training days and information events at local Fire Stations for minority groups in society who are under represented in the Fire and Rescue Service.
<b>Routine Duties</b>	Consists of the daily work carried out on a Fire Station including normal training, inspection of equipment and vehicles and testing of Service equipment.
<b>Watch</b>	Group of operational personnel working on a Fire Station. Known as Red, White, Blue, Green to distinguish each watch that is on duty at a particular time.
<b>Woman Firefighter</b>	Alternative term used for a female operational person who is now termed a firefighter (female)

## Appendix B

### **Topic Guide for Interview with Female Firefighters who are also Trade Union Representatives**

#### **Recruitment**

- Length of time in the FRS
- Age at joining the FRS
- Reasons why you wanted to be a firefighter
- Knowledge of firefighting through family/media
- Financial security of a job in the FRS
- How you felt when you had passed selection to be a firefighter in the FRS

#### **Training Course**

- Location and length of the course
- The positives and negatives of the initial training phase

#### **About the job/role**

- The qualities of a good firefighter
- First experiences on the watch
- The attitude of the other firefighters
- Description of a typical shift
- What do you do in “stand down” periods
- Dynamics of the watch
- Characters on the watch
- Humour on the watch
- Positives of the job
- Negatives of the job
- Physical stress of the job
- Mental stress of the job
- Affects on you of physical and mental stress
- Your mechanisms for coping
- Your attitude to danger and risk
- Your experience of support for female firefighters

- The positives and negatives of living so closely with people on a Fire Station
- Socialising with the watch outside of work
- Facilities for females on fire stations and the fire ground
- Improvements that are needed to these facilities
- Barriers to improving these facilities

### **Identity**

- How do you describe yourself to others professionally
- How do you feel being in the FRS
- What do you think of the image of the FRS
- What do you think the public thinks of female firefighters
- Your role model
- Their characteristics

### **FRS as an employer**

- Contact with senior Managers – uniformed and non uniformed
- Their attitude to female firefighters
- Policies that affect female firefighters
- Equality and Diversity policy in the FRS
- Improving the Equality and Diversity policy in the FRS
- Treatment of female firefighters compared to other minority groups
- Reasons behind negative treatment of female firefighters
- What changes have you noticed in the Fire Service since you started?

### **Work/life balance**

- Your family and relationships
- How you cope with the balance of your work life and the other aspects of your life
- Do you have different identities in your work life and your home life
- The positives and negatives of the shift system
- Effect of your work on your family/relationship

### **Fire Brigade Union National Women's Committee**

- What is the role of the FBU National Women's Committee (NWC)
- What are your experiences to date of being a trade union representative (negative/positive)
- The ways that the FBU/NWC can improve conditions for their members
- How it can have an influence on policy

### **Further Questions**

- Number of female firefighters on your watch
- Maximum number of female firefighters on your watch at any time
- Level of highest educational qualification
- How does being a firefighter change your outlook on life
- Has the FRS lived up to your expectations
- What do you think the time frame is for the FRS to improve for women?
- What are your career plans
- Recommendation of the FRS as a career?

(Appendix C and D are not included here)

## **Appendix E**

### **Thematic index**

#### **1. Reasons for choosing job**

- 1.1 Attraction of job
- 1.2 Previous knowledge of firefighters/expectations job for women
- 1.3 Previous work experience
- 1.4 Other

#### **2. Recruitment**

- 2.1 Process of applying
- 2.2 Obstacles/difficulties
- 2.3 Qualities needed for the job
- 2.4 Other

#### **3. Initial training**

- 3.1 Place and length of training
- 3.2 Experience of training
- 3.3 Relationships with colleagues and trainers

3.4 Other

#### **4. Perceptions of firefighters and female firefighters**

4.1 Initial reactions from family, friends

4.2 Reactions now from family, friends

4.3 Reactions from public

4.4 View of self in relation to doing male job

4.5 Image of male firefighters

4.6 Image of female firefighters

4.7 Other

#### **5. Experience of the job**

5.1 Where work/how long for

5.2 Movement between watches/stations/brigades

5.3 Positives of the job

5.4 Negatives of the job

5.5 Physical demands of job

5.6 Skills for the job

5.7 Watch culture (ie. banter)

5.8 Uniforms and kit

5.9 Career plans

5.10 Other

## **6. Working relationships**

6.1 Gender balance on watch/station

6.2 Relationships with colleagues

6.3 Relationship with managers

6.4 Being “one of the lads”/fitting in

6.5 Other

## **7. Problems in the job**

7.1 Bullying/harassment

7.2 Other problems

7.3 Support/lack of

7.4 Coping strategies

7.5 Effect of physical and mental stress

7.6 Making a complaint/or not

7.7 Other

## **8. Impact of job on relationships outside work**



- 8.1. Impact on relationship with partner
- 8.2. Impact on rest of life
- 8.3. Childcare
- 8.4. Other

**9. Change**

- 9.1 Changes in attitudes towards women
- 9.2. Change in treatment of women
- 9.3 Other

**10. Employer policies and action**

- 10.1. Awareness of employer policies to encourage a diverse workforce
- 10.2. Impact on their decision to join
- 10.3. Attitude towards employer equality and diversity policies
- 10.4 Other

**11. Union membership and activity**

- 11.1. Union membership
- 11. 2 Their perceptions of FBU NWC in general
- 11.3 Their perceptions of FBU NWC in relation to equality issues
- 11.4 The NWC Women's School

- 11.5 The G&L Committee and School
- 11.6 Experience of union support
- 11.7 Support from Union for representatives
- 11.8 Other