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in Employment and Human Resource Studies

A comparison of the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women in a non-traditionally female occupation, the fire service

Dissertation submitted by

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“I declare that the material contained in this thesis has not been used in any other submission for an academic award and was produced solely by me other than where explicitly and clearly attributed to other sources”

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Abstract

Research on women in non-traditionally female occupations has tended to treat women as a homogenous group, ignoring differences in sexual orientation, despite evidence that lesbians may be more likely to work in non-traditional areas than heterosexual women. This dissertation compares the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women working in a heavily male-dominated occupation, firefighting, where women are in a minority of only 2% in England. It finds that, in an occupation where masculinity is valued and emphasised, lesbians who do not conform to traditional notions of femininity may find it easier to be accepted into the “watch culture”, where fitting in with colleagues is seen as essential for performing the job safely, than heterosexual women. The lesbians in this qualitative study had all come out to most people at work, with more recent recruits doing so as soon as they joined. Nearly all the women interviewed had experienced harassment or bullying at some point in the job and for lesbians their sexuality was “an extra thing” against them for men intent on bullying women. Women’s strategies for survival in this male-dominated job are characterised as a continuum, with a position of Aligning with men at one end, through Networking with women, to Campaigning for women at the other end. Lesbian and heterosexual women showed no difference in the strategies adopted. Instead, age and length of service were more likely indicators of where women would be positioned in relation to these strategies.

1. Introduction and research aims

> “Fancy pulling an older woman?”
>
> “Out of a car, from a burning building or just out of danger?”

When the London Fire Brigade ran an advertisement in the gay media earlier this year using the above attention-grabbing headline, with small print below (Brook, 2005), they were trying to attract lesbians to become firefighters. Not everyone thought it was an appropriate message to use, though, and following criticism from female firefighters and the firefighters’ union, it was withdrawn. However, it neatly draws together two themes that are of interest to this dissertation: the sexy image of (usually male) firefighters in the popular imagination that contributes to a highly sexualised working environment, and the appeal of a non-traditionally female occupation to lesbians.

1.1 Background

Women who work in occupations and professions traditionally dominated by men have been the subject of many studies looking at how their presence challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes in the workplace and beyond. Yet these studies largely ignore the diversity of women’s experience as a result of their different sexual identities[1], thus perpetuating the lack of knowledge about the specific experiences of lesbians and bisexual women at work. This tendency to treat women as a homogenous group, regardless of sexual identity, has echoes of the way that black women’s experience was ignored by feminist writing that universalised the experience of white women (hooks, 1981).

Yet there is some evidence that lesbians may be particularly attracted to work in non-traditionally female areas or to uniformed occupations (Ainley, 1995;

[1] This dissertation uses the terms sexual identity and sexual orientation to refer to how people classify themselves and others according to whether they are primarily attracted to people of the same sex (lesbians, gay men), the opposite sex (heterosexuals), or both (bisexuals).

Dunne, 1997), and clearly some fire service employers think so, as the above advertisement shows.

The fire service in England provides a very interesting example of a non-traditionally female occupation: the first female firefighter only joined in 1982 and women still account for only 2% of all full-time firefighters. The strongly "masculine" and military culture of the fire service provides particular challenges for women entering the job, as well as for gay and ethnic minority employees. Yet the fire service has been undergoing a period of change in the last decade, with pressure from government to have a more diverse workforce. Some employers have introduced proactive equality policies, including actively recruiting in lesbian and gay communities. And, according to a representative of the firefighters' union the FBU, this has resulted in significant numbers of lesbians in the job who are open about their sexuality.

The fire service appears as a highly sexualised working environment, in which heterosexuality is the dominant form, expressed through the sexual banter about women common in how men bond together at work, as well as high levels of sexual harassment. And this is reinforced by the popular image of male firefighters as sex symbols.

When women enter this environment they may be seen in stereotyped terms, as illustrated by this comment from an equality officer in a metropolitan fire brigade interviewed for this research:

> "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."

All these elements combine to make the fire service a fascinating context in which to explore themes of gender and sexuality.

1.2 Research aims

This dissertation therefore considers the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women who work in this traditionally male occupation –

firefighting – focusing particularly on their working relationships and how they adapt to a predominantly male environment. It explores both their common experiences as women, as well as any differences that may be attributable to their sexuality. Specifically, it aims to:

- compare lesbian and heterosexual women's reasons for choosing to become firefighters;
- compare lesbian and heterosexual women's experiences in the job;
- explore the factors that enable lesbians to come out in the job and any obstacles to doing so;
- consider female firefighters' perceptions of the impact of employer actions to recruit and support female and lesbian, gay and bisexual firefighters; and
- examine women's strategies for coping in the male-dominated culture of the fire service.

1.3 Structure of the dissertation

The literature that contributed to the development of the research aims will be reviewed in Chapter 2, covering studies on women in non-traditional work, literature on lesbians and gay men at work and research on women and lesbians and gay men in the fire service.

The methodology used to try and answer the questions set out above is explained in Chapter 3, showing why a qualitative approach was chosen as the most appropriate method, and how this was executed.

Chapter 4 provides a brief context of the fire service and its work in relation to equality for women and lesbians and gay men, drawn from an analysis of documents produced by the fire service, the government and the trade union, together with material from key informant interviews carried out.

Chapter 5 describes the main findings of the research in relation to the research questions identified, drawn from in-depth interviews carried out with female firefighters, as well as the key informant interviews. The findings are

then analysed in Chapter 6, which links the findings to themes and theoretical perspectives identified in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

A critical reflection on the methodology employed for the dissertation and the extent to which it met the stated research aims is provided in Chapter 7.

Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the findings of the research and the analysis provided, and considers how far these illuminate the research questions posed at the outset. Some recommendations for further research into the career choices and working lives of lesbians are proposed, together with some issues raised by female firefighters in interviews that may be of interest to fire service employers in considering equality policies.

2. Literature review

An initial search for literature on lesbians at work revealed a relative paucity of material, but a finding that lesbians in one particular study (Dunne, 1997) were more likely to work in non-traditionally female jobs than other women prompted a search in library catalogues and journals for material on lesbians in such jobs. However they were largely invisible. This led to a decision to undertake a comparative examination of the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women working in a non-traditionally female occupation. The fire service was chosen as a particularly interesting example for the reasons set out in Chapter 1, and the literature described later in this chapter will illustrate this further.

Two significant bodies of literature are relevant to a comparison of the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women at work: the extensive literature on gender and work and the growing literature emerging from the field of lesbian and gay studies. Given the large volume of material, this review focuses, within the gender and work literature, on writings on women in non-traditionally female work, and, briefly, on men working in traditionally female areas. It also reviews the literature that introduces sexuality into the study of organisations. It then considers the relatively recent interest in the study of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals at work, and reviews the writings on lesbians and work.

2.1 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 the gendered inequalities which continue to exist (e.g. Adkins, 1995; Cockburn, 1991; Rees, 1992; 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 (EOC 2001, 2004; Siltanen, 1994). But occupational segregation

also operates to create, maintain and reinforce traditional assumptions about male and female roles and abilities.

2.1.1 Women in non-traditional work

Women who break into traditionally male spheres of work – either by beating vertical segregation through rising up the management ladder or by crossing the horizontal barrier into occupations typically done by men – have been studied by those wishing to challenge traditional gender hierarchies and roles. The presence of women in jobs traditionally said to require “masculine” traits or attributes challenges the supposed “naturalness” of the association of these traits with masculinity. As Reskin and Padavic (cited in Bagilhole, 2002: 56) ask: “How can man’s work serve as a rugged test of manhood if women are able to do it?”

These studies, however, can largely be classified into three main groups: women in male-dominated professional occupations (Henwood, 1998; McDowell, 1997; Miller, 2004; Spencer and Podmore, 1987); women in male-dominated manual occupations (Colgan, Johnstone and Shaw, 1996; Reskin and Padavic, 1998; Whittock, 2000); and women in managerial positions traditionally dominated by men (Bagilhole, 2002; Marshall, 1984; Wajcman, 1998).

But although the work environments in each of these types of studies, as well as the particular workplace cultures, may be quite distinct, there are many common features that may be identified when women are a minority in occupations dominated by men.

Kanter (1977) identifies organisations in which one type of people dominate over another (which could be gender or other characteristic) in a ratio of about 85:15 as “skewed”. The smaller group are referred to as “tokens”. One of the features that she identifies among skewed groups is a tendency for the dominant group to exaggerate differences between themselves and the “tokens”, a way of heightening the boundary between themselves and the others. This can take the form of sexual innuendo or seeking permission to

swear and talk about football etc. The concept of boundary heightening is a useful one to explore later when considering the watch culture of the fire service.

A key question for much of the literature on women in non-traditional work is that posed by Bagilhole (2002: 2): “If women work in non-traditional, male-dominated work, are they agents for change or [have they] changed themselves?”. Many of the writers conclude that women have to “become one of the boys” to fit in, rather than the workplace culture adapting to accommodate them. Henwood’s (1998) female software engineering students attempted to deny their difference from men, wanting to be treated the same as men. Similarly in Miller’s (2004) study of US oil engineers, women wanted to be seen as an “engineer”, not a “woman engineer”. However, the men in Henwood’s (1998) study sought to reassert the difference between male and female engineers as a way of maintaining gendered power relations, creating a conflict for the women who were seen as both “different from men” and “different from other women”.

Yet differences *among* women who are in non-traditional work are insufficiently explored in the literature, which commonly recognises the processes used by dominant heterosexuality (see 2.1.3) to control or subordinate women at work, but fails to explicitly consider the sexual identity of the women concerned, or explore differences in their experiences in a male environment that may be related to this. This omission is particularly notable in Wacjman’s (1998) comparison of male and female senior managers in the UK. The study recognises the important interconnections between home and work, devoting a chapter to the home lives of managers, including partners’ employment and the division of domestic labour within the family. Yet the question of the sex of the manager’s partner is not raised. She finds that 93% of male managers in the study are married or living with a partner, compared to 73% of female colleagues. Of the 27% of women living on their own, 17% are single and 11% divorced. Wacjman usefully demonstrates the differences in personal relationships and the organisation of domestic life between male and female managers, concluding that “men’s careers are still contingent on

the sexual contract of heterosexual marriage" (ibid: 138), yet fails to take a step further and ask whether there are differences of sexual identity among the female managers that might also impact on the interrelation between home and work lives.

Some work recognises that lesbianism can be "used as a category with which to control heterosexual women" (Cockburn, 1991: 196). In Colgan et al's (1996: 265) study of the Toronto Transit Commission one woman working in a male environment suggested that male colleagues perceive a woman as a 'hooker' if she is sociable or a 'lezzie' if she stands back. Similarly, women in McDowell's (1997: 141) City of London investment banks 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".

Some women in non-traditional jobs do not want to associate themselves with feminism (Henwood, 1998; Miller, 2004), which they may also associate with lesbianism. It is possible that sensitivity around these issues may have contributed to the lack of attention paid to the experiences of non-heterosexual women at work, combined with the practical difficulties of researching lesbians and gay men at work (which are discussed in Chapter 3). This lack of attention has been described as "theoretical heterosexism" by Dunne (2000). She explains her point of view in the following way: "My irritation with the lack of curiosity about lesbian and gay experience in mainstream feminist sociology is not simply about political correctness. It is about enabling more intellectually rigorous accounts of how the gender order is reproduced, sustained and importantly of how it can be changed" (ibid: 135). Her contention is that exploration of lesbian and gay experience of work and family life can shed further light on the workings of gender in the mainstream, an approach that has influenced the focus of this dissertation.

2.1.2 Men in non-traditional work

The lack of attention to lesbian sexuality in the literature on women in non-traditional work stands in sharp contrast to the smaller but developing body of

material on men in female-dominated work, which always introduces sexuality (Cross and Bagilhole, 2002; Lupton, 2000; Simpson 2004; Williams, 1993). When a man enters typically female work their sexuality is “almost immediately” questioned (Williams, 1993: 3).

Work is central to definitions of masculine identity, so when men move into gender atypical areas they adopt a range of strategies to reassert a masculinity that has been undermined by their choice of “feminine” work (Simpson, 2004). These include re-casting the job to emphasise the “male” elements, such as the safety functions carried out by cabin crew, or the “hard” aspects of personnel work, including making people redundant (Lupton, 2000).

The emphasis on masculinity, and its significance for definitions of sexual identity, brings sexuality to the fore in research on men in non-traditional occupations. This dissertation foregrounds sexuality when looking at how women experience a non-traditionally female occupation that has strong associations with masculinity.

2.1.3 Gender and sexuality of organisations

An important contribution to the literature on gender and work has been the introduction of gender and sexuality into the study of organisations. Hearn et al (1989) sought to address previous omissions in this field by bringing together a collection of writings on the topic. Burrell and Hearn (1989: 2) believe that “sexuality and gender are intimately interrelated with the production and reproduction of organizations and organization”.

Sexuality operates in organisations in two ways: just as sexuality constructs organisations, in the rules and structures that are based on sexualised relations, so organisations construct sexuality, meaning that how individuals perceive and express their own sexuality is developed in relation to the culture of the organisations of which they are a part. Particular attention has been paid to the boss-secretary relationship (Pringle, 1989) and to sexual harassment at work (DiTomaso, 1989; Cockburn, 1991). But Burrell and

Hearn (1989) acknowledge that the focus is largely on heterosexuality and heterosexual relations in organisations, because hierarchic or patriarchal heterosexuality are the dominant forms in most organisations.

Cockburn's (1991) study does, however, touch on the experiences of lesbians at work, finding that "careful lesbians" in senior posts in the head office of a high street retailer received a similar loyalty to that given to senior gay men. But in other parts of the organisation lesbians were viciously mocked by heterosexual men. The "strangeness" of lesbian sexuality is illustrated by the only open lesbian in Halford et al's (1997: 232) examination of banking, nursing and local government who finds that men don't know whether to treat her "as one of the boys", and one senior woman flirted with her "as if I was a man".

The role of "the body" in the production of gendered relations is emphasised in some organisational studies concerned with gender. Halford et al (1997: 27) describe how the womanly, reproductive body is "literally ruled out of place" in organisations that make few provisions for dealing with menstruation, PMT etc. This perspective is useful for examining an organisation such as the fire service, where the uniforms and facilities have been designed to accommodate a male norm.

Despite focusing predominantly on heterosexuality within organisations, the introduction of sexuality as an important and constitutive element provides a useful springboard for the study of lesbian, gay and bisexual experience.

2.2 Lesbian and gay studies[2]

The political movement for lesbian and gay equality in the UK since the 1970s contributed to the growth of "lesbian and gay studies" – a multi-disciplinary meeting of historical, sociological, psychological, literary and cultural studies. Here the focus is clearly on sexuality, although less on working lives, with more emphasis on the humanities and issues of culture, media representation

[2] The term "lesbian and gay" is used in this section for simplicity, instead of "lesbian, gay and bisexual", as some of the research described also covers bisexuality and some does not.

and identity. Influenced by Foucault's (1976) and Weeks' (1990) views of sexuality as constructed by society at different historical moments, this literature challenges fixed notions of identity.

Wilton (1995) pointed out that within lesbian and gay studies there is also a tendency to subsume lesbian experience within that of lesbians and gay men, again leaving gaps in the knowledge about the specific experiences of lesbians.

Ainley's (1995) history of lesbian identities from the 1950s shows how constructions of lesbianism change over time, and have different meanings for individuals. "Lesbians now see their identity – sexual, social and political – in as many ways as there are lesbians. While 'lesbian' to some means an all-encompassing identity, to others it is but one element in a multi-faceted self-definition" (1995: 71). People will also choose to prioritise some aspects of their identities at different times, or may have multiple identities based on ethnicity, sexuality or disability, for example.

The significance of such discussions for this dissertation, though, lies not only in how individual women identify themselves in relation to their sexuality, but in how other people in their work environment identify them. As Foldy (2002: 98) observes: "How we self-identify is only part of the equation. How others identify and categorize us is at least as important, if not more important".

2.2.1 Lesbians and gay men at work

In the UK the discrimination faced by lesbians and gay men at work has been documented by surveys, predominantly by labour movement or campaigning organisations rather than academics (Labour Research Department, 1992, 2003; Palmer, 1993; Snape et al, 1995; TUC, 2000, 2002). The failure of the law to protect workers from discrimination on account of their sexual orientation was well documented before the introduction of the *Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations* in 2003 (Labour Research Department, 1997; Skidmore, 2004; TUC, 2000).

Academic qualitative studies have examined the experiences of lesbians and gay men in the British police (Burke, 1993), in public service occupations (Humphrey, 1999), and the London office of an investment bank (Ward and Winstanley, 2004). Yet there remain "remarkably few case studies of sexual minorities in specific work organizations" (Ward and Winstanley, 2003: 1256), although research is beginning to address this gap (Colgan et al, 2005).

The difficulty of "coming out" (being open about one's sexuality) at work is a major theme of these studies, highlighting the tensions around the "public" and "private" domains (Skidmore, 2004). It also raises many issues for researchers investigating lesbian and gay populations who may not be out at work (see Chapter 3 for further discussion).

The organisational context has significant implications for decisions about coming out, with few of Burke's (1993) police officers voluntarily coming out, while several of Humphrey's (1999) public service workers in organisations with developed equal opportunities policies had careers "beyond the closet". The impact of employer strategies on individual decisions about disclosure of sexual identity is pertinent here as the London Fire Brigade now includes a question on sexuality in its annual staff census (Stonewall, 2003).

2.2.2 Lesbians and work

Work is vital for most lesbians, who generally need to be financially independent in the absence of a male "breadwinner" (and a female partner will earn less than a man, on average), yet very little has been written about their experiences of work, with most of what has been done coming from the United States. Dunne, however, provides an exception (1997, 1998, 2000). *Lesbian lifestyles* (1997) remains the most detailed UK account of lesbians' working lives. One finding – that more of her lesbian respondents worked in jobs that were usually performed by a man than the average for working women (30%, compared to 8% for women generally) – contributed to the focus of this dissertation on lesbians in a non-traditionally female occupation.

In the US, Hall (1989) considered a predominantly male world in her study of lesbians in US corporations, and found lesbians well represented at all corporate levels, despite an inhospitable culture. Her exploration of their coping strategies found fear of disclosure to be a common experience. However, she also found some advantages to being perceived as different or “masculine”, with one woman in a non-traditional job feeling that she received more challenging assignments than colleagues who were seen as “feminine”.

Also in the US, Schneider’s (1984) quantitative research involving 228 lesbians was part of a wider study of working women’s sociability, relationships and experience of sexual harassment. She found that 21% of the lesbians studied had met their current partner at work and 52% had had a relationship with someone from work (possibly male or female) during their working lives (ibid: 381) – this presents a challenge to the presumption of an overwhelmingly heterosexual culture in some studies of organisations, as many of these relationships were known to colleagues. Two further findings are pertinent here: lesbians in male-dominated workplaces commonly did not believe work and social lives could be integrated (ibid: 380); and only 10% of lesbians in male-dominated workplaces were open about their sexual identity, compared to 55% in female-dominated workplaces (ibid: 383).

Other quantitative research (Driscoll et al, 1996) into the relationship between disclosure of lesbian identity and workplace satisfaction was not conclusive, but suggested that disclosure of lesbian identity contributed to a sense of integrity and wholeness that can lessen the impact of institutional homophobia. This study also highlights the conclusions of Levine and Leonard (1984) that the work setting is more important than factors such as age, income and education in determining anticipated or actual discrimination towards lesbians.

US research has addressed the absence of attention to lesbian experience in studies of career choice and development (Boatwright et al, 1996; Lonborg and Phillips, 1996). Lonborg and Phillips (1996: 180) pose the question of whether lesbians are “actually more likely than heterosexual women to depart

from gender-related occupational stereotypes". Boatwright et al (1996) consider the impact of coming out on career development, suggesting that this can delay, disrupt or even derail the career development process for lesbians, again highlighting the need to consider the specificities of lesbians' experiences which are often different from heterosexual women's.

2.3 Women and lesbians and gay men in the fire service

Since the publication of a damning review of equality in the fire service (HM Fire Service Inspectorate, 1999 – see Chapter 4) and the setting of Home Office targets in 1999 to increase the proportion of women and ethnic minorities (ODPM, 2004), there has been some research on women or equality issues in the fire service, some of it by firefighters or former firefighters (Johnson, 2004; Baigent, 1996), or others with connections to the fire service (Wood, 2002).

Policy-oriented research has also been undertaken for the Home Office (FRDG, 2000) into the recruitment of women and ethnic minority firefighters in four brigades and the FireWorks project (FSRTU) is looking at improving the recruitment of women and ethnic minority firefighters. A study of women's attitudes to becoming a firefighter was undertaken by Woodfield (2003).

Other unpublished research has investigated the masculine culture of the fire service (Baigent, 2001a; Penn, 2002). Baigent (2001a), himself a firefighter for 30 years, shows in detail how firefighters construct their masculinity through the job, engaging in a form of homosociality (Cockburn, 1991) through which they pass their skills onto others like them (men). He also shows the importance of "fitting in" with the informal hierarchy of the watch, one that remains dominated by white, working class, heterosexual and able-bodied men.

There is evidence that the small numbers of openly gay firefighters have been subjected to intolerable levels of intimidation (Equal Opportunities Review, 2003). But little has been written about the specific experiences of lesbian and gay firefighters (Baigent, 2001a, admits that homosexuality is one of the

omissions from his study), with the exception of Ward (2004), whose PhD thesis includes the fire service as one of the organisations in which he studies the construction of minority sexual identity; and Ward and Winstanley (2005), which discusses coming out in six organisations, including a fire service, using a storytelling and narrative approach in which individuals are interviewed to gather stories of coming out and these are then discussed in focus groups. The fire service coming out stories (of two gay men and no lesbians) provoked interesting discussions among firefighters that revealed a claimed acceptance of homosexuality “as long as it is not flaunted in front of them” (Ward and Winstanley, 2005: 463). The discussions also showed a widely held view that tolerance should go both ways in the sense that where someone has a problem working with a gay person, this should be respected and “he shouldn’t be made to feel embarrassed about it because that’s his personal view” (ibid: 471). The presence of such beliefs poses a challenge for the implementation of equality policies in the fire service.

3. 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. It also considers methodological issues surrounding feminist research, and points out some of the difficulties when studying lesbian, gay and bisexual populations. The chapter then describes the particular research design chosen, explaining why it suits the objectives of the research. It also considers some practical and ethical issues.

3.1 Qualitative methods

Qualitative research covers a range of approaches, but Ritchie and Lewis (2003: 3) 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".

A qualitative approach was therefore 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 service, their *experiences* in the job, their *decisions* in relation to coming out at work, 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 people perceive their own experiences and the meanings they attach to these.

Qualitative research is also more suited to understanding the complexity of people's experiences (in this case around the sensitive issues of gender and sexuality) than quantitative methods and allows an understanding of the context in which people act and think (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 27). For this

research on women working in the same male-dominated occupation, understanding that context is important.

3.1.1 Epistemological positions

In addition, there are philosophical debates surrounding qualitative and quantitative research methods that tend to incline some researchers towards one approach or the other.

Generally speaking, it can be said that the quantitative paradigm is mainly positivist in orientation, that is “an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality” (Bryman, 2001: 12). It seeks to use controlled measurement to produce replicable data that can be generalisable. In contrast, the qualitative paradigm is generally phenomenological in orientation (“a philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them”, Bryman: 2001: 14), using uncontrolled observation or interview techniques to produce descriptive data that may not be generalisable. Qualitative research is also usually associated with the ontological position of constructionism, whereby social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2001: 18).

However, Bryman (2001: 433) also tries to break down the quantitative and qualitative divide by showing that “the connection between research strategy, on the one hand, and epistemological and ontological commitments, on the other, is not deterministic”. Rather there is a *tendency* for each of the paradigms to be associated with particular epistemological and ontological positions.

3.1.2 Feminist methodology

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.

This dissertation is taking a feminist approach, foremost in its choice of subject that aims to better understand the experiences of women in a working environment where they are a minority, and commonly experience discrimination. Within that, the research also throws further light of the experiences of an often ignored and under-researched group of women – lesbians – so contributing to an understanding of the heterogeneity of women's experience.

Feminist methodology has taken on the debates around epistemology, criticising the exclusion of women from what is considered to be legitimate knowledge. The binary distinctions stemming from Enlightenment thinking pit reason and rationality against emotion, mind against body, subject versus object and male against female, with the second component consistently being devalued (Maynard, 1994). The search for objectivity (positivist methods have often excluded the private, emotional, personal experiences of women) is rejected by feminist methodology, which recognises that all knowledge comes from a partial, specific perspective. Instead it calls for researchers to be aware of how to be accountable for their partiality and subjectivity.

Within this framework, however, many feminist researchers take a flexible position on their choice of methods depending on the topic and scale of study in question (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994) and recognise the contribution that quantification has made to knowledge of issues such as the gender pay gap (Maynard, 1994).

More recently feminists have argued that there is no ontological or epistemological position that is distinctively feminist, 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: 16).

3.1.3 Researching lesbian, gay and bisexual populations

There are a number of issues around researching lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) populations that make the use of quantitative methods problematic.

Firstly, there is very little nationally-collected statistical data that includes questions on individuals' sexual orientation (McManus, 2003). Secondly, this lack of national sample frames makes obtaining representative samples of LGB populations problematic. Thirdly, samples gathered through lesbian, gay and bisexual publications, community or friendship networks are often unrepresentative of the wider LGB population (ID Research, 2003; McManus, 2003; Meezan and Martin, 2003) because of the ways in which participants are reached and difficulties in accessing people who are not out about their sexuality.

These considerations played some part in both the choice of qualitative methods for this research, as well as in the selection of questions that it would be possible to answer. Some ethical and practical considerations when researching lesbians are considered in sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.3

3.1.4 Choice of qualitative methods

In summary, a qualitative approach, using both in-depth interviews and some documentary analysis, was selected as most appropriate for: 1) providing data to answer the research questions; 2) the researcher's epistemological standpoint (tending towards a social constructionist view of the world); 3) the researcher's political perspective (a feminist position); and 4) accessing the research sample (lesbian and heterosexual women). Therefore the methodological approach taken seems consistent with the ontological position of the researcher and the research aims.

3.2 Research design

To understand and compare the experiences of lesbian and heterosexual women working in a male-dominated occupation – firefighters – the following research design was adopted:

- **Five key informant interviews**: made up of two equality specialists from two different fire services, two representatives from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) Women's and Gay and Lesbian Committees, and a representative of Networking Women in the Fire Service[3].

- **12 semi-structured interviews** with female firefighters from different fire services: six lesbian and six heterosexual.

- **Analysis of documentary material** relating to equalities issues produced by the government, the fire service and the FBU.

It can be argued that including interviews with men in the fire service would provide further understanding of the male-dominated culture in which the women are working (Wood, 2002). However, it was decided that the focus of this research is the women's own perceptions of their experience. Furthermore, the main point of comparison is the differences between women according to their sexuality, rather than differences between the experiences of men and women.

3.2.1 Contextual interviews and material

The five key informant interviews with employer, trade union and Networking Women in the Fire Service representatives provide valuable context for the employee interviews by giving a perspective on national and fire authority-level policy in relation to equality issues, as well as offering a view on the changes that are taking place to the fire service. The employer interviews[4] were held with an equality manager in a large metropolitan brigade and a human resources manager with responsibility for equality issues in a brigade covering both urban and rural areas. Interviews were also carried out with a representative of the FBU National Women's Committee and a representative

[3] A self-help group for women employed in all roles in the fire service, see Chapter 4 for more details.
[4] These two interviews were carried out jointly by the author and another researcher as part of a European Social Fund research project on the experiences of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals at work (see Colgan et al, 2005). The interview guides used were devised by the research team, with some additional questions included that relate to this dissertation.

of the FBU National Gay and Lesbian Committee (see appendices 4 and 5 for topic guides), and a representative of Networking Women in the Fire Service[5].

When studying an organisation it is useful to study the papers, policies and documents of the organisation (Silverman, 2000). In the case of the fire service, documentary material contextualises some of the issues raised in interviews, and provides an indication of who and what is driving some of the changes that are taking place.

3.2.2 Sampling strategy

The interviews with female firefighters provide the core of the data needed to address the research aims. A total of 12 interviews – six heterosexual and six lesbian or bisexual women[6] - was felt to be sufficient to offer a range of experience and allow comparison between women who define their sexual orientation differently, but also be manageable for a dissertation of this size, in addition to the key informant interviews.

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: 79). In this case, the criteria that the sample was designed to include related to: sexuality (lesbian/bisexual and heterosexual women); range of employers (women working in both metropolitan and county brigades); and involvement in the union (women active in the FBU and those who are not).

Access to women firefighters was initially sought through the FBU Women's Committee. This was facilitated by the researcher's previous work with the FBU National Women's Committee while working for the trade union movement, which meant a certain level of trust had already been established. There is clearly a potential for bias towards union activists in using this access route. However, this was lessened by two factors. Firstly, 92% of firefighters

[5] As the opportunity to carry out this interview arose at short notice, a separate topic guide was not devised but the FBU Women's Committee topic guide was adapted.
[6] In the event, all women that came forward to be interviewed identified as lesbian or heterosexual.

and control staff are in the FBU, so union membership is typical. Secondly, as there are so few women firefighters, many contact the union committee for support and networking opportunities without necessarily becoming active union members. However, to ensure that the sample would also include non-active members, other routes to access women were sought. An invitation to attend the annual conference of Networking Women in the Fire Service was accepted, and provided access to women who, while interested in the Network, were not necessarily actively involved in the FBU. The other method used was snowball sampling (asking people interviewed to identify others who fit the research criteria), which reached women known to those who had volunteered via the FBU contacts.

It was thought to be important to include women working in both metropolitan and county brigades, as it was expected that 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.

3.2.3 Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a way of providing detailed descriptions of the interviewees' own experiences as heterosexual or lesbian women 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 short one-page questionnaire was completed at the start of the firefighter interviews to collect demographic and basic employment information (see appendix 2).

A topic guide was devised for the interviews (see appendix 3) covering the research questions and areas suggested from reviewing the literature, such as reasons for choosing the job, experience of initial training, working relationships, support, being a woman in the job, promotion, the impact of the

job on relationships outside work, coming out at work, employer policies and 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” (Liebling et al, 1999: 75) and was seen as valuable for use in a sensitive organisation where staff had suffered much 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. This included questions such as: “Ideally, how would you like others at work to treat you in relation to your sexuality?”; “What are the things you like about the job?”; “What qualities do you think are needed for the job?”; and “Are there any advantages to being a woman in this job?”.

The questionnaire and topic guide were piloted on an experienced 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).

Interviews generally lasted around an hour to an hour-and-a-half and were tape recorded with the interviewees’ permission. Interviewees were given the opportunity to choose where the interview would take place, and only one chose to do it at her fire station before starting her shift. Others took place at the researcher’s place of work, some were in the interviewees’ homes and others were carried out at the Networking Women in the Fire Service conference.

3.2.4 Data analysis

In general terms, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) influenced the approach taken to analysis, whereby themes emerged from the data collected, rather than the application or testing of any particular theoretical construct or model. However this approach was not used in its purest form,

and a number of possible themes were identified from the literature review and these 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, based initially on the topic guide but modified as data analysis progressed, was used to classify interview transcripts according to emerging themes (see appendix 7). Thematic charts were then created, summarising and bringing together the experiences of all interviewees concerning a particular theme.

3.3 Ethical issues

3.3.1 Confidentiality and anonymity

While it is always important to assure confidentiality to participants in research studies, particularly where they may be critical of their employer, this has an additional significance in research involving lesbians who may not be out at work, and, even if they are, are possibly more easily identifiable because of their minority status. And as all women in the fire service are in a tiny minority, they are often known, or known of, in their own and other brigades. Therefore to maintain the women's anonymity, it was also necessary to keep anonymous the names of the brigades they work for. Their employers are therefore described as a "metropolitan" or a "county" brigade. In reporting the findings, pseudonyms are used for the female firefighters interviewed.

3.3.2 Consent

Participants in the research were informed about the research aims and methods in the first instance either directly by the researcher or by representatives of the FBU Women's Committee, with whom the researcher had discussed it. The support of the FBU Women's Committee helped to vouch for the researcher and assisted in women agreeing to come forward. Once individuals had volunteered or expressed an interest in taking part, the researcher provided them with a sheet setting out the aims and purpose of the research, as well as what participation would involve (see appendix 6). In the

course of phone calls or emails arranging the interview time and date, and at the start of interviews, participants were reassured about confidentiality and anonymity and invited to ask any questions. Through these means, informed consent to participate in the research was felt to be achieved.

3.3.3 The researcher's role and responsibilities

The British Sociological Association (2002) in its Statement of Ethical Practice warns that "social research intrudes into the lives of those studied", and for some "the experience may be disturbing". Feminist research too 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, and that recommended avoiding giving personal information or opinions. In conducting a longitudinal study of women before and after giving birth (as well as observing some births), she felt morally obliged to answer their questions and share something of her own experience. She believes that "personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (Oakley, 1981: 58).

Debates about the relationship between interviewer and interviewee have also been taken up by those researching lesbian and gay populations (Kong et al, 2002; LaSala, 2003; Meezan and Martin, 2003). LaSala (2003) considers both the advantages and disadvantages of an insider perspective when lesbian and gay researchers study lesbians and gay men. Advantages can be greater understanding of the interviewees' perspectives and access to participants, but the disadvantages could be a failure to notice the familiar or participants' concerns about anonymity within the lesbian and gay community.

Reflexivity of the part of the researcher (Kong et al, 2002) is one way in which these issues can be addressed. It is to be hoped that this account of research undertaken in the fire service draws on an awareness of both an "outsider" perspective of someone with little previous knowledge of the world of the fire service, and an "insider" perspective of being a woman with experience of

lesbian relationships. The approach taken in relation to disclosing personal information, for example about sexual orientation, was a willingness to answer questions if asked, although in reality interviewees expressed little interest in the personal life of the researcher!

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

4. The organisational context: the fire service

This chapter provides some context to the findings outlined in chapter 5 by outlining the structure of the fire service, explaining some terminology used and giving the framework for equality initiatives undertaken by the fire service, as well as the role of the Fire Brigades Union and Networking Women in the Fire Service in promoting equality. This material is drawn from an analysis of fire service, government and union documents, as well as key informant interviews carried out during 2005 with: an equality specialist from a metropolitan brigade (abbreviated below as “Equality officer 1”); a human resources and equality specialist from a mixed urban and rural brigade (“Equality officer 2”); a representative of the FBU National Women’s Committee (“FBU NWC rep”); a representative of the FBU National Gay and Lesbian Committee (“FBU G&LC rep”); and a representative of Networking Women in the Fire Service (“NWFS rep”).

4.1 The structure of the fire service

The fire service in England[7] is overseen by the government through the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister but is operated at local level by brigades, commonly now known as Fire and Rescue Services or Authorities. There are therefore many common features of the fire service that apply to all brigades, including the job and rank structure and terms and conditions of staff, and government-set targets that they must meet. In addition, brigades will have their own policies on issues such as recruitment, equal opportunities and staff development.

Throughout the fire service staff are divided into three groups: operational firefighters; control room staff and support staff (also known as non-uniformed). This dissertation is only concerned with operational firefighters

[7] Fire services in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are now the responsibility of devolved governments (ODPM, 2004), so this dissertation will confine itself to England, where all the interviews took place.

and officers. In the current structure[8] there are three ranks below officer level that are mostly responsible for the physical work of putting out fires, rescuing people and some community safety activities: Firefighter, Leading Firefighter, and Sub-officer. Officers start at the rank of Station Officer, normally responsible for managing incidents and running a fire station, or in some cases a watch[9], rising to Chief Fire Officer, who will be in charge of a brigade. All brigades outside of London also have a system of retained firefighters (part-timers who are called in when an emergency occurs), but this dissertation only covers whole-time staff.

4.2 Equality in the fire service

In 1999 the Fire Service Inspectorate published its thematic review, *Equality & Fairness in the Fire Service* (HM Fire Service Inspectorate, 1999), characterising the fire service as sexist, racist and homophobic. It described the dominant watch culture as “macho” and “laddish” with a requirement for new recruits to “fit in”. It found that sexual harassment of women was common and homosexuality was considered an “absolute taboo”.

In 1999 the Home Office set targets for the fire service to increase the percentage of women among operational staff to 15% by 2009 and the proportion of ethnic minority staff in the workforce as a whole to 7% (ODPM, 2004: 52).

By the end of March 2004, women only accounted for 2.1% of all whole-time firefighters in England (see Appendix 1). In London, which has the largest number of women firefighters at 153, women still only represented 2.5% of the 5,990 firefighters. However some county brigades, despite having small numbers overall, had a higher proportion of women: Gloucestershire, for example, had 7.1% women (17 out of 221). Similarly, the fire service is some

[8] Currently the grading structure of the fire service is changing from a system of ranks to roles in at attempt to remove some of the militaristic associations, so officers are becoming managers, for example. However the old terms are used here as most people interviewed still used these.

[9] Known as red, blue, green and white, a watch is the shift on which the firefighter works, and is always the same team of people

way from meeting its targets for ethnic minority staff, who represented only 2.1% of the workforce in 2003 (ODPM, 2004: 27).

The slow progress on meeting targets for women is despite particular efforts made by many brigades to recruit women, including open days, outreach campaigns and targeted advertising (Equality officers 1 and 2). In some cases the retention of women had been a significant problem, described as "practically a revolving door" by Equality officer 1, although measures such as improved dormitory facilities, trying to place women on watches or stations with other female firefighters and positive action around promotion were all said to have helped this significantly.

Equality and diversity policies had not been "effectively communicated" to the majority of employees (FRDG, 2000), with many feeling that equalities is "rammed down their throats", and some of those whom the policies are intended to benefit also complain that the additional attention did not help them to fit in with the majority culture (Equality officer 1).

The FBU G&LC rep observed that high proportions of lesbians who are out at work have been attracted to the job when employers have targeted recruitment at women.

4.3 The Fire Brigades Union

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) represents whole-time, control and retained staff in the fire service and has about 92% membership among eligible staff[10] (FBU G&LC rep). The union has been actively pursuing equality issues over a number of years, and their contribution was commended in the Fire Inspectorate's thematic review (FBU, 2000).

The National Women's Committee has been a formal committee of the FBU since 1999, although it started as in informal group in London in the late 1980s. Three years ago it gained representation on the union's Executive

[10] Support staff are normally represented by UNISON and, less commonly, the GMB.

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 (FBU NWC rep).

The National Gay & Lesbian Committee began informally in 1994 and now has a parallel structure to the Women's Committee, with a seat on the Executive Council since 2004 (FBU G&LC rep).

The interviewees representing the NWC and the G&LC both commented on the apathy and disillusionment felt by many members towards the union, as well as the employers, since the industrial dispute that took place in 2002-2003 which was having a detrimental affect on their ability to interest members in equality matters. The process of modernisation that the fire service is undergoing since the dispute has also been difficult for the equality sections of the FBU, as the government has tried to link the changes to the equality agenda, but the whole process is seen very negatively by most members as representing cuts in the service (FBU G&LC rep).

4.4 Networking Women in the Fire Service

Networking Women in the Fire Service (NWFS) was established in 1993 by women in the fire service as a support group for all women that includes operational, control and support staff, as well as men who are supportive of its aims. It has an annual conference that provides opportunities to practice using breathing apparatus, fighting fires and dealing with other incidents in a supportive environment, as well a range of workshops on topics such as leadership skills, disability awareness, stress management and mentoring (NWFS rep).

NWFS receives support and backing from a number of chief officers of fire brigades, but is not seen entirely positively by the FBU NWC and G&LC representatives, who believe that the employers try and use it to bypass the FBU negotiating structures.

5. Findings

This chapter sets out the main findings of the research, mostly drawn from in-depth interviews carried out with female firefighters, but also bringing in data from the key informant interviews. First the sample is introduced. Then the chapter describes the findings as they relate to the research questions set out in Chapter 1, covering the women's reasons for choosing to become a firefighter, their experiences of working in a male-dominated job, how sexuality impacts on the work environment and how lesbians come out at work, and how employer actions and policies support women. Women's strategies for coping in a male-dominated environment will be analysed in Chapter 6. Throughout the chapter any significant differences in experiences between lesbian and heterosexual women will be drawn out.

5.1 The sample

Table 1 introduces the female firefighters interviewed (using pseudonyms), giving their sexual orientation, age, length of service, rank and type of brigade.

Table 1: The interviewees

Name	Age	Length of service	Rank	Type of brigade
Heterosexual				
Fiona	21-30 years	1-4 years	Firefighter	County
Patricia	21-30 years	1-4 years	Firefighter	County
Theresa	21-30 years	1-4 years	Acting leading firefighter	Metropolitan
Louise	31-40 years	10-14 years	Firefighter	County
Liz	31-40 years	15-20 years	Station officer or above	Metropolitan
Tania	41-50 years	15-20 years	Station officer or above	Metropolitan
Lesbian				
Kath	21-30 years	1-4 years	Firefighter	Metropolitan
Ellen	21-30 years	1-4 years	Firefighter	County
Carol	21-30 years	5-9 years	Firefighter	County
Fran	31-40 years	1-4 years	Firefighter	Metropolitan
Rachel	31-40 years	10-14 years	Station officer or above	County
Paula	31-40 years	15-20 years	Station officer or above	Metropolitan

The sample contained a balance of six heterosexual and six lesbian women. All described themselves as white, reflecting the small numbers of ethnic minorities employed in the fire service (see Chapter 4).

The table shows that a range of ages was represented, although half were in the youngest age group. This is not surprising given that increased efforts to recruit women have taken place in recent years. There was no particular difference in age according to sexual orientation among those interviewed.

The sample comprised women who had been in the job between two and 20 years, with lesbian and heterosexual women represented fairly evenly among newer recruits and longer-serving women.

Just over half of the sample (seven women) were at the lowest rank, that of Firefighter and one was temporarily acting up to the next position, Leading Firefighter. None occupied the next rank of Sub-officer, the last position before becoming an Officer. Four were Officers, which starts with the rank of Station Officer (one of these was temporarily acting up from a lower rank). There was no particular difference in rank between lesbians and heterosexual women interviewed. It should be noted that although Firefighter is a rank within the grading structure, the term “firefighter” is used generically in this dissertation to refer to the occupation of all the women interviewed.

Half of the sample worked for two different metropolitan fire authorities, and half worked for four different county brigades (which cover both town and rural areas). This was evenly divided between lesbian and heterosexual women.

Eight of the women were living with a partner, and four were not, split evenly between lesbians and heterosexual women. Only one (heterosexual) woman had children living with her.

Educational attainment was the only demographic characteristic in which there was a different pattern among the lesbians and heterosexual women in the sample, as table 2 shows. All the lesbians had a minimum level of

educational attainment of ‘A’ levels, and were more likely to have a degree. Although it was noted by the FBU National Women’s Committee informant that recent recruits to the job are more likely to have higher academic qualifications, this is not likely to explain the difference observed here as there was no difference in length of service by sexual orientation (see table 1).

Table 2: Highest qualification and sexual orientation

	Heterosexual	**Lesbian**
GCSE	3	0
‘A’ Level	2	1
Higher education below degree	0	2
Degree	1	3

5.2 Reasons for becoming a firefighter

5.2.1 Attraction of the job

Women were attracted to the job of firefighter for two main reasons: the physical or active nature of the job and the feeling of doing something useful and helping people. The physical side of the job was an attraction for all the lesbian interviewees, who all mentioned having been members of women’s football or rugby teams. The physical nature of the job also appealed to some of the heterosexual women, two of whom had worked in the fitness industry before joining.

It was common for women to have had dreams of being a firefighter since childhood (four heterosexual women and two lesbians expressed this), with some acting on this idea early on, and others returning to it later in their careers. Two had chosen to do their work experience when at school at a fire station, and one maintained this contact, which proved to be helpful when preparing to apply for the job some years later.

Rather than being seen as a potential difficulty, working in a male-dominated environment was an attraction of the job for some. One lesbian, Ellen, knew she felt more comfortable working with men than with heterosexual women, from whom the perceived herself as quite different. Kath too had always worked with men and was more comfortable doing so. Two heterosexual

women described being brought up in a male environment, with mainly boys as friends, which made them feel more comfortable working with men, with Theresa saying she was always “more into sports and getting as dirty as I possibly could than most girls I knew” and knew from early on that she didn’t want to be “a ballerina or a vet”. It is clear then that for some women ideas of themselves and their potential formed when fairly young were significant in their choice of career.

Most of the women did not know any firefighters well before entering the job, and therefore did not have much appreciation of the job before starting. But for Fran contact with a female firefighter was important in her decision to join:

> “Talking to [friend’s name] and practising some of the selection tests, I realised that I wouldn’t have a problem getting in. It gave me a little bit more of a spur, knowing a female firefighter that had been through the selection process, that pushed me towards trying”.

Being told by friends and family that she couldn’t do it and that the fire service was “not a job for girls” when she first mentioned it, spurred Liz on to applying.

Tania, who was working in childcare at the time, had a more pragmatic reason for considering the job. She recalled thinking: “Maybe I should do a man’s job, because I’m quite well built.. and will probably get a better wage”.

5.2.2 Previous work experience

The women tended to be in their early twenties when they joined, although two of the longer-serving women had joined at 18 and 19 years old. Most women therefore had some previous work experience, although two joined soon after leaving college. Among the lesbians interviewed were more who had done professional jobs, including teaching and publishing (which would be consistent with the higher educational levels noted above), than among the heterosexual women, one of whom had started training to be an accountant, but other jobs included childcare, fitness instructor and temporary office worker.

5.3 Working in a male world

Women are made to feel “other” or “out of place” in the fire service in several ways, in addition to the fact of their very small numbers. These include: the physical environment that has been designed for male workers; the attitudes of men towards women in the job; a culture that is built around male solidarity and “masculine” behaviour; and harassment or bullying which is designed to ensure that women (and other minorities) know that they are not welcome.

All but one of the women in this study had been the only woman working on her watch, and often the only one at that fire station, for at least some of her career, often all of it. It was also common to be the first woman that male colleagues had ever worked with in the job, and so experience the brunt of their adaptation to working with a woman.

5.3.1 Women’s bodies “out of place”

An obvious way in which women are made to feel “out of place” in this job is by the failure to provide them with uniforms to fit female forms, female toilets and dormitories and other facilities to accommodate their female bodies. Fiona, for example, had only recently been provided with socks in her size, after nearly four years in the job. The FBU National Women’s Committee (NWC) representative described their frustration at the slow progress in getting uniforms to fit, and their concerns about whether the uniform is actually protecting women. She explained that a male form mannequin is used to test the clothing for protection from fire, so they do not know if it is providing adequate protection in the right areas for the female form.

The provision of women’s toilets, showers and dormitories is also taking a long time to achieve in many brigades, with women often still having to share a dorm with men when on the nightshift. A bed had only recently been provided in the women’s locker room, according to one woman from a county brigade, although there had been three women working at the station for some time. The equality officer from a metropolitan brigade observed that “it’s about dignity”, and commented that there were “lots of men who didn’t like it

either". In her brigade the principle of separate sleeping arrangements had been accepted, although not fully implemented.

One issue for women can be the provision of sanitary products at work, and one fire station at a county brigade had resolved this by keeping them in the first aid box on fire engines, but the women were finding that someone kept removing them. As Fiona explained:

> "We haven't caught who it is yet, we've got an idea which watch, but they just don't think they should be on there, they don't think they should have to see them, even though they are tucked away in a sealed bag in a first aid box, they're not exactly out on display".

The implementation of maternity policies was also a matter of concern for the FBU NWC. While a national agreement on maternity leave and pay was in place, brigades were often unprepared for what to do when a woman became pregnant. The NWC was keen for them to remain on the watch for as long as possible, to maintain the position on the watch that they had worked hard to settle in to. Only one woman in this study had taken maternity leave, and recounted having to sort out her own "light duty" placement, as the employer was not very organised. She returned to a desk job for a period after maternity leave, as she wished to breastfeed, but described this as a provision that they didn't really want to think about.

5.3.2 "No place for a woman"

There continue to be men who are explicit in their view that women should not be in the job and cannot do it. Several long-serving women had frequently encountered such attitudes when they started, but more recent recruits had also come across these views, both from older men who had always worked in male-only teams as well as from younger men. Some men expressed their hostility towards women through harassment and bullying (see section 5.3.4).

Another way in which men can make women feel uncomfortable in the job, particularly when they start, is by assuming a protective role that prevents them from actually learning to do the job. This protective attitude was

especially frustrating when women were seeking to “prove themselves” to be as good as the men at the physical aspects of the job. Liz found this over-protectiveness as difficult as the men who would not talk to her:

> “It’s stifling, because you want to actually get in and pick up a sledgehammer, and it’s ‘no, no I’ll do that for you’. And they are doing it with the best of intentions but it’s as bad as the people that aren’t speaking to you, because it stops you doing the job as well”.

Paula suggested, though, that lesbians may suffer less from this form of over-attentiveness with men perceiving them as “just getting stuck in .. a bit more boyish anyway … that’s the perception”.

As has been shown, for many of the women interviewed the physical nature of the job was one of the attractions in the first place, but is also an area where women’s difference from men is brought to the fore. It is therefore no surprise that proving oneself to be as physically fit or capable of doing the job as the men is important for women. Some wanted to prove not just that they were as good as the men, but that they were better. Fran describes how she “overcompensated” from the start:

> “I would step in to do the dirty job, the heavy job, before they started doing it, so they knew that I could do it, so the next time round it wouldn’t be a situation of ‘I’m going to have to do it, because Fran is a woman, she shouldn’t get dirty’”.

Ellen ran physical training drills for the men, working on their fitness, which she claims helped her to move off the bottom rung of the informal hierarchy of the watch. But being “better” than the men can be a risky strategy, though, and can provoke animosity rather than gain respect. Patricia, who had been a fitness instructor before joining the fire service, put down some of the hostility that she experienced at training school to the fact that she was “enthusiastic and keen and fitter than half the blokes there”.

5.3.3 “One of the lads”

All new firefighters are expected to “fit-in” to an environment dominated by white, working class, heterosexual and able-bodied men (Baigent, 2001a),

and so become “one of the lads”. And there is an acceptance among most in the fire service that fitting-in with the watch is necessary for carrying out the job safely and effectively, and goes further than simply creating a convivial or sociable working environment. As Louise put it:

> “It’s very important in the fire service, the way the watch operates, and it also makes it very effective in the job they do because they’re tight, they think the same, they all work the same, but it has this huge downside”.

The downside to which she refers is the way in which uniformity or sameness is maintained through the exclusion of those who are not obviously the same as the majority, such as women, ethnic minorities or lesbians and gay men.

Women described a number of features of “laddish” culture that they felt uncomfortable with, including swearing, nose-picking and banter. In some cases swearing was modified in the presence of women, although one of the longer serving women remarked that although the men had been warned by a senior officer before her arrival that they would no longer be able to swear, they clearly took no notice. Liz described how she joined in with the swearing on the watch when she started in order to fit, before realising that she felt uncomfortable with this way of behaving.

The humour and banter that characterised the atmosphere of the watch was often appreciated and was one of the elements of the job that some women described as enjoyable. But several women mentioned the importance of the jokes not “crossing the line”. However this line is in different places for different people, as Ellen acknowledges:

> “I like the jokes in the back of the bus, taking the mickey out of each other, as long as, you know, there’s barriers, there’s lines and I think we all know each other, we take the time to know each other to find out where the barriers are”.

Some of the lesbian interviewees suggested that the line may be drawn differently with lesbians than with heterosexual women, as men may perceive

lesbians as closer to them in the sense that they also fancy women, and therefore more sexual banter may be permissible.

> “It’s really bizarre but if there’s a [heterosexual] woman there, then the lads’ terminology changes, they won’t speak like they normally speak with me.” (Ellen)

Fran too wondered whether “they think that the boundaries are a little looser, but we certainly talk about things in depth more than when we’ve had other [heterosexual] women on station.” But she acknowledged some discomfort with their level of comfort with her, seeing it as double-edged:

> “There’s a lot of sexual banter that goes along with being in a male-dominated area, so sometimes I think, ooh, that’s a little bit close to the mark there. But on the flip side, them being comfortable enough to talk about something like that in front of me says something”.

So while some lesbians may find their shared attraction to women allows a form of bonding with the men which may ease their acceptance into the watch, there are limits to how far this type of conversation may go, with certain discomfort felt at the limits.

For Carol a shared interest in football gained her acceptance. She commonly played football with the men on another watch before starting her own shift, and when a vacancy arose on their watch, they specifically asked for her.

Often women attributed their difficulties with fitting into the watch to the attitudes or behaviour of just one or a few individuals. But the strength of the culture that requires people to fit in means that the others will not stand up to these individuals, or for the woman. As Louise observes: “If you don’t become part of that you will be the one who’s picked on”. However, she believes that many men are also not comfortable with that kind of environment and are pleased when women do challenge this form of behaviour, and welcome the change that it can bring to the atmosphere of the watch.

5.3.4 “Crossing the line”

All but three of the women interviewed described incidents or behaviour that could be said to have “crossed the line” between acceptable banter or behaviour and harassment. This ranged from a single incident that they felt able to confront and deal with themselves to more persistent bullying and harassment that led them to make a complaint or move watches. While it was observed by some that bullying is part of the fire service culture, particularly of new recruits, the examples here are clearly targeted at women.

Watching pornographic films on the station at night was part of the culture when two of the women joined their watches (12 and 16 years ago). In Liz’s case an attempt was made to conceal it from her by one of the men occupying her with a game of darts, but when she stumbled upon them watching TV in a darkened room, she felt “really uncomfortable”. Louise found it “very frightening”. While these two examples happened some time ago, two other women gave more recent examples of pornographic magazines being left to intimidate or offend them, an illustration that this form of behaviour has not been eliminated despite official condemnation from the employers. For Paula, when a porn magazine was left in her dorm, she knew it was deliberate intimidation: “It was a very pointed thing”. It led her to make a complaint that included several other acts of harassment that had occurred during that time, but which she had not reported until this final incident prompted her.

Patricia had suffered several incidents of harassment and bullying. These included frequent derogatory comments about women’s anatomy from one colleague, hurtful and offensive material about her left in the locker room, an offensive prank at the Christmas party and a serious incident of sexual harassment while at training school when an officer tried to remove her bra in a pub.

For lesbians, harassment may be on account of their gender or sexual orientation. Paula did not know the perpetrator of the series of incidents targeted at her, and was left wondering whether it was to do with her gender,

lesbianism or both. Two other lesbians in this study suffered sustained periods of harassment. Carol's problems started when an individual joined her watch, who, she said, "doesn't like women and he hates gays even more". Ellen too felt they didn't like her being female or gay.

But one thing that women had in common was the pressure not to make an official complaint or "go outside the watch". Indeed for some there seemed to be a sense of pride or honour in sorting things out for themselves. Theresa stood up to a bully on her first day, who took her aside, swore at her and threatened her so that she knew she was not welcome. She described how offering to go outside and fight with him caused him to back down and he was no problem after that. Kath would also have been willing to confront a homophobic member of another watch who was trying to stir up problems among her colleagues when she started at a new station, but when she told her boss, it was dealt with immediately by the brigade (see 5.5).

Neither Carol nor Ellen felt able to complain formally about the incidents that were making both of them consider leaving the job. Carol believed that if she did "no-one would speak to me, no-one would come near me because I'd be a troublemaker" and didn't want the "fanfare" associated with making a complaint. Ellen also did not want to make a formal complaint, but when she spoke informally to a woman she knew, this was passed onto others in the brigade and she was called to a meeting with officers. Following this she decided that she would transfer to another watch, as did Carol. However both felt some unease with this solution: Ellen thought she had been treated as "the problem" rather than the guys who were bullying her and Carol felt that "he had won".

Patricia did complain about the sexual harassment she suffered while at training school, but was disappointed that her colleagues on the course who had offered to back her up at the time of the incident, later "didn't see enough to make a statement". Therefore the brigade said it could not be taken any further, but suggested that she could go to the police. But Patricia's response

illustrates, as with Carol, the pressure women are under to fit in with the watch and not complain:

> “That would be the end of my career, it would tarnish my name anyway, you hear about all these women that make complaints, that would be my name as mud and the lads then wouldn’t interact with me and you can’t have that”.

5.4 Sexuality at work

The “male” culture of the watch has already been shown to be a highly sexualised environment, with sexual banter commonplace and behaviour at times crossing the line into harassment. This prominence of sexuality is reinforced by the treatment of male firefighters as sex objects by the public. Many of the women interviewed were amused and surprised at the attention paid by female members of the public to firefighters in uniform, regardless of their physical attractiveness. Women members of the public were often astonished when they realised that the uniformed object of their attentions was in fact a female firefighter, and Louise had encountered women exposing their breasts when she was driving the fire engine, assuming it would be a male driver.

Within the job women are stereotyped as “lesbians or fire tarts”, according to the equality officer from a metropolitan fire brigade. Several women said that female firefighters are seen as potential sexual conquests, or the subject of gossip concerning their sexual relations. On the other hand, there is a belief that women firefighters are “really butch and dykey”, noted by Liz. Rachel told of a male officer who, when meeting her and another woman for the first time, asked: “OK then, which one of you is the dyke?”, reflecting his belief that 50% of the women in the fire service were lesbians.

It is in this environment that both heterosexual and lesbian women have to negotiate their relationships with male colleagues, and decide what to reveal about themselves.

5.4.1 Sexual attention and relationships at work

Nearly all of the women mentioned that male colleagues had at times expressed a sexual interest in them, including some of those known to be lesbian (one said her Station Officer thought he could “turn” her). Sometimes the women had dealt with this easily, but men could sometimes be difficult if turned down, as Liz found with one who “got really arsy about it and blanked me”.

Theresa was adamant that she would not sleep with another firefighter in her brigade as her name would go round and it would be harder to be viewed professionally as a result.

Some women described their relationships with the men on the watch in familial terms. Fiona said “they’re like big brothers, uncles, dads, it’s like having lots of dads” and described how they were “disgusted” when other people suggested they may have any sort of sexual relationship with her. Patricia viewed her watch in a similar way, saying “we are family, there’s no incest here”. She contrasted this with another watch at her station, who often flirted with her, which she enjoyed.

Some lesbians felt they had easier relationships with male colleagues due to the lack of sexual tension, although this is dependant on them coming out (see below). Tania, a heterosexual woman, had eliminated possible sexual tension with male colleagues by telling them she was gay. She hadn’t really expected them to believe her, but when they did, had found it to be useful in avoiding situations in which men “can turn nasty” when rejected.

For heterosexual women, though, there may be times when they wish to engage in a sexual relationship with a male colleague and two of the women in the sample were married to firefighters. While one woman suggested that relationships between firefighters were not allowed by her brigade, another said that her brigade’s policy was that relationships on the same watch or station were acceptable if they did not interfere with the job, and where there

was a difference in rank, then a move could be requested. In another brigade a woman had felt pressure from management to move stations when she got engaged to a man on her watch, even though she and her partner had felt comfortable with the situation.

Lesbians also have relationships at work, and one lesbian interviewed had a partner she had met through the job. Another lesbian also lived with a firefighter, although her partner had become a firefighter in a different brigade after they met.

5.4.2 Coming out

All of the lesbians interviewed had come out to at least some of their colleagues, although some had taken a time to do so. The three most recent recruits (two of whom worked for metropolitan brigades) felt comfortable enough to come out while at training school, taking the approach that they saw no reason to hide it. Kath expressed it in this way:

> “I don’t treat it as an issue so I don’t make a big deal of telling people or make a deal of hiding it. So I’ll talk about my partner or whatever and people will ask”.

Ellen chose to have a “coming out party” in the pub when she told the guys she was at training school with she was gay, and was “gobsmacked” that they hadn’t already realised. This information then got back to the men on the first watch she joined, so she did not have to come out again to them.

Carol, who joined a county brigade seven years ago, experienced bullying characters at training school, so did not come out to them, and it also put her off telling her first watch, whom she did not feel comfortable with. However, when she changed to a new watch where she felt more accepted, she came out without any bad reactions from colleagues.

Similarly, Paula waited until she moved onto a station where she felt comfortable before discussing her sexuality at work. In contrast to the first station where she felt questions were intrusive, at this station she said: “I just

felt me, they just asked normal questions, so you didn't feel it was something you had to hide or react to".

Rachel was in a heterosexual relationship with a member of her watch when she started seeing a female firefighter she had met at training school. Although her colleagues knew that she proceeded to share a house with this woman, Rachel was hurt and surprised that no-one asked about their relationship and decided that she wasn't going to tell them until they asked. But she described feeling very relieved when somebody finally asked after six years! Concealing the relationship had affected her relationships with the watch and she had become more withdrawn and quiet. But since coming out she has had no problems with colleagues.

The FBU Gay and Lesbian Committee informant believed that it was easier for lesbians to come out in the fire service than gay men, as lesbians are not a threat to the men. He said: "It's more a case of one of the lads, they fancy women and a lesbian will fancy women".

However lesbians have to weigh up the advantages of coming out, which can feel easier than concealing their private lives, and may assist them in bonding with the watch or put an end to unwanted sexual attention (although not necessarily), against possible adverse reactions and prejudice (see 5.3.4).

5.5 Perceptions of employer actions

There is much that could be said about action taken by the fire service to recruit and support women and lesbian and gay firefighters, but limits of space mean that this section is confined to the views of employer actions expressed by female firefighters and the FBU key informants.

5.5.1 Recruitment

In only a couple of cases had women responded directly to employer recruitment initiatives targeted at women or ethnic minorities, one of which was a community centre and another a sporting event. Several, though, had attended women's open days where they had tried out the physical tests

required for the job. Some ambivalence was expressed by Theresa about such events that appear to give “special treatment” to women (see below), although she acknowledged that some women would not apply without the opportunity to try the tests away from men.

The FBU National Women’s Committee informant was disappointed with the lack of commitment of some brigades to actively targeting women.

> “I certainly don’t believe this argument that women don’t want to do the job, I think … that women don’t know they’re allowed to apply or think of it as a career option, but that’s up to the brigades to get that message out and we know that when they do, it works, and if they don’t bother, you expect much of the same”.

She also explained that the lack of basic facilities for women mentioned earlier also limit the prospects for recruitment of women, and mean that the NWC cannot be fully supportive of recruitment initiatives until these facilities are in place.

5.5.2 Equal opportunities initiatives

Employers received criticism for both not doing enough to support women, and for doing too much. Liz took the view that until recently there had been little encouragement for women to go for promotion, Tania thought that while support for women was available, there was not enough done to prevent problems arising such as equality training, for example, and Fiona was frustrated that the employer’s good intentions were often not turned into practical action.

Others highlighted the view held by many in the fire service that policies that support women are seen as singling them out for “special treatment”, which may be “unfair” to the men who do not receive such treatment. These actions may then be counterproductive to women, who preferred to be left to fit in with the watch by playing down their differences, rather than being given attention as women.

Occasionally the employers seem to get it right, and an equal opportunities training programme that had been implemented was thought to be effective by Paula. Kath also thought there were good support structures in place if problems of harassment or bullying arose, and thought the employer had worked hard to eliminate it.

5.5.3 Dealing with complaints

As already seen, women often feel pressure to deal with any problems themselves and not “take it outside the watch”, believing that they will not be accepted by their colleagues if they make a formal complaint. This presents employers with a difficulty in addressing a culture of bullying or harassment, and means that there is sometimes resistance from those affected when they do attempt to deal with such behaviour.

While some women might prefer to attempt to deal with incidents themselves informally, the policy in some brigades appears to be to take it out of their hands. Kath commented that her initial response to the homophobia she encountered when joining a new station (see 5.3.4) would have been to tackle the person herself, but she was happy with the way the brigade took it seriously and “stamped on it straight away”. While the brigade in Paula’s case dealt with her complaints by carrying out training on the watch and making clear that the behaviour was not to be tolerated, she was unhappy that she was never consulted about how it would be tackled, nor given a chance to understand their reasons:

> “It doesn’t always feel very good if you are the victim and things are happening out of your control, because everything is out of your control anyway. I can understand them doing things, but I wish they would discuss them with people first and explain why, because then you would think, OK that’s a good reason, I’ll let you do that”.

6. Analysis of findings

This chapter discusses the findings described in Chapter 5 in the context of some of the themes and concepts identified in the review of literature in Chapter 2. It draws out any significant differences among lesbian and heterosexual women in relation to the findings, and proposes a way of categorising women's strategies in relation to coping in a male-dominated working environment, which is discussed in the context of previous research.

6.1 Reasons for becoming a firefighter

The physical aspect of firefighting appealed particularly to the lesbians interviewed, all of whom took part in women's football or rugby teams. For the heterosexual women physical fitness tended to focus on individual activities such as gym or fitness training. This suggests a connection between the social networks engaged in by these lesbians and their interest in physical activity, so they may join a women's football team to meet other women, as well as to take exercise or get fit.

Uniformed and male-dominated jobs such as the police, the armed forces, and the ambulance service have traditionally attracted lesbians (Ainley, 1995), particularly those who identify with a more "butch" image. The male working environment and image of the job was indeed an attraction for some lesbians interviewed, who felt more comfortable here than in jobs, such as office work, where there may be more conventional expectations of feminine roles. However, it is important to be wary of "homogenising" the lesbians in the sample, as it has been argued here has happened in studies of women in non-traditional work, and to remember Ainley's (1995: 71) observation that "lesbians now see their identity – sexual, social and political – in as many ways as there are lesbians". So while several of the lesbians interviewed did identify easily with a male environment, not all expressed this.

It was notable that more of the lesbians than heterosexual women in the sample had done professional jobs before joining the fire service, and had

achieved higher levels of education. While the sample is too small to allow any conclusions to be drawn from this, it is interesting to consider Lonborg and Phillips's (1996: 180) question of whether lesbians are "actually more likely than heterosexual women to depart from gender-related occupational stereotypes?". While they draw no conclusions, and suggest further research to consider whether lesbians have a wider range of career interests, the findings of this research do point to a more varied career background among the lesbians interviewed, which raises a further question about whether they may try more jobs until they find something in which they feel comfortable.

6.2 Working in a male world

The women interviewed, regardless of their sexuality, faced many ways in which they were made to feel "other" or different from the dominant male culture. Halford et al (1997: 27) describe how in many organisations the womanly, reproductive body is "literally ruled out of place" where little provision is made for dealing with menstruation or PMT. This characterisation was shown to be very apt in the fire service with the many examples of uniforms and facilities designed only for men. The resistance to accommodating female bodily needs was sharply illustrated by Fiona's story that an unknown person had been removing sanitary products provided on fire engines, in an expression of his view that such items were "out of place", which may also be seen as representing a view that women too are out of place on a fire engine. Or at least if they are there, then they should minimise their biological differences from men, rather than the work environment adapting to accommodate women.

Expressions of masculinity in relation to female colleagues in a male-dominated occupation were classified in Henwood's (1998) study of engineering students in two ways: the male students were either aggressive and hostile or protective and paternalistic. Whereas the first approach used overt sexism to emphasise women's difference from men, the second stressed women's vulnerability as a way of highlighting their difference from men. While both these ways of behaving towards women were noted by the female firefighters studied, and caused distress and frustration in some cases,

these were not the only ways in which male firefighters related to their female colleagues, which may be more complex than this classification suggests. Some women described relationships where they felt that the men treated them as equal and Kath used an example of a heavy toolbox that often had to be carried to illustrate different approaches of colleagues. Some men would expect her to carry it, so treating her exactly the same as the men, but others would carry it themselves. While the second approach could be seen in Henwood's terms as "protective", Kath viewed it rather as "working to the strengths of the team" (with teamwork being particularly important in the job), and felt equally happy with both approaches, believing that she was physically capable of doing the job and so did not need to prove herself.

The "watch culture", though, proved difficult for most women, at least when they started. As Baigent (2001b) has shown, proving that one is a "good firefighter" is a test closely linked to the construction of "masculinity", and is not just about proving that one can meet the physical demands of the job, but also how one "fits in" with the watch culture. He argues (Baigent, 2001b: 4) that: "The ability to *fit- in* is important for reasons of safety, not least because it helps firefighters to recognise how they and each other will each react at a fire". And some of the women in this study upheld this opinion of the importance of close working relationships for safety reasons. Yet this was felt to have been overstated as part of the culture by the equality officer of a metropolitan brigade, and may form part of a resistance to change:

> "Lots and lots of people operate in teams […] and do a job really, really well. And they don't live together and they don't think they are each other's family. […] You don't need it to carry out the job efficiently. The analogy that is often given is a crew on an airline. They will meet on the airport, they will get on the airplane, they will work as a team and they will get all the stuff that they need done, efficiently, effectively and then they will get off the airplane and they won't see each other again."

The emphasis on bonding, particularly around typically male activities such as sport and, in some cases, pornography, was identified as the culture of the "locker room" in Parkin and Maddock's (1995) typology of organisational

cultures, in which men actively exclude women by building relationships based on common assumptions and agreements. Such exclusion of women can be seen as a form of “boundary heightening”, as observed by Kanter (1977), where the dominant group seek to exaggerate differences between themselves and the minority or “tokens” to maintain their dominant position. This can take the form of sexual banter or pornography, or by seeking permission to swear and talk about football. Interestingly in this study, though, it has been seen that for lesbians the boundaries between them and the men may be a little lower, with men not able to distance themselves so successfully from lesbians who emphasise the common ground between themselves and the men.

There was a view here that lesbians may also be better at “getting stuck in” to the job, and the physical fitness and sportiness emphasised by most of the lesbians can be seen as an advantage. This concurs with Hall’s (1989) observation that there may be advantages to being seen as “masculine” in a non-traditionally female job, where women may be given more challenging work.

There is a notable contrast here with men working in traditionally female jobs, where their minority status and heightened visibility is seen as largely positive (Simpson, 2004). As Williams (1993: 3) says: “Men are rewarded for emphasizing their difference from women; women are typically penalized for any difference they (willingly or not) represent from men”. So in this case it is women who emphasise their more “masculine” qualities that are rewarded.

In the fire service there is recognition of the existence of lesbian sexuality, represented in the labelling of women as either “lesbians or fire tarts”. But it remains a culture dominated by patriarchal heterosexuality, in common with most organisations (Burrell and Hearn, 1989; Cockburn, 1991). This is expressed through the high levels of sexual harassment and harassment of lesbians and gay men already identified, and which continues to occur, according to the women interviewed here, who experienced harassment on grounds of gender, sexual orientation or a combination of both. It can be seen

both as a reassertion of men's power at work (DiTomaso,1989) and a pointed reminder of women's, or lesbians', *difference* from the male majority, while the women may be trying hard to fit in and see themselves as *the same*. And in this attempt to not stand out or be different, women then feel they cannot complain about the harassment for fear of being labelled a "troublemaker". Many other studies have noted the difficulties of complaining about harassment (for example Bagilhole, 2002; Cockburn, 1991), but the emphasis on fitting in with the watch here exacerbates these difficulties.

So while there may be certain ways in which being a lesbian can help with fitting in with the watch culture, the other side is the potential for homophobic harassment, and it is in this context lesbians have to make decisions about coming out at work.

6.3 Coming out

The equality officer informant from a metropolitan brigade believed that there was no reason for a lesbian not to come out in her brigade. And there was a commonly expressed view among both key informants and firefighter interviewees that it was much easier for a lesbian to come out in the fire service than a gay man, given the intolerance of male homosexuality expressed by the majority of men.

However, coming out was not an easy process for some of the lesbians interviewed in this research, although all were now open to most people at work about their sexuality. (Perhaps not surprisingly, no lesbians who were not out at work came forward for this research, although some interviewees did talk of lesbians they knew who were not out, including one who invented a whole life with a male partner).

All three lesbians who had joined the fire service in the last four years had come out while at training school, with relatively little negative reaction at the time, although Ellen had later suffered harassment related to her sexuality and gender. Those that had been in the service longer had waited until they felt settled in a watch before discussing their sexuality. The findings therefore

suggest that more proactive employer policies on lesbian and gay issues, combined with increasing confidence among younger lesbians, are having an influence on lesbians' decisions about coming out. This is consistent with the cohort effects identified by Swann and Anastas (in Meezan and Martin, 2003: 6). They note that "lesbians coming out today… are more likely to have access to positive role models… [and] social service and community-based agencies… [that] affirm young lesbian identities".

The indications here that many lesbians are able to come out in the fire service are in contrast to Schneider's (1984) finding that lesbians in male-dominated workplaces were much less likely to be out than those in female-dominated workplaces (10% compared to 55%). This could in part be a result of changes in attitudes towards homosexuality in the 20 years since her study (carried out in the US), but it also underlines the importance of the organisational context for the experiences of lesbians and gay men, emphasised in the approach of Ward and Winstanley (2003, 2004, 2005).

6.4 Perceptions of employer actions

This sample of interviewees did not allow analysis of employer recruitment initiatives targeted at women as only a couple of the women had responded to such efforts, in both cases some years ago. However, their views on measures to promote women's equality within the fire service ranged from the commonly-held belief that such "special treatment" was counterproductive for women and other minorities to the view that employers were not doing enough to provide facilities and support for women. Cockburn (1991) points out that organisations commonly face the accusation of "discrimination against men" when implementing even the most minimal action to support women. But she argues that it is necessary "to keep 'difference' in play" (ibid: 164) in the context of positive action for sex equality rather than promote policies of assimilation for women.

This goes back to the question posed by Bagilhole (2002) of whether women in non-traditionally female jobs are agents for change or change themselves to fit in. The survival strategies identified below show that individual women in

the fire service adopt different positions on how far they emphasise fitting in with the existing culture on one hand or push for change to accommodate women on the other.

The fire service as an organisation, though, is taking steps to accommodate women, ethnic minorities and lesbians and gay men, although to a greater degree in some brigades than others. The equality officer interviewed from a metropolitan brigade described their stance on equality and diversity as an “aggressive” one, and the equality officer from a mixed urban and rural brigade said they also took a firm approach to investigating reported cases of bullying and harassment. But she acknowledged that this could deter people from complaining, as confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if the problem is to be dealt with seriously. Indeed it has been seen among interviewees here that the “fanfare” associated with complaining could cause problems on the watch. This highlights the difficulties of introducing change in a culture where fitting in and being the same is given such prominence.

However there were indications that some policies were proving successful in producing change. The policy, described by the metropolitan brigade equality officer, of trying to place women on watches or stations with other female firefighters had resulted in higher retention rates for women. This approach was supported by the experiences of Fiona, who felt that she had a much easier time being the second female to join her watch, and believed that the first woman had borne the brunt of the men’s process of adapting to a woman in the job. She also valued the support given to her by the experienced woman.

Several women also stressed the positive changes to the watch culture for both women and men that women can bring. This was summed up by Paula:

> “I’ve known officers who asked for a woman to come on his watch, because he’d worked with me and he saw the dynamics were completely different, how people interact with each other. I think women bring a bit of normality to the environment… I think men get tired of the macho thing”.

6.5 Strategies for survival

The women interviewed adopted different strategies in relation to how they chose to gain support, or not, from other female firefighters. These strategies are characterised here as three positions along a continuum, with women sometimes changing their strategies and moving along it in either direction, although they were more likely to move from left to right.

Aligning with men	**Networking with women**	**Campaigning for women**

< - - -

The women in this group tended to have been in the job for less time than others. Theresa could be said to have moved along the continuum, and now acknowledged some benefits in “Networking with women”. Fran, who had been in the job for two years, currently did not want to take part in any support groups, believing that it would affect how she got on with her colleagues, although she didn’t rule it out in future:

> “I’m quite happy at the moment finding my feet on the station and I don’t necessarily want to get involved with certain groups because you get seen in a different light then. I don’t want to be Fran who is chair of the women’s section or the lesbian and gay section. I want to be accepted as me first and then maybe think about doing something like that”.

6.5.2 Networking with women

The women who chose this strategy did seek out and associate with other women in the fire service for support. This was more likely to be through Networking Women in the Fire Service (NWFS) than the FBU Women’s Section, which they tended to see as too “political”. Their primary reasons for wanting to participate were to meet other women for friendship or support or for additional training and networking opportunities that might further their career, rather than wishing to campaign to change the situation for women in the fire service.

While some women in this category may attend NWFS events and also be part of the FBU Women’s Section, they tended to feel more comfortable in the NWFS environment. Rachel and Kath, who were involved in NWFS, expressed their disillusionment with the FBU since the dispute: Rachel was unhappy with the pay claim made by the union and had considered leaving, and Kath was annoyed at the continued disputes between the union and the employer. Ellen had not wanted to get involved with the union’s Women’s Section, feeling she did not “fit into sisterhood and all that sort of thing”, although she attended NWFS events.

Paula, who took part in both NWFS and her local FBU regional Women’s Committee sometimes found the union “quite extreme in their opinions” so

took a supportive rather than active role in union events, but observed a less "aggressive" political stance among her local Committee than at national level. But in the early days of the career, contact with other women through the union had kept her in the job. She could be said, therefore, to have moved along the continuum from right to left from Campaigning for women towards Networking with women.

Gaining additional operational experience was seen as valuable by women attending the NWFS conferences. Theresa explained that at work "as a woman it's quite difficult getting hold of the machines off the boys sometimes because it's boy's toys", and Carol was impressed by the networking opportunities available at the conference as chief officers also attend. Thus career prospects may also be enhanced by participating in women's activities.

6.5.3 Campaigning for women

Some women sought out the support of other women in the job and then became involved in trying to change the situation of women in the fire service, most commonly through the FBU Women's Section, although some women were also pushing for change through Networking Women in the Fire Service. This group tended to have been in the fire service longer.

Two women in this group, Louise and Fiona, had also been active in their FBU branch, and both had found this to be a useful way of gaining acceptance by the men. As Louise said, "while you're doing something for them they won't kick you". She believed that it helped them to understand that while they were involved in activity that supported women in the union, they also cared about improving conditions for all workers.

Tania, who joined the job 20 years ago, had always networked with women from her days at training school, believing that she may not have survived the course without this support and contact. She is firm in her belief that support from other women is important for survival in the job.

> "The women that have made friends with other women, the women that where possible do something about the situation they're in if they are

> unhappy, more often than not will survive. They will stay in the job, they will find somewhere they like, they will feel happy, when they are pissed off they will talk to somebody else and they will feel confident about moving on and maybe going for promotion".

The women who adopted this strategy believed that the fire service had not done enough to support and accommodate women, and were involved through the union or NWFS in pressing the employers for improvements.

6.5.4 Discussion

The equality officer from a metropolitan fire brigade classified women in two separate groups, and noted that there are tensions between the two:

> "Those that just wish to get on with their work and have nothing to do with anything, wouldn't talk with Equality under any circumstances whatsoever".

And those:

> "who are determined that the organisation will change, that it will accept women. No, not just that it will accept women but that women have a place in this organisation and the organisation must make accommodation for that place".

Her first group is consistent with the "Aligning with men" position identified here, and the second with the "Campaigning for women" approach. Yet this research has identified a position between these two, which seems to appeal to significant numbers of women, of those who wish to "Network with women", without necessarily marking themselves out as campaigners for change.

Many of the writers on women in non-traditional work have identified a strategy of "becoming one of the lads" that involves disassociating from women (for example, Cockburn, 1991; Henwood, 1998; Marshall, 1984), expressed by Kanter (1977) in this way: "For token women the price of being 'one of the boys' is a willingness to turn against the 'girls'" (cited in Bagilhole, 2002: 156). Given the greater ease with which lesbians in this study may fit in with the "lads", shown above, it could be expected that they would therefore be most likely to associate with the "Aligning with the men" position identified

here. However, there was no clear difference between lesbian and heterosexual women concerning the strategies adopted[11]. (The lesbians interviewed were more likely to seek support through women's networks than the FBU lesbian and gay support structures, but this is likely to be because the sample was accessed mainly through the women's support networks).

Age and length of service were more likely indicators of where women would be positioned in relation to these strategies, with younger and more recently recruited women concentrated in the "Aligning with men" and "Networking with women" groups, and the older and longer serving women more likely to be "Campaigning for women". It is not simply that with age and experience women tend to move towards "Campaigning", as all the women in this group described being involved from soon after they joined the fire service. Therefore it may be that improved conditions for women in the fire service (due largely to campaigning by women) and greater numbers of women, mean that newer recruits were less likely to see a need to campaign for change. Another, and perhaps complementary, explanation, could be the decline in interest in feminist politics and trade unionism among younger women. This would support Kelly and Breinlinger's (1996) findings in their study of involvement and activism within women's groups, which noted the importance of a commitment to activism and collective action, a strong sense of gender identity, and the importance of life-cycle changes in explaining women's involvement in women's groups and activities.

Colgan and Ledwith (1996) identified a trajectory of women's consciousness and activism in work organisations with "traditional women" at one end; "women 'in transition' along the trajectory"; and "women-aware" and "feminist" positions at the other end. This is useful here in supporting the distinction identified between "Networking" and "Campaigning" women, with the first group sharing with the "women aware" position the desire to present a more moderate image, particularly to management, and have men as members.

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[11] Although more heterosexual women were identified with the Campaigning for women group this was thought to be a feature of the way the sample was obtained, with greater efforts made to find lesbians through the snowballing and NWFS routes.

The “Campaigning for women” approach is similar to the “feminist” end of Colgan and Ledwith’s trajectory where women wish to remove obstructions to women’s progress and transform patriarchal structures and cultures. However, none of the women interviewed in the fire service would fit the model of “traditional woman”, identified as one that “implies broad acceptance of women’s gendered place in society, the family, the labour market and work organisations” (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996: 24), since their choice of occupation immediately challenges conventional notions of “women’s” work. Therefore, in this study of women who are already in one sense “non-traditional”, a position of “Aligning with men” was needed to represent women who felt their interests were served best by concentrating on getting on with their watch.

7. Critical reflection

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

7.1 The research questions

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 compare the experiences of female firefighters working in one metropolitan brigade with those in a county brigade, offering an analysis of employer policies and actions in two different organisational contexts. However, it soon became apparent that it would be difficult to find enough women, particularly lesbians, to take part from a single county brigade, given the very small numbers of female firefighters. It was therefore decided to have a balance of women working in metropolitan and county brigades, to get experiences of different employers. This means that the research question concerning perceptions of employer policies relates to a range of employers. During the research, though, it became clear that the fire service as an organisation has many common features, despite being made up of separate employers, and that women in different brigades had similar experiences.

7.2 The sample

This dissertation set out to challenge the presumed homogeneity of women's experiences of working in a non-traditionally female occupation by considering their sexuality. Therefore it was decided to seek out a balance of heterosexual and lesbian/bisexual women firefighters to interview. In the event, though, all the women who came forward to be interviewed identified themselves as either heterosexual or lesbian, with none defining themselves as bisexual. It is not possible to know whether this is representative of the women that work in the fire service. So while the research can compare the experiences of

lesbians and heterosexual women, there is another group of women whose experiences have not been reflected here.

Female firefighters were invited to take part in the research in the knowledge that it would compare the experiences of heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women, and that confidentiality and anonymity would be assured (see Appendix 6). Information about the research was circulated through two FBU Regional Women's Committees, at the Networking Women in the Fire Service conference and to other women known to those who volunteered through these routes (see Chapter 3). While this approach succeeded in achieving a balance of women who worked for metropolitan and county brigades, and those who were actively involved in the FBU Women's Section and those who were not, it may be that a different strategy would be required to find harder to reach groups such as bisexual women, as well as those who are not out at work. All of the lesbians interviewed had come out to at least some people at work, although some had not disclosed their sexuality until they had been in the job for several years. Therefore it was possible to explore issues around not being out at work with these women, but the perspective of those who have felt unable to come out at all is absent.

All of the women in the sample described themselves as white, reflecting the low proportions of ethnic minorities in the fire service. While it was not the intention of this dissertation to discuss issues around race and ethnicity, which would require a separate theoretical discussion, it is worth noting that this sample lacks ethnic diversity, and being aware that for future research in organisations with small non-white populations specific efforts would need to be made to ensure a more diverse sample.

7.3 Research tools

The female firefighters interviewed completed a questionnaire at the start of the interview, which included a question about their sexual orientation. All answered it with no apparent reluctance. In some cases the researcher had no knowledge of the woman's sexual orientation before the interview, and

ascertaining it in this way allowed the introduction of the topic of sexuality in a relatively easy way during the interview.

The topic guide worked well in terms of covering the areas that it set out to include, although at times 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 interviewee to cover themes in a less directive way. In retrospect it can be seen that the 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.

The “appreciative enquiry” approach (Liebling et al, 1999), used to introduce questions that reflect on the positive aspects of the job, in general worked well, with questions such as: “What are the things you like about the job?” bringing out the enormous enthusiasm that all the women felt about the actual job of going to fires and incidents, despite the fact that most had also experienced difficult working relationships. The question: “Are there any advantages to being a woman in this job?” was useful in exploring the differences that they perceived between women and men in the job, as well as in some cases leading to a discussion of their coping strategies as women.

7.4 Analysis

The use of Ritchie and Lewis’s (2003) Framework method for analysis was experimental for the researcher, but proved a useful way of organising the data collected and identifying links between themes and between interviewees’ experiences. Lessons were learnt, for example, the original thematic index was found to have too many detailed categories which made labelling difficult, but simplifying it at that stage would have involved re-labelling the transcripts. Instead, categories were grouped together at the sorting and synthesising stage of thematic charting. More time spent on refining the thematic index at an early stage would pay off in time saved in later stages of analysis.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

This dissertation set out to address a gap in the literature on women in non-traditionally female work concerning the experiences of lesbians and to contribute to the limited existing knowledge about lesbians in work organisations by investigating the experiences of lesbian and heterosexual women working as firefighters. It compares their reasons for choosing a traditionally male occupation, their experiences in the job and their strategies for coping in a heavily male-dominated environment. It also explores the factors that enable lesbians to come out in this job and considers female firefighters' perceptions of employer efforts to support female and lesbian, gay and bisexual firefighters.

The principal findings in relation to these aims are summarised in this chapter, in the context of the existing literature. Some recommendations for further research on the careers and work experiences of lesbians are made, and some issues raised by interviewees concerning equality policies in the fire service are highlighted.

8.1 Becoming a firefighter

All women who choose to become a firefighter are defying traditional stereotypes of "male" and "female" jobs. However, male-dominated jobs have traditionally attracted lesbians (Ainley, 1995) and for some in this study it was because they felt more comfortable working in a male environment than in jobs with more conventional expectations of "feminine" roles.

Most women recalled that family members expressed fears for their safety when they decided to join (which commonly developed into intense pride). But this danger - which is exaggerated in the public perception compared to the reality of the job (Johnson, 2004; Woodfield, 2003) – was also part of the appeal of the job, with nearly all interviewees enthusing about the "buzz", the "rush" and the "adrenaline" of going to fires and incidents. The job of firefighter therefore allows women to escape from the constraints of typically female

work and test their physical abilities and capacity to get on with colleagues and the public, in an environment that is both exciting and dangerous.

It was also notable that more of the lesbians than heterosexual women in the sample had done professional jobs before joining the fire service, and had achieved higher levels of education, which supports Lonborg and Phillips's (1996) assertion that further research is needed to explore the possibility that lesbians have a wider range of career interests and different career patterns from heterosexual women. The higher educational levels observed in this admittedly small sample is consistent with Dunne's (1997) findings in her study of 60 non-heterosexual women and those of the 2001/2002 Gay and Lesbian Census (ID Research, 2003).

8.2 Experiences in a male-dominated occupation

Unlike most organisations where heterosexuality and heterosexual relations predominate (Burrell and Hearn, 1989) and gay and lesbian sexuality is usually invisible, lesbianism is acknowledged in the fire service in the expectation that women will be either "lesbians or fire tarts". In some ways, then, it is easier for lesbians to be accepted into the male-dominated and "macho" culture of the watch than heterosexual women, as lesbians may be perceived as better at "getting stuck in" to the job and more willing to join in with watch banter concerning women and sport, assuming that they are happy to identify with these "male" forms of behaviour. In this way lesbians may be able to lower the boundaries that men heighten, according to Kanter (1977), when small numbers of women enter a male-dominated sphere.

Heterosexual women who do not wish to accept the label of "fire tart" (as none in this study did) must find other ways of defining themselves in relation to male colleagues. This may be through stressing the familial nature of the watch, described by one as "like having lots of Dads". This emphasis may help to desexualise the working environment. One heterosexual woman opted for the "lesbian" label, when she told colleagues, as a joke, that she was gay without thinking that they would believe her, but discovered it was a useful way of avoiding unwanted sexual attention.

Lesbians too can challenge male preconceptions, as men may not know whether to put them in the “woman” or “one of the guys” box, according to Fran, who enjoyed their uncertainty:

> “I think it challenges them quite a bit, to know how to treat you and where to place you, which is always good fun. You can always shift the boundaries a little bit”.

Unfortunately, though, there were still many reported examples of men reasserting their power through sexual harassment, which supports the findings that women in non-traditional work may be at greater risk of sexual harassment (Colgan et al, 1996; DiTomaso, 1989; Wacjman, 1998). Both heterosexual and lesbian women had experienced harassment in the job, with the lesbians believing it was on account of their gender and sexual orientation.

8.3 Coming out

In contrast to Schneider’s (1984) finding that lesbians in male-dominated workplaces were much less likely to be out than those in female-dominated workplaces, all the lesbians interviewed here had come out to all or most people at work. The three newest recruits had all felt able to come out while at training school, with relatively little negative reaction, compared to those who had been in the fire service longer who had waited until they felt settled in a watch and trusted colleagues before discussing their sexuality. This suggests that recent employer policies on lesbian and gay issues, combined with increasing confidence among younger lesbians, are having an influence on lesbians’ decisions about coming out in the fire service. This is consistent with the “cohort effects” identified by Swann and Anastas (in Meezan and Martin, 2003: 6) whereby younger lesbians have greater access to positive role models and support which affirms their identities.

8.4 Perceptions of employer actions

Cockburn (1991) identified that organisations commonly face the accusation of “discrimination against men” when implementing action to support women,

and this was observed in this study of the fire service where there was a commonly-held belief that “special treatment” for women was counterproductive for those it intended to help, emphasising their difference rather than sameness.

Employer policies to deal firmly with bullying and harassment were often unsuccessful in encouraging people to report problems for fear of being seen as a “troublemaker” by colleagues, with some feeling pressure to sort out problems themselves.

Addressing the question posed by Bagilhole (2002) and others of whether women in non-traditionally female jobs are agents for change, or change themselves to fit in, it can be seen that just increasing the numbers of women entering the job is not sufficient to change the culture, there need to be specific policies that support women. For example the policy of one metropolitan brigade of trying to place women on watches or stations with other female firefighters had stopped the “revolving door” of women joining and then leaving, so resulting in higher retention rates for women.

Support from other women in the job was cited as essential for survival in this environment by some women, but not all, as the following section shows.

8.5 Strategies for survival

This research proposes a continuum for characterising the different ways in which the women interviewed chose to gain support, or not, from other female firefighters. Three positions are identified, but women may change their strategies and move along the continuum in either direction, although they were more likely to move from left to right.

Aligning with men	**Networking with women**	**Campaigning for women**

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Aligning with men: the women adopting this strategy preferred to operate as an individual and did not wish to take part in any support groups for women, feeling that this might jeopardise their relations with men on the watch or simply that the men they worked with provided all the help and support that they needed. They also tended to disassociate themselves from other women who they might feel are less able to do the job, for fear of being "tarred with the same brush".

Networking with women: the women who chose this strategy did seek out and associate with other women in the fire service for support, and, in some cases, for the opportunities to advance their careers. This was more likely to be through Networking Women in the Fire Service than the FBU Women's Section, which they tended to see as too "political".

Campaigning for women: some women sought out the support of other women in the job and then became involved in trying to change the situation of women in the fire service, most commonly through the FBU Women's Section, although some women were also pushing for change through Networking Women in the Fire Service.

The "Aligning with men" position has much in common with the strategy of "becoming one of the lads" observed by many writers on women in non-traditional work (Bagilhole, 2002; Cockburn, 1991; Henwood, 1998; Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984). The "Networking with women" and "Campaigning with women" distinction shares some features of Colgan and Ledwith's (1996) "women aware" and "feminist" positions, where the former is generally more moderate and the latter wishes to transform patriarchal structures and cultures.

There was no clear difference between lesbian and heterosexual women concerning the strategies adopted. Instead, age and length of service were more likely indicators of where women would be positioned in relation to these strategies, with younger and more recently recruited women concentrated in the "Aligning with men" and "Networking with women" groups, and the older

and longer serving women more likely to be “Campaigning for women”. This suggests that improved conditions for women in the fire service may mean that newer recruits were less likely to see a need to campaign for change, as well perhaps as a decline in interest in feminist politics and trade unionism among younger women, suggested by Kelly and Breinlinger (1996).

8.6 Recommendations

8.6.1 Further research

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

- **Career patterns of lesbians**: several of the lesbians here had done professional jobs before joining the fire service, and had higher levels of education than the heterosexual women. It would therefore be interesting to consider whether lesbians have different career patterns than heterosexual women.

- **Experiences of promotion**: limits of space meant it was not possible for this dissertation to consider women’s experiences of, and desire for, promotion, but there were indications that women may see promotion as a strategy for surviving this male-dominated culture. A comparison of the experiences of lesbians and heterosexual women could combine Wacjman’s (1998) important findings on the significance of domestic life to the careers of managers with Dunne’s (2000) view that how lesbians combine work and family life can shed light on the workings of gender in the mainstream.

- **Differences between lesbians and gay men in male-dominated occupations**: the findings hinted that the fire service is an easier environment for lesbians than for gay men. It would therefore be interesting to explore this further in the fire service and to compare this with other male-dominated occupations to see whether this pattern applies more widely or is a particular feature of the fire service culture.

8.6.2 Implications for the fire service

As an outside observer of the fire service for a short period only, it would be presumptuous to suggest answers to the well-known difficulties of recruitment and retention of women in the fire service. However, some issued raised by interviewees may be of interest to employers in considering their equality strategies:

- **Complaints procedures**: procedures for making complaints, particularly of harassment and bullying, should allow complainants to understand and feel included in the process: one woman who made such a complaint felt that it was taken out of her control and the procedure was not explained to her, so compounding the sense of powerlessness that she already felt as a result of the harassment.

- **Mainstreaming of equality training**: while it was recognised that any emphasis on equalities runs the risk of highlighting minorities to their detriment, a more mainstream approach to equalities training, where the issues are addressed as a routine part of management or recruit training rather than being introduced when there was a problem on a watch or station, was felt by some to be a more effective approach.

- **Placing women together**: the policy of a metropolitan brigade of trying to place women on watches or stations with other female firefighters had resulted in higher retention rates for women. This approach was supported by the experiences of a woman in another brigade, without such a policy, but where she had been placed with another woman by chance, and felt that she gained support and benefited from the fact that the men had already adjusted to working with a woman.

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Appendix 1: Gender of fire and rescue service staff, 31 March 2004

	Men	Women	Total	% Women
ENGLAND	**31,185**	**671**	31,856	**2.11**
Avon	660	18	678	**2.65**
Bedfordshire & Luton	320	10	330	**3.03**
Buckinghamshire	342	10	352	**2.84**
Cambridgeshire	280	5	285	**1.75**
Cheshire	608	8	616	**1.30**
Cleveland	567	3	570	**0.53**
Cornwall	200	5	205	**2.44**
County Durham & Darlington	396	6	402	**1.49**
Cumbria	263	8	271	**2.95**
Derbyshire	463	16	479	**3.34**
Devon	562	13	575	**2.26**
Dorset	304	5	309	**1.62**
East Sussex	443	10	453	**2.21**
Essex	887	33	920	**3.59**
Gloucestershire	221	17	238	**7.14**
Greater Manchester	2,079	21	2,100	**1.00**
Hampshire	795	13	808	**1.61**
Hereford & Worcester	333	14	347	**4.03**
Hertfordshire	566	8	574	**1.39**
Humberside	716	12	728	**1.65**
Isle Of Wight	56	2	58	**3.45**
Isles Of Scilly	11	0	11	**0.00**
Kent	928	14	942	**1.49**
Lancashire	977	13	990	**1.31**
Leicestershire	473	3	476	**0.63**
Lincolnshire	180	7	187	**3.74**
London	5,837	153	5,990	**2.55**
Merseyside	1,296	23	1,319	**1.74**
Norfolk	291	4	295	**1.36**
North Yorkshire	354	9	363	**2.48**
Northamptonshire	309	2	311	**0.64**
Northumberland	193	5	198	**2.53**
Nottinghamshire	576	11	587	**1.87**
Oxfordshire	242	3	245	**1.22**
Royal Berkshire	425	5	430	**1.16**
Shropshire	209	7	216	**3.24**
Somerset	177	2	179	**1.12**
South Yorkshire	894	24	918	**2.61**
Staffordshire	455	15	470	**3.19**
Suffolk	235	9	244	**3.69**
Surrey	653	16	669	**2.39**
Tyne & Wear	957	13	970	**1.34**
Warwickshire	276	8	284	**2.82**
West Midlands	1,932	36	1,968	**1.83**
West Sussex	392	17	409	**4.16**
West Yorkshire	1,632	26	1,658	**1.57**
Wiltshire	220	9	229	**3.93**

Source: ODPM

Appendix 2: Questionnaire for firefighter interviewees

I would be grateful if you could complete this short questionnaire to provide me with some background information about you and your job before we start the interview. All information you provide on this questionnaire, as well as during the interview, will be treated in strict confidence and you will not be identified in the research. Many thanks for agreeing to take part in this research.

Your job

1. What is your current rank/role?

   ……..
2. Which fire station do you work at?

   ……..
3. How long have you been in the fire service?

   ……
4. How long have you been in your current rank/role?

   ……

About you

5. What is your age?

   Under 21 ☐ 21-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐

   41-50 ☐ 51-60 ☐

6. Are you?

   White ☐ Mixed heritage ☐ Indian ☐

   Bangladeshi ☐ Pakistani ☐ Black Caribbean ☐

   Black African ☐ Chinese ☐ Other ☐

   If other, please state……...

7. Are you?

   Heterosexual ☐ Lesbian ☐ Bisexual ☐

8. Do you live with a partner?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

9. Do you have any children that live with you?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

10. What is your highest qualification (please tick one only)?

    Degree or above ☐ Higher education below degree ☐

    GCE A Level or equivalent ☐ GCSE grades A-C or equivalent ☐

    Other qualification ☐ No qualification ☐

Appendix 3: Issue guide for female firefighters

Revised: 23 July 2005

Explain what research about and for, and interview process
Outline tape recording, approach to confidentiality and timing
Ask her if she has any questions
Check completed questionnaire

Reasons for choosing job

- how did you join FS? (ie saw advert, just applied, s.o. told her of vacancy)
- What attracted you to the job?
- Did you know any firefighters before?
- Previous work experience, briefly

Experience of initial training

- How long was initial training and where did it take place?
- how did you find the training period in terms of difficulty (physical and mental); working with colleagues and trainers
- did it alter any previously held ideas of what job would be like?
- What was it like being a woman on the training? Were there other women there?
- (Did you come out to anyone during training? If so, how did they respond?)

Experience of current job

The job

- what are the things you like about the job?
- what are the things you dislike about the job?
- What qualities do you think you need for the job?
- Are there particular difficulties about being a woman in the job, in terms of a) the demands of the job; b) the physical working conditions; c) working relationships etc?

Working relationships

- are there other women are on your watch/at the station where you work?
- how would you describe your relationships with male colleagues? How has this changed since starting the job?
- how would you describe your relationships with any female colleagues? How has this changed since starting the job?
- what is your relationship with managers like (male/female?) ?
- How do male colleagues treat you as a woman in the job?
- How do female colleagues treat you as a woman in the job?
- (have you come out to any colleagues? How did they respond? Differences between men and women? Any other L or G you are aware of?)
- (Ideally, how would you like others to treat you in relation to your sexuality?)

Support

- do you get support from colleagues in general, and in relation to any specific difficulties?
- do you get support from managers in general, and in relation to any specific difficulties?

Being a woman in the job

- Are there any advantages to being a woman in this job?
- (Are there any advantages to being a lesbian in this job?)
- Do you think there are ways in which the job is different for heterosexual women and for lesbians?

Change

- Since you've been in the job, how would you say it has changed in terms of working environment or culture (particularly in relation to how women/lesbians are treated)? Reasons for this?

Promotion

- have you been promoted since working in FS?
- If yes, do you think being a woman made this more/less difficult/no difference?
- (If yes, do you think being a lesbian made this more/less difficult/no difference?)
- If have applied, but didn't get it, do you think being a woman (and/or lesbian?) had anything to do with it?
- Have other colleagues – male and female – got promotion? Why do you think this was?
- Any future plans to go for promotion? If yes, do you think it will be easy/difficult to get?
- Do you intend to stay in the fire service for some time?

Comparison with any previous jobs in FS

- have you had any other jobs in FS? If so, what position(s) and for how long?
- Is current job different from previous jobs in FS in terms of a) the demands of the job; b) the physical working conditions; c) working relationships?

Employer policies and action

- are you aware of employer policies to encourage women (lesbians and gay men?) to join FS? If yes, can you describe? If yes, did this have any impact on your reasons for joining (if not covered Reasons for choosing job above)?
- are you aware of activity by employer to support women (lesbians and gay men?) once in the FS? If yes, can you describe? If yes, how helpful is it?
- Are you aware of any action by the employer in relation to the legislation in 2003 that bans discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation? If yes, what? (Has this made it more likely that you would take action/grievance etc?)

Social/sporting events with colleagues

- do you take part in any activities outside work with colleagues, either social or sporting? With men/women/both?
- Do you feel included/welcomed as a woman (lesbian) ?

Impact of job on relationships outside work

- how do you feel the job impacts on relationships with partner, children, family, friends, and vice versa?
- If have children, how is childcare organised, and how shared with partner, if have one?
- If have children, have you had children since being in the job? If so, how was it being pregnant in job? Maternity leave? And coming back to work?
- if have cohabiting partner, do they work, and if so, what is their job?

If lesbian/bisexual

- When did you first think you might be lesbian/bisexual?
- Have you been out in other jobs? How was this?
- Did your sexuality influence your decision to become a firefighter?

Perceptions of female firefighters

- What sort of reactions did you first get from partner, children, family, friends to doing a typically male job? And now? If negative, did/does this bother you?
- Some might say it's not a very "feminine" job – how important is it to you to be perceived as "feminine"?
- Image of male firefighters as sexy – does this apply to women too? Are there other images/stereotypes of women firefighters? How do you feel about these?
- Did you hear about London advert "Fancy pulling an older woman?" If so, what did you think of this way of advertising for firefighters?

Union membership and activity

- Member of FBU?
- participation in Women's Committee?
- attendance at Women's Schools? And how you found it?
- (participation in LGBT group?)
- Other support groups?
- Other union positions/activity?
- any other branch/local level activities?
- have asked for/got support from union? Was this WC/local or regional rep/national office? In relation to?
- what is your view of union in terms of supporting women (lesbian and gay employees?) ? (local and other levels)

Many thanks for taking part.
Explain that I'd like to give summary of research findings to participants – would she like me to email/post this to her? (Get details).
Any questions for me?

Appendix 4: Issue guide for interview with FBU Women's Committee

Role of Women's Committee
How long has FBU had a Women's Committee?
How was it established?
What is composition of WC?
What is role/remit of WC?
Position in FBU structure? Resources provided?
Regional Women's Structure?
How long have you been in your role on WC?
Full-time union position?
What is your role on WC?
Proportion of firefighters in FBU male/female?

Issues for female firefighters
what are the main difficulties for women in the job?
what are the benefits/advantages of being a woman in the job?

Union support for female firefighters
how does WC offer support to women firefighters? New recruits/trainees?
Support for those having particular difficulties (ie hotlines?)
Particular support for lesbian or bisexual women?
Women's School – what proportion of women attend?
Publications – Siren? How often? How distributed?
Individual cases/legal support?

Employer support for female firefighters
How do employers offer support to female firefighters?
What is your view of the effectiveness of these measures?
How do union and employers work together to support women firefighters?

Employer efforts to recruit female firefighters
what are employers doing to recruit female firefighters?
What is your view of the effectiveness of these measures?
does the union/WC have a role in the recruitment of women firefighters? What does this involve?
View on "pulling older women" advert?

Changes in culture
Has seen any changes in attitudes of men towards female firefighters?
Any changes in "watch culture" as a result of having some/more women?
What employer measures have been effective in terms of making culture more favourable for women?
Seen changes in union culture/attitudes towards women?
Aware of any differences in experiences of job for lesbians?

Other WC activities
Campaigning role for wider women's issues?
Pressure for change within union?
Networking Women in the Fire Service – Any links with FBU WC

Appendix 5: Issue guide FBU Gay and Lesbian Committee rep

Role of Gay and Lesbian Committee

- How long has FBU had a G&L Committee?
- How was it established?
- What is composition of G&LC?
- What is role/remit of G&LC?
- Position in FBU structure? Resources provided?
- Regional Structure?
- How long have you been in your role on G&LC?
- Full-time union position?
- What is your role?

Issues for lesbian and gay firefighters

- Extent to which LGB firefighters come out
- what are the main difficulties for LGB FFs in the job?

Union support for LGB firefighters

- how does G&LC offer support to LGB firefighters? New recruits/trainees?
- Support for those having particular difficulties (ie hotlines?)
- G&L School – attendance?
- Publications – How distributed?
- Individual cases/legal support?

Employer support for LGB firefighters

- How do employers offer support to LGB firefighters?
- What is your view of the effectiveness of these measures?
- How do union and employers work together to support LGB firefighters?

Employer efforts to recruit LGB firefighters

- what are employers doing to recruit LGB firefighters?
- What is your view of the effectiveness of these measures?
- does the union/WC have a role in the recruitment of LGB firefighters? What does this involve?

Changes in culture

- Has seen any changes in attitudes towards LGB firefighters?
- What employer measures have been effective in terms of making culture more favourable for LGB firefighters?
- And union activities?
- Any differences for lesbians compared to gay men?

Other G&LC activities

- Campaigning role for wider LGB issues?
- Action in relation to the legislation in 2003 that bans discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation?

Appendix 6: Letter to potential interviewees about the research

Research on the experiences of lesbians, bisexual and heterosexual women in a non-traditionally female occupation, the fire service

I am carrying out research for my Masters dissertation that aims to compare the experiences of lesbians, bisexual and heterosexual women firefighters. I would like to interview a range of women (around 16 in all) about their experiences.

The research will consider questions such as:

- reasons for joining the fire service; experiences in the job and in relation to promotion; relationships with male and female colleagues and managers; the impact of domestic circumstances on the job etc;
- what factors enable lesbians and bisexual women to come out at work, and what prevents others from doing so;
- the impact of any employer and union efforts to recruit and support female and lesbian, gay and bisexual firefighters on employees, as well as any impact of the new regulations prohibiting discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation;
- examine women's experiences of working in a male-dominated culture and the extent to which they perceive any changes in this culture as women enter the job.

My intention is to carry out 4 interviews with key informants, which would be 2 with employer representatives (human resource/equality specialists) and 2 with FBU representatives (one from the Women's Committee and one from the Gay and Lesbian committee) and 16 semi-structured interviews with female firefighters, 8 of whom would be lesbians or bisexual (some out at work and some not) and 8 who define themselves as heterosexual.

I would like a mixture of experiences of women working for a large urban fire service, such as London, and some in smaller towns or rural areas. I would also like to speak to women who are both active in the union and those who are less involved in union activities.

Interviews will be face-to-face and are expected to last about one hour, and I will ask permission from the interviewees to tape record them. The identity of all women interviewed will remain anonymous and participation in the research will be confidential. This means that I will not attribute specific comments in the dissertation in a way that reveals anyone's identity.

Interviews need to take place during spring and early summer 2005 and will be at a location and time convenient to the participants.

I have a number of years experience of doing research on women's equality and on lesbian and gay issues, mainly through my work at the Labour Research Department, a trade union research organisation, between 1992 and 2004. I am now also working on a research project at London Metropolitan University that is looking at the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual workers in the fire service, local government, education, banking, manufacturing and the voluntary sector.

I hope that my research will highlight some of the issues that affect a diverse range of women who are working in a traditionally male environment, and I will be happy to present findings from the research to those who took part and other interested groups.

If you would like to participate in the research and/or have any questions about the research, please do contact me using the details below.
Many thanks.

Tessa Wright
Work: 020 7320 1389; Home: 020 7326 1752; Mobile: 07949 785258
Email: t.wright@londonmet.ac.uk

Appendix 7: 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 and getting accepted/time taken
2.2. Obstacles/difficulties
2.3. 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. Experience of coming out/being a lesbian during training
3.5. Other

4. Experience of the job

4.1. Where work/how long for
4.2. Movement between watches/stations/brigades
4.3. Reasons for moving
4.4. Things she likes
4.5. Things she dislikes
4.6. Qualities needed for job
4.7. Physical demands of job
4.8. Other demands
4.9. Watch culture (ie. banter)
4.10. Other

5. Working relationships

5.1. Gender balance on watch/station
5.2. Relationships with male colleagues
5.3. Relationships with female colleagues
5.4. Relationship with managers
5.5. Being “one of the lads”/fitting in
5.6. Other lesbian/gay colleagues
5.7. Sexual interaction/relationships with colleagues
5.8. Other

6. Coming out

6.1. Experience of coming out in fire service
6.2. Experience of coming out in previous jobs
6.3. Experience of coming out to family/friends
6.4. Views on own sexuality
6.5. Other

7. Being a woman in the job

7.1. Experience of being a woman (good and bad)
7.2. Attitudes of others towards women
7.3. Qualities women bring
7.4. Coping strategies
7.5. Uniform/facilities
7.6. Other

8. Being a lesbian the job

8.1. Experience of being a lesbian in job
8.2. Attitudes of others towards lesbians/gay people
8.3. Differences being a lesbian compared to heterosexual woman in the job
8.4. Coping strategies
8.5. Other

9. Problems in the job

9.1. Bullying/harassment
9.2. Working relationships
9.3. Other problems
9.4. Support/lack of
9.5. Coping strategies
9.6. Effect on self/job
9.7. Making a complaint/or not
9.8. Other

10. Change

10.1. Changes in attitudes towards women
10.2. Changes in attitudes towards lesbians/gay men
10.3. Change in treatment of women
10.4. Other

11. Promotion

11.1. Experience of promotion so far
11.2. Desire for future promotion
11.3. How being a woman did/might affect promotion
11.4. How being a lesbian did/might affect promotion
11.5. How others view her/women's promotion
11.6. Other

12. Employer policies and action

12.1. Awareness of employer policies to encourage women/lesbians, gay men
12.2. Impact on their decision to join
12.3. Attitude towards employer equal opportunities policies
12.4. Awareness of sexual orientation regulations
12.5. Employer action in relation to sexual orientation regulations
12.6. Impact of sexual orientation regulations
12.7. Other

13. Social/sporting events with colleagues

13.1. Participation in social activities with colleagues
13.2. Participation in sporting activities with male colleagues
13.3. Participation in sporting activities with female colleagues
13.4. Other

14. Impact of job on relationships outside work

14.1. Impact on relationship with partner
14.2. Impact on rest of life
14.3. Partner's job
14.4. Childcare
14.5. Other

15. Perceptions of female firefighters

15.1. Initial reactions from family, friends
15.2. Reactions now from family, friends

15.3. Reactions from public
15.4. View of self in relation to doing male job
15.5. View of own femininity/masculinity
15.6. View of image of male firefighters as sexy
15.7. Image of female firefighters
15.8. View of London advert “Fancy pulling an older woman?”
15.9. Other

16. Union membership and activity

16.1. Union membership
16.2. Their perceptions of FBU in general
16.3. Their perceptions of FBU in relation to equality issues
16.4. FBU action on sexual orientation regulations
16.5. Activity in branch
16.6. Activity in Women’s committee/Women’s School
16.7. Activity in G&L committee/G&L School
16.8. Activity in Networking Women
16.9. Experience of union support
16.10. Perceptions of Networking Women
16.11. Their need for support groups
16.12. Other