

No change here



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There has been considerable debate in the fire service about making the shift system more “*family friendly*” (Bain 2002; ODPM 2003). However, is this suggestion compatible with hopes to “*increase the percentage of women amongst uniformed operational staff to 15% by 2009*” (ODPM 2006a)? Whilst it is clear that throughout our society, women are seen as primary carers, (therefore it is legitimate and commendable when the fire service seeks to support this), but what if women do not think that a change to the shift system is family friendly? Is it then legitimate to use women as an excuse for change, particularly as such an argument is likely to cause a backlash against them from men in the service?

This article will seek to add to this debate using new research with women firefighters. The research, which asked 78 questions of women firefighters, had two questions specifically designed to seek women’s views on the shift system. But before we look at this data we need to look at the background around the fire service’s reaction to the employment of women firefighters.

Some background

Ten years ago, one of the first surveys of women firefighters in the UK provided data for “*Who Rings the Bell*” (Baigent 1996): a report that set a benchmark on the fire service’s reaction to women firefighters. Further research soon followed and the inspectorate (HMCIFS 1999; HMCIFS 2001), private companies working on behalf of fire services (C3. 2001), Chief Fire Officers (McGuirk 2002) and ‘independent’ researchers (Johnson 2005; Wright 2005) are amongst those that contributed. Some of this research identified ‘fire service culture’ as a considerable barrier to women (Archer 1998; Howell 1996). There was also a suggestion that rather than one fire service culture there were two; one formal and one informal, and that that these cultures were increasingly divided over what constituted an efficient fire service (Baigent 2001). When it came to managing the fire service this gap between cultures was often seen as horizontal (HMCIFS 2001). However, when it came to employing women firefighters this division was vertical – running up and down the service.

This vertical division became more obvious when Jack Straw issued his targets (Straw 1999; Straw 2000). On one side of the divide were Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector and the FBU General Secretary. Both firmly supported the concept of a diverse fire service. On the other side, many officers and firefighters were more ambivalent, and some were out-rightly hostile to any attempt to increase the number of women in the fire service.

Employing women in the fire service was to be both expensive and difficult. Expensive, because of the cost of adapting fire stations to provide facilities for women. Difficult, because there were many in the fire service who did not believe that women had any place on a fire station, let alone a need for a separate toilet and shower. Money is now being spent on providing accommodation for women, but what of the resistance to women per se? When women were asked “*Do you consider your brigade at senior level supports the concept of women firefighters*” 131 women out of a

possible 227 answered “Yes.” Sharifa¹ explains how women might describe this positive move forward:

Sharifa: I’ve always been given full support from senior managers.

However, there remain a sizable number of women who would not support Sharifa’s statement. Jo explains how these women may think:

Jo: I don't think they do, because they are terrified of challenging any behaviour that may be affecting women. Also most of them are old style firefighters that do not think that women should be in the job either.

For Jo resistance to women in the fire service is not just a matter of firefighters harassing their colleagues, it still occurs at all levels and remains an institutional matter as well as an individual one.

It is clear to this ex-firefighter turned academic that despite women having an inalienable right to work in the fire service, well-established informal male cultures are unlikely to change just because the inspectorate or the FBU they should. Throughout the service there remain men who will take any opportunity to turn difficulties into a ‘women’ problem. Their arguments relate to women’s strength, technical ability, pregnancy and there was even a Chief Inspector in Scotland who left the service soon after arguing publicly about women’s lack of practical skills (HMCIFSS, 1998). Changing such an entrenched culture is problematic, and a look at how ‘modernisation’ may be stalling under cultural pressure provides an interesting example.

Modernisation and the informal culture

The concept of culture change became very much a central feature of the fire services recent difficulties over modernisation. Given the initiative provided by Bain (2002) and a partial collapse of FBU resistance, there have been sweeping changes (ODPM 2003; ODPM 2006a; ODPM 2006b). But are some of the changes so unacceptable to firefighter’s core values that they have once again started to form up under the umbrella of the FBU to defend their service? If this suggestion is correct, then those planning to transform the fire service may already recognise the ability (once again) of the informal culture to resist².

It is not only the big issues where the impact of cultural resistance is being experienced. ‘Smaller’ issues such as the views of women and minority ethnic employees are once again emerging to find some in the workforce who believe they have been pushed too far and want to lash out. In our society it is more acceptable to be sexist than racist and as women are a visible target it may be easy to make them the scapegoat for changes to the shift system.

Against this background I am sitting on research that can stop any pretence that women are to blame for the current shift changes and this prompts my entering the debate³.

¹ The names of the actual correspondents have been changed.

² Without the union to act as spokesperson for the informal culture individual watches may well have the ability to hinder change - in this area it is well worth considering Rolph (2005).

³ Further information about the research can be found at <http://www.fitting-in.com>

Methodology

My research questionnaire asks 75 questions of women, and was distributed by mail and electronically, and then returned privately to me. It is difficult to ascertain how many women could have taken part, as statistics on women firefighters are sometimes inaccurate and always out of date. Nonetheless, most women firefighters had an opportunity to participate in this research. An early analysis of the 237 replies suggests that they provide a generalised view of women's experience. The age range of respondents is between 18 and 45, they have served from one month to 22 years and the sample includes 187 firefighters; 27 crew managers; 9 watch managers and 4 station managers (Baigent 2006).

The data has been processed, but analysis is being delayed because there has not been much interest in funding this research and therefore analysis takes place alongside my day job.

The analysis tool is Grounded Theory and this should be familiar to the fire service because it follows similar learning circles to those forming the basis for IPDS (Kolb, 1984). There is an acquisition of knowledge from the data, this is consolidated by thinking, theorised on and then written up. The subsequent writing then provides further data for continuing analysis. Whilst there will be interviews to improve the wider analysis in this research, what women are saying about the shift system needs little in the way of further explanation. The overwhelming response makes it possible to be more positive than normal about the accuracy of the result⁴.

Women's views on the current shift system

The question asked was "*Do you prefer the current 2-2-4 shift system*" and then women were asked to provide some qualitative comment⁵.

"*Figure One*" indicates that out of the 207 women who answered the question that 96.1% (199) of these replied "Yes," 0.9% (2) "Yes/No" and 2.6% (6) "No."

Figure One

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	199	87.7	96.1	96.1
	No	6	2.6	2.9	99.0
	Yes and No	2	.9	1.0	100.0
	Total	207	91.2	100.0	
Missing	System	20	8.8		
Total		227	100.0		

Often when talking about data it is good to provide a chart to assist in understanding. No chart is required to clarify this response; by anyone's standards the answer is unequivocally "Yes."

There were also qualitative responses from 153 women. Amongst these who 12 whose answers suggest that they may rethink their career if the shift system changed. Three replies indicate their mood:

⁴ In looking at further questions I shall also interview key witnesses and this will include some of the 99 women firefighters who have offered to speak to me and provided their contact details for this purpose.

⁵ One woman was quick to remind me the fire service does not work 2-2-4 - "*By the way its 2-2-3 as we work 9 hours of the first day off.*"

Velma: *Part of attraction to service, as childcare much easier on this system - if changed may have to re-think.*

Jayne: *What better family shift can you get (none). I will have to consider my future carefully if they change my shift pattern.*

Julie: *It's very family friendly I see my child a lot would consider or have to leave if it changed drastically.*

In contrast there were six women out of 153 who argued that the 2-2-4 shift system was not for them. Jeanetta and Jasmine represent their views:

Jeanetta: *Yes when children small - No now they are older - hence trying for promotion to go on 9-day fortnight.*

Jasmine: *Now on days and I love it - goodbye nights.*

Four women argue for more flexibility. Brenda and Barbara explain:

Brenda: *Although there needs to be flexibility and an introduction of part-time/job share opportunities for firefighters.*

Barbara: *I would like to see a range of shift patterns not one or two.*

This left 143 women who made a comment that supported the existing shift system and 58 of these were explicit about how childcare and family friendly the shift system was. Typical of these responses are:

Jill: *Childcare wise it would be dire if it should change. Very family friendly.*

Carol: *Child friendly, used it, why fix something that is not broken.*

Stella: *Gives me more time with my daughter than my previous job.*

Susie: *This is such a family friendly shift, so much time off is great as I wont need the baby minder more than 2 days a week.*

Conclusion

There is clear evidence to suggest that women do not support a change in the current shift system. There is also some evidence to suggest that women with children may reconsider their employment in response to change. As a consequence, it seems likely that changing the current shift system will work against rather than for women's employment and retention in the fire service. Perhaps we should let Michelle sum up how the overwhelming majority of women firefighters think:

Michelle: *I love the 2-2-4 system. At the present time its about the best thing in the job. It's the best system I've ever worked and it really annoys me when reasons given for changing it is to encourage women into the job because its nonsense.*

There is also a small voice against the current shift system, but anyone who has worked in the fire service knows that at times working shifts does create difficulties. When this happens there is already ample opportunity for firefighters to undertake day duties or other shift systems if they do not like the 2-2-4.

Given the groundswell of reaction against change, raises the question as to why there is an attempt to change something that clearly works for women? If Bain (and others that follow him) made their arguments based on the learning circles involved in IPDS, they would find almost no evidence to support an argument that women firefighters want a more family friendly shift system. It may even be realistic to ask (given that women are seen as primary carers), if women are being discriminated against if the shift system changes? But that is for lawyers to consider. I am however empowered to talk on cultural matters. And there is one point that needs to be brought out into the open.

It is clear from talking to male firefighters that women are being blamed for changes to the shift system. Some of these men think this way because they believe the argument made by those following Bain (2002). Other men, not so accepting of women, will need no excuse – women are to blame for changes to the shift system. These responses should have been anticipated by those sponsoring change. Could it be that institutional sexism has allowed some people to use women as the smoke screen for shift change and in so doing are serving two purposes?

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