

The Country Fire Authority as an “Extremely Gendered” Organisation

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ABSTRACT: Despite the importance of rural fire services to many rural, regional and urban fringe communities in Australia, there has been relatively little academic inquiry into the history of these organisations or their current operation. Most, if not all, of these services in Australia are militarised in a variety of ways and are conspicuously male dominated but there is little recognition, either in the existing literature or within the agencies themselves, of how these organisations are culturally masculinised. This paper focuses specifically on one example of these rural fire services, the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Victoria, and argues that it is imperative that the highly gendered nature of bushfire fighting be recognized. The concept of “extremely gendered” organisations is applied to the CFA in order to help better understand how the institution is masculinised and in what ways this may affect recruitment, organisational culture, and attempts at community engagement.

Emergency and disaster management agencies are often highlighted as having military-based histories and continuing to maintain militaristic, “command and control” styles of operation (Fordham & Ketteridge 1998). Similarly to the military, these organizations tend to be heavily male dominated and culturally masculinised; they tend to be associated with traditionally masculine attributes and tend to (either formally or informally) exclude women. Australia is certainly no exception to this. As Robertson (1998: 201) argues, emergency management in this country has been “[b]y tradition if not by right, a male prerogative...Emergency services organisations, so similar in nature and activity to the

military, were regarded as very much a male domain”. Indeed, this paper argues that the situation remains largely unchanged with regard to rural fire services, in this case, the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Victoria. Given the masculinised and militarised nature of emergency management and disaster response it is misleading to consider these areas through a gender-neutral lens; they must be understood as profoundly intertwined with particular constructions of masculinity.

The CFA as a militarised organisation

Fire-fighting and especially bushfire-fighting tend to fit at the more extreme end of militarised/masculinised emergency service organisations. Fire-fighting is “by any measure a male dominated occupation” and “[c]ulturally speaking, the work of fire-fighting is extremely masculinised” (Baigent 2005: 45). It is not only that fire-fighting is associated with traditional characteristics of masculinity, such as physical strength, mateship, courage and aggression (Maleta, 2009), but that the concept of fire-fighting is seen as so inextricably linked with men that “the notion of women fighting fires still does not fit into society’s picture of fire-fighting” (Baigent 2005: 60). This is certainly reflected in the low rates of women’s participation in the operational areas of rural fire agencies in Australia (Batty & Burchielli 2011; Beaston & McLennan 2005). Last year, for example, the CFA reported that women made up approximately 13 percent of their operational volunteers¹ and only three percent of their career fire-fighters (CFA 2012a).

In terms of militarisation, there are a number of links with bushfire-fighting in Australia. While there are only limited sources on the history and structure of the CFA, those that do exist mention a variety of military connections. The initial set-up of the small volunteer brigades in Victoria (which later formed part of the CFA), for example, tended to be based on

those in the US and the UK, which were themselves based on military (mostly Navy) organisation and discipline (Murray & White 1995; Schauble 2002). Moreover, the official formation of the CFA occurred at the end of WWII so “many of its early officers were drawn from the ranks of the demobbed military” (Schauble n.p.) and it was generally expected that men in positions of authority within the CFA would have military experience (Murray & White 1995). Furthermore, during the 1960s all CFA members were issued with a book titled *Tactics and Administration in the Field*. The book was co-written and edited by one of the most influential chairmen of the CFA, Dick Eason, and was based, in part, on his own military experience. Eason declared it to be the first attempt to “formalise firefighting on a military basis” (Murray & White 1995: 203). This military lineage is still particularly obvious in the designation of leading members of CFA brigades as “captains” and “lieutenants”.

But the militarisation of the CFA goes further than basic historical connections. It is also embedded in the cultural representations and language that surround bushfire-fighting. As John Schauble (now manager of policy and planning at the Fire Services Commissioner of Victoria) has written:

The language of fire in Australia is also the language of war. We "fight" fires and "battle" blazes. Bushfires have "fronts"... While the use of the military metaphor in firefighting is not unique to Australia, it is one perpetuated by politicians, the mass media and a general public searching for symbols of, and desperate for, evidence that "traditional" Australian values still exist somewhere. The thousands of volunteer firefighters across Australia...have become, in the eyes of some, the spiritual inheritors of the ANZAC legend (Schauble 2002 n.p.)

The military metaphor is also noted by Cox (1998: 132), with reference to coverage of the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983: “[i]mages of war and the ANZAC spirit are replete in media accounts of the fire, which has a front, and armies of volunteers, mostly young men, who

battle the flames in a ‘spirit of mateship and defiance’” (p. 132). Despite the strikingly militarised and masculinised nature of bushfire-fighting, its importance in constructing and recreating gender roles in Australia is “rarely discussed” and gender-blind policy still dominates (Eriksen et al. 2010: 2). The possible negative consequences of important institutions like the CFA being “extremely gendered” have not yet been taken into account.

“Extremely gendered” institutions

The concept of “extremely gendered” institutions comes from the work of Orna Sasson-Levy (2011). It is proposed as a way to enhance understandings of “how military organisations are gendered in structure, ideology and practice” (Sasson-Levy 2011: 392). Drawing on broader theories of gender and organisations, Sasson-Levy argues that the gendering of organisations occurs at three basic levels: structural (policies, divisions of labour, formal practices), cultural (pervasive images, symbols and ideologies about femininity and masculinity) and interactional (both individual identity and interpersonal relations). My concern here is primarily with the cultural gendering of the CFA and, to a lesser degree, issues of structure; that is how the CFA is both structured and represented as an institution founded on a type of militarised masculinity.

Employing the work of Lorber (2005), Sasson-Levy also notes that the notion of an “extremely gendered” institution implies that there are different levels of gendering evident in organisations and also varied possibilities for “degendering” them through institutional change (2011: 405). A “low” level indicates an organisation that is “amenable to reform”, a “medium” level requires “greater effort to modify the gender regime” in the organisation, and a “high” level dictates the “need for compensatory affirmative action”. She argues, however,

that the military constitutes a special, more extreme, case and that as such it will be exceptionally resistant to change.

There are several factors cited by Sasson-Levy in support of viewing the armed forces as a special case. These include: that many military organisations still have official policies or entrenched informal practices that prohibit women from service, or particular kinds of service (usually frontline); that militaries which do include women remain highly gender segregated; that the level of top-down control in the military is very high and so it is largely shielded from change within; and that, although it is discriminatory, the institution maintains its legitimacy.

Sasson-Levy focuses, in particular, on the last point regarding legitimacy to explain why the military may represent a unique case. She (2011: 407) suggests a number of reasons why the military can remain so heavily unequal in gender terms and yet still be seen as highly legitimate. These include: that the centrality of the male body in military organisations is not generally replicated in other institutions; that military rites of passage are “mainly physical”; and that the military is unusual in its central importance to the “hegemonic patriarchal order”, particularly through links between constructions of combat, masculinity, the state and citizenship. The military, she argues, therefore *has* to be constructed as a male institution in order to continue its existence. Jeffreys (2007) also argues that while there are other institutions that “require masculinity in order to function”, the military is an extreme case. She states: “Masculinity is central to the basic enterprise of the military in a way in which it is not for the fire service. Male soldiers are trained to kill on the basis that they are men and that women are the ‘other’ against whom they can recognise themselves” (2007: 18).

With the notable exception of being trained to kill, it seems that militarised services like the CFA might meet these criteria too. For instance, while there are no longer official policies banning women from operational or frontline roles in the CFA, the physical entrance requirements are quite prohibitive, and are often given as an explanation for the low rates of female operational staff, and even lower rates of female career fire-fighters (Batty & Burchielli 2011). The CFA also has a prominent sexual division of labour. It does include women within the organisation but the division of labour is still highly gender segregated. Women are substantially under-represented in frontline roles but they make up almost half of all support staff and about a third of all non-operational volunteers (CFA, 2012a). Individual brigades do experience some level of autonomy but the military “command-and-control” model is still evident in the CFA and the hierarchy of the institution seems especially unlikely to change. Generally, those with senior roles come from the operational areas of the service, which means women are, at this stage, extremely rare in the upper levels of authority (Batty & Burchielli 2011). Again, similar to the military, despite the noticeable lack of women in the CFA, and a stark gendered division of labour within the organisation, these issues are not perceived as challenges to its legitimacy. Indeed, concepts of masculinity and physical strength are still so core to the organisation that it is possible any serious change that incorporates women more successfully may actually challenge the existence of the organisation itself.

It can also quite reasonably be argued that, like the military, the male body is at the heart of the CFA. Although the institution performs more diverse functions than simply physically fighting bushfires, this is still the primary image of the organisation (Batty & Burchielli 2011) and the fire-fighters in such imagery are almost exclusively men. On a more material level, the organisation does not supply different uniforms for men and women in operational

roles (McLennan et al. 2007). This problem seems to stem from the “universal” body-shape sizing of the Australian Standard for fire industry protective clothing. This system, as McLennan and colleagues (2007: 67) note in their research on recruiting and retaining female volunteer fire-fighters in Australia, is “in reality, a *male* body-shape sizing system” which “sends a demoralising message to women volunteers” that they are either not welcome or not valued as equal members.²

It is impossible to argue that the CFA is as important to the formation of the state, nation and citizenship as the military, and therefore that it can claim the same kind of importance in the formation of the broader “hegemonic patriarchal order”. It can be more plausibly argued, however, that what the military performs on a national level, the CFA can be seen to do at a local level. The local CFA brigades are often seen as an important part of the community in rural and regional areas of Victoria and those who volunteer, particularly in operational roles, are afforded significant respect (Murray & White 1995). Fighting bushfires is often seen as heroic and selfless; that officers are risking their lives to save the community. In addition, bushfire-fighting conforms to dominant constructions of rural masculinity, including notions of physical strength, risk-taking and a “frontier mentality”, or the setting of “man against nature” (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013a). Thus, the frontline CFA members – those who physically fight the fires – simultaneously fulfil concepts of hegemonic masculinity and the “good citizen” (Sasson-Levy 2011), elevated above those who do not. This therefore helps to reinforce the more general hierarchy of men as fighters and protectors and women as lesser citizens in need of protection.

Finally, although CFA does not have any need to train its frontline fighters to kill, it does require them to risk their lives. This, coupled with war language that sees fighting fires become battling an enemy (Shauble 2002), offers notable parallels with the armed forces.

Furthermore, the “brave boys” of the CFA can indeed be seen as set in opposition to women as “the other” in feminised roles. To be a fire-fighter is to be a man (Baigent 2005) and, given that gender is relational, this is set going to be set in opposition to constructs of femininity. In the military this opposition to, and othering of, femininity is highlighted in significant levels of sexual harassment, intimidation and unequal treatment of women (Sasson-Levy 2011). Again, these have been documented as issues for the limited numbers of women in operational roles in the CFA. Batty and Burchielli (2011) describe the environment for women in the CFA as “hostile”. Participants in their study described being singled out as women and suffering harassment in a variety of forms, including one particularly memorable incident of “being yelled at on the fire-ground by male fire-fighters on a passing truck to ‘show us your tits’” (2011: 317).

Consequences and conclusions

This brief overview suggests there is some evidence to support understanding the CFA, and possibly other rural fire services, as “extremely gendered” organisations. Utilizing this understanding may provide greater insight into how these organisations operate and why they have trouble recruiting and retaining female staff. However, it may provide an even more important background to understanding bushfire policy, fire agency advice to civilians and resistance to change.

Fire agencies like the CFA are responsible for more than frontline firefighting, they are also increasingly responsible for warnings, community education and prevention measures. It is possible, therefore, that the militarised and masculinised nature at the core of rural fire services may affect broader approaches to bushfire safety. There are, for example, a handful of community engagement programs offered by rural fire services specifically for women.

With names like “Fiery Women” and “Fired-Up Females”, these programs aim to promote a “stay and defend” approach to bushfire (as opposed to evacuation). Some of these programs emanate from a belief that women are ill-educated about bushfire compared to men (Tyler & Fairbrother 2013b), while others take the approach that women’s behaviour is more easily changed (RFS 2013). They continue to push a masculinised “fight” approach to bushfire at the cost of greater preparation for early evacuation, which is often culturally understood as “weak” (Griffiths, 2012).

The persistence in pushing a traditionally male norm of staying to defend is quite extraordinary given that civilian men die at much higher rates than women in Australian bushfires – possibly as a result of a higher preference for staying to defend a property (Tyler & Fairbrother 2013b) – and that the stay and defend model has been significantly challenged since the Black Saturday fires of 2009. Such reluctance on the part of the agencies to alter an existing approach may, in part, be explained by the “extremely gendered” nature of the rural fire services and the attachment to militarised and masculinised understandings of bushfire response. If the “extremely gendered” nature of agencies like the CFA continues to be ignored, it may prevent more varied, and ultimately less risky, approaches to bushfire response from being adopted, or even openly discussed, in the future.

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¹ Interestingly, this is slightly lower than the percentage (13.8) of women listed as permanent Australian Defence force personnel (ADF 2012).

² Although there has been a recent attempt by the CFA to deliver more appropriate personal protective clothing (PPC) for women volunteers (CFA, 2012b), the PPC in question does not appear to be specially designed for women, but rather does not require the use of braces and has a drawstring instead, therefore allowing women to more easily relieve themselves when on active duty.