

Article

Frametown: Addressing Declining Volunteerism through Empowering Female Engagement

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Abstract: The goal of this research is to identify the drivers that have resulted in an exceptionally high level of female engagement in the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department (FVFD) in the rural community of Frametown, West Virginia. Females comprise only 11% of the volunteer fire service in the US, however, they comprise approximately 60% of the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department, including the Chief, President, and Secretary. Structured interviews were used to investigate factors that have led to recruitment and retention of female volunteers. Interviews were conducted with 24 of the department's 29 members with representation from female ($n = 14$) and male members ($n = 10$). Male members were included in the study to gain meaningful information from both gender perspectives as their story-telling added context to the evolution and current organizational culture of the department. Themes from the interviews included organic growth of the department, a sense of service to the community, a mentoring family environment, a heightened level of compassion as a value women bring to the fire department, and gender inclusiveness within the department as key recruitment and retention factors. The results of this study may provide insight into how other volunteer fire departments can increase female volunteers, particularly in an age of declining volunteerism.

Keywords: women in the Fire Service; female Firefighters; volunteer Fire Service; volunteerism; rural Firefighting

1. Introduction

Volunteer fire departments across the United States are challenged with recruiting and retaining members to effectively protect communities in which they are tasked to serve [1]. The volunteer fire service is responsible for protecting the majority of the geographic U.S. with 65% of all firefighters being volunteer. These departments engage in activities that include structural firefighting, vehicle extrication of victims in automobile accidents, suppressing brush fires, and emergency medical calls. During response activities members might engage with other public service organizations, to include other fire departments, police departments, and ambulance services.

There are currently 745,000 volunteer firefighters, with the most current year's data, 2018, showing the first year of an increase in volunteerism in recent years. Recruitment and retention of volunteer fire department members is particularly problematic among rural communities [2,3]. The average age of volunteer firefighters has been on the rise due to the lack of being able to recruit and retain new and younger volunteers [4,5].

Residents of the Appalachian Region are particularly vulnerable to the crisis of recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters. The economic impact of the exodus of the coal industry has resulted in residents moving out of the area to find gainful employment. Braxton County, West Virginia is specifically designated as a distressed area by the Appalachian Regional Commission [6].

Volunteer fire departments are self-organized in compliance with state regulations. Training is based on state standards and applies to various levels of responsibility and rank within a department. Funding to sustain operations is typically comprised of a combination of governmental funding and independent fundraising activities.

The volunteer fire service has traditionally been male-dominated. Women only account for approximately 11% of all volunteer firefighters in the U.S. [7]. One barrier to women becoming engaged in the fire service is the need to overcome a culture of masculinity [8]. They must navigate a predominantly masculine culture and determine how they can successfully integrate into the organization. The overtly masculine culture is evidenced in news media in situations such as coverage of the events of 9/11 when the male stereotype eclipsed the contributions of women in the fire service [9].

Male-dominated cultures can negatively evolve to the point where women are specifically not welcome in the department [10,11]. An unwelcoming environment creates a barrier for women to consider engaging in the volunteer fire service. They would have to knowingly enter a hostile environment that could result in disparagement and harassment [12].

Physical capabilities of women can be a barrier, whether real or perceived [13]. Women might be perceived as weaker than their male counterparts, thus making them inferior as a firefighter candidate. Firefighting and other emergency response activities are physically rigorous and women must overcome the stereotype that they are naturally incapable of accomplishing required physical tasks.

Due to most volunteer fire departments existing in rural areas, another barrier for women to engage in the volunteer service is existing multiple responsibilities that require time investment [14]. Becoming a volunteer firefighter requires a great investment of time in activities such as training, emergency response, attending departmental meetings, and work to maintain the physical property of the fire station.

Despite national statistics and known gender barriers, the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department in Braxton County, West Virginia is a unique case in that 60% of its membership is female. An investigation of this department can help to identify factors that could assist in the recruitment and retention of women into the volunteer fire service.

One research question guided the investigation of the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department. That question was:

What factors have led to such a high level of female engagement in the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Context of the Study

This study took place within the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department in Frametown, West Virginia. Frametown is a rural community in Braxton County and is 56 miles northeast of Charleston, the capitol city of West Virginia. Frametown is comprised of approximately 1400 citizens, 500 households, one elementary school, and a number of small businesses.

The Frametown Volunteer Fire Department was first formed in 1973. The original fire station was a renovated school house at the corner of Route 4 and Wilsie Road in Frametown. The department later relocated to its current property at 485 Wilsie Road where the fire station was first built in 1982. The department currently operates in a physical fire station that was rebuilt in 1993 and includes four apparatus bays, a kitchen, an administrative office, and a training room. Response apparatus includes two fire trucks and one rescue truck. Membership includes 7 officers, 15 firefighters, and 7 support members. Support members engage in a spectrum of operational activities to include work in response scene safe zones, operational tasks at the fire station, and fund raising.

2.2. Selection of Participants

Participants in this research were purposefully selected in that they were current members of the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department. In describing purposeful sampling Creswell stated:

This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. [15]

Within the scope of this research, members of all categories within the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department “purposefully inform” us about issues related to female engagement in the department. Male and female members ranging from the department’s lone Junior Firefighter to support members in their 70’s were interviewed. Structured video recorded interviews were accomplished among 24 of the department’s 29 members (14 women and 10 men). Time and schedule restrictions limited the ability to interview additional members of the department. Only one male and one female member specifically declined to be interviewed. One female member declined to be video recorded, but agreed to an audio recorded interview.

The goal of this research was to determine the factors that have led to such a high degree of female engagement in the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department. Themes that emerged from the interviews can help place into perspective the success of this department. Table 1 presents interviews that were accomplished among 83% of the members of Frametown with time and availability preventing the interview of additional members:

Table 1. Participants Interviewed.

Position	Female	Male	Not Interviewed
Officers	1	5	1 officer could not be scheduled
Firefighters/EMTs	8	3	1 female and 1 male could not be scheduled; 1 female and 1 male declined
Support Members	5	2	

2.3. Data Collection

Qualitative research was utilized through the use of video recorded formal semi-structured interviews. Specific questions were asked of each participant while latitude was given to allow freedom to explore issues of female engagement and retention in the volunteer fire service. This is referred to as a “formal semi-structured interview” [15].

Interviews were video recorded due to the potential to develop a mini-documentary, which has occurred due to the quality of information obtained through participant responses. The primary ethical consideration of such a methodology was the need to gain approval to use each participant’s name and likeness. The approval was included in the informed consent document as approved by the Eastern Kentucky University IRB.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through the identification of themes present in participant responses to interview questions. Questions were designed to elicit the thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of department members. Interview responses were transcribed utilizing the YouTube transcription function and were fully edited in Microsoft Word to ensure grammar and punctuation were accurate according to what was stated in video recorded interview question responses. Data were extracted and coded from the interviews by identifying keywords utilized in participant responses to structured and follow-up interview questions. Data coding involves the process of breaking down the responses in the interview by analyzing the transcript in manageable pieces and then assigning each piece “a label that is cognitively relevant for the study” [16]. Once the data were broken down into their lowest form through coding, the next step was to separate data that were similar in nature into themes.

3. Results

Analyzing the data in participant responses resulted in the identification of five themes in response to the research question, “What factors have led to such a high level of female engagement in the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department?” Following is a presentation of each theme.

3.1. Organic Growth of the Department

Participants were asked to identify how they initially came into contact with the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department, which was the first step in eventually making the decision to join as a member. Among all participant responses, only three indicated they proactively reached out to the department. One male relocated to Frametown from New Jersey and visited the station to inquire about membership due to his prior volunteer firefighting experience. One female independently volunteered to help paint the interior of the fire station and was then recruited. A second female independently decided to join as a junior firefighter while in high school. All other respondents indicated they had a personal connection with a member in the department and those individuals encouraged them to join. Table 2 presents the avenues through which members were recruited or came into contact with the department.

Table 2. Point of Recruitment or First Contact.

Avenue	Female	Male
Knew Someone	4	7
Family Member in FVFD	7	1
Proactively Inquired	2	1
Original Member		1

3.2. Sense of Community

When asked what drew them to volunteer their time in the fire department, most women referred to their desire to “help” and/or “serve” the community and/or department. All female participants included a sense of community in their interview responses. They all expressed a true desire to help their fellow citizens in Frametown and throughout Braxton County. Their male counterparts responded similarly. Table 3 presents reasons why members joined the department:

Table 3. Reason to Join.

Reason	Female	Male
	7 Respondents	4 Respondents
“Help”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5—“community” • 1—“community” and “department” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2—“community” • 1—“department”
	5 Respondents	6 Respondents
“Serve”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3—“community” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6—“community”

3.3. Mentoring Family Environment

Though mentoring might be one of the most typical words applied to the dynamic at Frametown, the word does not fully capture the essence of what is occurring in this organization among women and men. One of the key retention factors expressed by all women was the degree to which they have been welcomed into the organization and allowed to develop to the level of their potential and desire. Beyond the concept of mentoring, they described the fire department as a “family”. The word “family” routinely surfaced in interviews among both women and men to describe the level of connectedness

among all members of the department and the inclusive community that has been created. Table 4 presents reasons why members remain in the department:

Table 4. Reasons Why Members Remain.

Reason	Female	Male
“Serve”	2 • 2—“community”	3 • 2—“community” • 1—need for volunteers
“Help”	4 • 3—“community”	2 • 2—“community”
“Family” Environment	6	3

The concept of “family” is taken to a deeper level at Frametown where the members are truly interested in the development and success of all others. The concept of family was presented in two respects, the first being that actual family relationships exist within the department. Among those interviewed, such family relationships include:

- two sisters;
- two pairs of husbands and wives;
- three generations of women.

Five women and two males indicated they became a member of the fire department due to a family member being a member of the department. One male joined due to seeing how the fire department managed a car accident in which his sister suffered fatal injuries.

The relational family dynamic within Frametown has fostered the second respect of family, that being a culture in which all members feel part of the departmental family. The family dynamic among the membership of Frametown has been sensed early by those who wish to join as one male member said:

The people that are here are a close-knit group of people and the comradery of the people have really made me want to become a member and stay here and join them in their efforts here.

He characterized the very essence of the family environment that has been created at Frametown. Women members were more specific regarding the mentoring family environment that first attracted them and has caused them to remain with the department. For example, one female firefighter said:

I think we [women] make it [the department] more family, more family oriented.

A second female firefighter said:

We learn from each other. Each one of us has different situations happen to us because we are women and our women’s perspectives. So, they just pass it down the line, their perspectives, to help each other learn from different situations. So, it is basically learning situations and they just help each other learn, is what we do.

A third female firefighter said:

Being around other women, you can tell each other what you have learned and be excited about it and then you pass it on to somebody else and it just brings that part out of you that you did not even know was there.

A fourth female firefighter said:

I consider this place like a family and I have a love for each and every person that’s here. We know everyone. We are a close fire department.

Males were also very specific regarding the mentoring family dynamic within the culture of Frametown. One male said:

Everyone here is my family . . .

He went on to describe how women encourage each other and work with members of the department in the event they do not pass a certain training module until they do pass it. Another male indicated the degree to which the concept of family extends beyond the walls of the fire department:

We call us a family. We all know each other. When one of us calls and says, ‘something is not working at my house’, you go over and help them. It is not just a fire department, we are a family. We take care of each other.

Beyond the tight bonding that is traditional within the fire service, Frametown has developed an even greater level of culture where members are taken in as part of a family and developed to their fullest potential based on areas in which they would like to serve the department and the community.

3.4. Compassion

Both men and women were asked what value women bring to the fire service. A theme that emerged was the concept of compassion. Both men and women spoke to the degree to which they believed women in the department are able to demonstrate compassion on a more agile level than their male counterparts. The ability for men to show compassion was not dismissed, but both genders clearly communicated that they each believed women could more effectively demonstrate compassion to victims on the scene of an incident. The demonstration of compassion was seen as having great value due to the ability to calm victims in a moment of crisis. One male spoke to the superior ability of women in the department to “talk down” victims on the scenes of car accidents.

Women did not discount the ability for men to be compassionate, but simply saw women as one female stated:

A little more compassionate than men.

Female participants specifically spoke to the fire department as being a conduit through which they can exercise compassion. For example, one female shared a story of when the women took the children of a car accident victim to get something to eat while the parent was being treated at a hospital. Another female shared the story of an incident when the department was dispatched to a medical emergency of an elderly victim at a personal residence. She said:

The EMS [Emergency Medical Services] guy said, ‘Does she have a DNR [Do Not Resuscitate]?’ and they said ‘yes’, so we had to stop. So, I just got in bed with her and held her.

Table 5 presents the degree to which compassion serves as a reason to remain engaged in the department:

Table 5. Compassion as a Retention Factor.

Avenue	Female	Male
Create a welcoming environment	1	1
Compassionate	6	3
Address need of members	0	3
Determination	1	2
Support	1	0

3.5. Gender Inclusiveness

Participants were asked questions from a number of perspectives in an effort to assess the degree to which gender was an issue in the department. Due to volunteer fire departments needing to

interact with outside agencies during emergency response, such as state and county police, other fire departments, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS), members were asked if they had experienced issues during response activities due to a having a large volume of female responders. Table 6 provides information that substantiates few issues exist in interacting with outside agencies:

Table 6. Challenges Interacting with Outside Agencies.

Challenges	Female	Male
None	12 (one reference to physical limitations)	8
Other	Other volunteer fire department member dismissed command orders from Frametown’s female Chief; DMV worker balked at issuing fire department automobile tag with paperwork signed by the female Chief (worker assumed she was not the Chief due to being female)	Random negative remarks, but outside responders have grown to accept it

Focusing inwardly to the department, participants were asked if any issues exist within the department due to the large volume of women among its membership. Table 7 presents responses that indicate few issues exist:

Table 7. Issues Due to Large Female Engagement.

Issues	Female	Male
None	12 (one reference to physical limitations)	9
Other	Physical limitations; personal romantic relationships	

The concept of “normal” was specifically mentioned in two interview responses. In relation to the gender-inclusive culture of Frametown, one female said:

It is not normal, but it is our normal.

When encouraging females to engage in the volunteer fire service, one male said:

What’s your normal is not someone else’s normal.

This statement indicates the degree to which Frametown has established a gender-inclusive environment to which many organizations aspire.

Of interest was female responses to questions that expressly focused on gender division within the fire service. For example, the “Fireman’s Prayer” appeared in two locations in the Frametown fire station. Also, the state association to which Frametown volunteer firefighters can become members is titled the “West Virginia Firemen’s Association”. No female participants expressed any concern over these gender-biased labels. Rather, they looked beyond the labels and simply saw themselves as being included within the intent of both the “Fireman’s Prayer” and the “West Virginia Firemen’s Association”. One female said:

We [women] do not have to have our name in a prayer. We do it because we care.

Members in the department are not assessed based on gender, but are simply assessed on desire and ability. Regardless of gender, the department seeks to effectively prepare members so they can serve in desired areas based on legal training requirements. Every male and every female interview made comments regarding gender inclusion within Frametown. Table 8 presents responses women in the department made regarding gender inclusiveness:

Table 8. Female Firefighter Responses Related to Gender Inclusiveness.

Female	Response
Firefighter 1	I do not think females feel they have to prove their selves. It is welcoming to see other females, so they do not feel like they have to prove their selves because we are already here. The men do not see any difference.
Firefighter 2	The county pretty well accepts us.
Firefighter 3	I am a firefighter. The people here respect one another.
Firefighter 4	When asked about the unique value women bring to the fire service a member responded, “I do not know an answer to that because we are all here and we all do the same thing.”
Firefighter 5	I think we are willing and we are strong and we know we can do this stuff and we can do whatever we put our minds to.
Firefighter 6	I just see us as anybody else.
Firefighter 7	As far as I can remember, we were all treated as equals.

Men in the department have also demonstrated a perspective of gender inclusiveness. Table 9 presents male responses to interview questions related to gender inclusiveness:

Table 9. Male Firefighter Responses Related to Gender Inclusiveness.

Female	Response
Firefighter 1	I think they are created the same as anybody else here. They are trained and have to do the same training that a man has to do. If they pass, they are equal to us.
Firefighter 2	This is just the way it is. The way it is.
Firefighter 3	We have got some hard workers. And they do whatever a man can do, as far as fighting fire or whatever.
Firefighter 4	I do not see a disadvantage. At first I did, I seen all kinds of disadvantages. But once they got here and we got to working together, there are no disadvantages. They can do what we can do. That is just the bottom line.
Firefighter 5	Maybe some of the guys [in other responding departments] think, ‘They are a woman. They are not going to be able to do much.’ I can tell you they can.
Firefighter 6	They [other responding departments or members of the community] may feel that women may not be able to respond to calls quite as well as men, when actually in practice, women get the exact same training and they have to be put through the same physical efforts that men do. So, in actuality, there is no real difference whether a woman or a man is responding to a call.
Firefighter 7	One of the gender stereotypes is sexism and I do not see it here in the fire department and that was very surprising to see that women are treated equally here.

The gender inclusiveness of Frametown has spread to other organizations with whom they interact, to include the fire department that was created in the early 1990’s as a result of a separation from Frametown in protest to a large number of women gaining membership in the department. One female said:

The guys that split to create the new department now treat me like normal.

Another female supported the positive relationship when she said:

There are no hard feelings anywhere. We are all working together.

In relation to responding with other fire departments, one female member said there might be a moment of hesitation by members of the other departments, but once emergency response operations commence, she said the other departmental members tend to respond by saying:

Oh yeah, they do know what they are doing and it is alright.

A female firefighter summed up the value of the gender-inclusive culture created at Frametown. In looking to the future to inspire youth of today, she said:

I think it is a good example for young kids, not just girls, not just boys, but young children to see men and women working, and working well together, setting a good example.

The story of Frametown and the findings presented here should help to address this critical issue in the volunteer fire service. Engaging women in the volunteer fire service can provide a substantial solution to the decline experienced in the U.S. and abroad.

4. Discussion

Freire discussed power dynamics in the context of oppression. He presented a detailed analysis and applicability of issues associated with oppressors (those who hold power) and the oppressed (those who are subject to power) [17]. Though Freire's work was focused on the poor in Brazil, similar dynamics of female oppression in the fire service have existed for decades. Chetkovich said:

... autonomous choice is possible under circumstances of oppression when it reflects a balanced understanding: one that avoids both the distortion of the oppressor's view and the constraints of the victim's response." [18]

The Frametown Volunteer Fire Department once operated under a system of oppression where women were not valued as equal and were not wanted. The volume of women continued to grow causing a rift in the department that was the impetus for its current culture of gender inclusiveness with a "balanced understanding" rather than oppression.

The Frametown Volunteer Fire Department appears to be a microcosm of much of what the United States is striving to achieve related to one aspect of the gender dialogue; that being the ability to create an environment where gender inclusiveness is achieved with a focus on individual development and performance rather than biological labels. In the early phase of interviewing participants, it was interesting to note the lack of response when questions were asked regarding gender. The realization soon surfaced that this was a minor finding in and of itself. It was not that participants were hesitant to speak to issues of gender within their fire department, but that gender issues are unimportant.

In a period of declining volunteerism, the story of Frametown offers an opportunity to gain insight into how women have become an integral part of fire department operations. Frametown has not been immune to the problem of declining volunteerism. A male firefighter said:

We do not have a lot of new people coming and stepping up. New volunteers are rare.

However, Frametown has become a model that can be used as a potential point of learning and organizational development for many volunteer fire departments. Achieving a high level of success related to gender inclusiveness involved men who were willing to consider desire and ability as a sole measurements for performance and women who simply desired to do more. If one were to erase gender from the equation, the social and operational environment in the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department would be what anyone could hope for with respect to the concept of inclusion: those who desire to do more and those who welcome their effort into the fold and support them without reservation.

In an effort to stem the decline in the volunteer fire service, departments could examine the success of Frametown and engage women who have highly needed skills and can be recruited into the volunteer fire service. One element that can be applied is Frametown's success in growing their department and developing their organizational culture organically rather than through structured recruitment activities or initiatives. Members have utilized familial and friendship contacts to share their excitement for the volunteer fire service, which has resulted in an extended familial culture in the department.

Frametown's primarily organic growth through individually recruiting family members and friends in the community stands in contrast to recruitment initiatives that are promoted to recruit volunteers. In addressing the status quo of membership development, Maltbie states:

The process of bringing members into a first-aid squad or a fire department is typically simple and reactive—an individual decides to join. Then, the organization makes contact, conducts an interview, performs a background check, and decides to admit. [19]

He then addresses flawed assumptions in the recruiting process, which are “people know what we do”, “people know how to help”, and “people know they have time to volunteer”. These assumptions are followed by communications that should occur within the construct of a designed recruitment plan. Chapman discusses the use of “public education and open houses” as tools to recruit volunteer firefighters [20]. Pillsworth encourages fire departments to absorb the cost of paid time off for required firefighter training so members will not have to utilize personal vacation time to attend training sessions [21]. The State of Pennsylvania is in a period of crisis due to the low volume of volunteer fire firefighters, resulting in the state issuing a report encouraging the use of incentives to recruit volunteers [22]. However, none of these intricate and costly recommendations are consistent with the membership at Frametown where members simply utilize existing relationships to recruit new members into the department. These findings are consistent with prior, similar studies demonstrating the effectiveness of organic, contact-based growth [10,23].

Identifying individuals with a sense of community is a second element that could be addressed. Women who join Frametown tend to do so because it provides an avenue through which they can serve their community. Due to the rural environment in which Frametown exists, a unique dynamic is that a high likelihood exists of a member of the department knowing a victim to whom they are responding as a friend, family member, or acquaintance. One female firefighter said:

We [female members] are not out to change the world, we just want to better our community.

Another female firefighter said:

I think we are all here for the same reasons. To save lives and help people and we know each other and we know most of the people in the community and we have a strong love for each other.

Five female firefighters specifically referenced the fact that they had grown up in the area, in addition to five male firefighters also stating they had grown up in Braxton County. One of these women said:

I love my county.

Such a statement indicates the degree to which she was committed to the geographic area.

This dynamic was present in the study of rural firefighting communities in Australia in that women are motivated to join due to:

... community-based motives, including the desire to protect personal assets, those of family and friends ... [14]

Similarly, Ainsworth, Batty, and Burchielli found women in Australia joined to protect:

... real people with a name on the gate ... a trampoline and a little kid's slide. [8]

Greene and Hendershot identified in a study of South Carolina volunteer firefighters that values, enhancement, and understanding were areas that promoted recruitment and retention [3]. The concept of “values” addressed the desire of one to be concerned with the wellbeing of others.

Perrott and Blenkarn found that women tend to join the volunteer fire service for altruistic reasons. They usually have a deep concern for those they will serve and that motivation tends to be a primary factor in the paradigm through which they view their work in the volunteer fire service [24].

Cultural development within the fire department is a third element for volunteer fire departments to consider. Rather than pandering to the stereotypical masculine “brotherhood”, volunteer fire departments can assess their culture and determine the degree to which gender-inclusive familial attributes exist.

Stereotypically, the fire service is known for its bond among firefighters. The environment that exists in Frametown is unique in relation to findings in other studies. The events of 9/11 resurrected the masculine image of the firefighter along with the term “brotherhood” causing women in emergency services to become invisible in the media. Brenda Berkman became a prominent figure in fighting for female inclusion in the Fire Department of New York (FDNY). She played a pivotal role by filing a law suit against the FDNY to adjust its physical test requirements that excluded women from being able to pass. As a responder during 9/11, she observed the presence and impact of numerous female first responders, though the media image regressed to the masculine stereotype of FDNY firefighters and the associated “brotherhood” [25].

Dowler identified a similar dynamic:

Although there were female heroes at Ground Zero, as mentioned earlier by the acceptable heroine of this conflict seems to be the white, heterosexual, Christian mothers who have been left without husbands. [9]

Media coverage, stereotypes that were fostered, and national perception allowed female emergency responders during 9/11 to fade into the background.

Woodfield found women struggled to achieve recognition in the masculine culture of the fire service:

Participants further identified the existence of a female prototype, counterposed to the male firefighter prototype, against which they were ‘struggling, mostly in silence’. [13]

Such a picture stands in stark contrast to the family environment created in Frametown where women are accepted and encouraged to grow in skill and engagement in the department.

Chetkovich found that the events of 9/11 “lionized” the masculine stereotype of firefighters. She found that such behavior reverted to masculine terms surfacing, such as “firemen” rather than the gender-neutral term “firefighter”. Similarly, in relation to Frametown, women are exposed to terminology such as the “West Virginia Firemen’s Association” and the “Firemen’s Prayer” (which is posted in two areas within the fire station). Yet, when specifically asked about these clearly masculine terms, women tended to not be concerned about the gender focus of the words and considered themselves as being included. Chetkovich states:

Collective action through public policy and organized practice must promote women’s agency in part by transforming communities (including organizations) in a way that makes them more inclusive. [18]

Women at Frametown indicate they are unconcerned about masculine terminology and are included in organizational operations of the department. The Chief, President, and Secretary are all female in addition to approximately 60% of its overall membership being female.

Volunteer fire departments can establish an environment that fosters the ability for members to demonstrate compassion as a fourth element that can contribute to membership growth. Though women showing compassion can be considered a gender stereotype, it is not a harmful one as evident at Frametown in addition to being manifested among female firefighters in Australia [8].

An outgrowth in the interviews associated with the emotional ability to demonstrate compassion was that such responses were not terminated once the situation at an emergency response scene was resolved. Women reported allowing themselves to experience physical emotional responses following an incident, such as shedding tears, whereas men tended to report internalizing such emotions. Women saw their ability to demonstrate emotions as a benefit in that they could process issues at the time of the event and reach a point of mental and emotional resolution.

Ainsworth, Batty, and Burchielli identified a similar finding in their study under the label of “preferred femininity” that included the “ethics of care” [8]. Women recognized their ability to provide compassion and care for victims as something unique in comparison to their male counterparts:

Women are much better when say you get to a house fire and there is a woman or children all upset . . . We are just able to offer support . . . A man would have no idea let alone even think about doing that.

A male Frametown officer referred to women as simply being better than men when interacting with female and child victims on scenes. Though such characterization could be interpreted as gender-specific, men were not discounted in their ability to demonstrate compassion and the ability for women to do so at a greater level was expressed as a strength.

Creating a gender-inclusive environment is the final element volunteer fire departments could address. Rather than relying on the male stereotype of the firefighter, volunteer departments can create an environment that solely considers desire and ability rather than gender. Females bring greatly needed skill sets to emergency response operations and can navigate required training, similar to their male counterparts.

Eriksen investigated gender issues in rural firefighting in Australia, a geographic environment similar to that of Frametown. Her focus was on identifying elements of gender-balanced and gender-sensitive environments. She found:

The benefits of hands-on experience and practice, the strength of networks and the imperative of learning environments” to foster an environment that productively incorporates both males and females. [10]

The finding of “supportive learning environments” echo the words of Frametown participants where women are seen as “fellow firefighters” and have to navigate the same training as men.

Beatson and McLennan explored the value of engaging women in correcting the decline in Australia’s volunteer fire service. They identified challenges in recruitment (public perception, competing commitments, and recruitment practices), retention (perceived competence and sexual harassment) and the physical environment (adequate protective gear and fire department facilities) [11]. Of these three primary areas of challenge, Frametown appears to only share the challenges of recruitment, as do many volunteer fire departments across the country that struggle to increase membership. However, challenges of retention and facilities did not appear in participant interviews. Beatson and McLennan made a prophetic statement in their research that Frametown has experienced:

A predominantly male and aging volunteer membership is likely to lead to reduced volunteer fire fighter numbers in the future. Research aimed at enhancing the recruitment and retention of women volunteers is thus essential.

In the words of one long term female member:

We are not out to change the world. We just want to make an impact on our community.

These women have accomplished that which a great deal of the mainstream has aspired to in relation to gender inclusiveness. Incremental change over a period of years has assisted this fire department to reach a pinnacle level of gender inclusiveness, one in which gender does not appear to be a consideration in fire department member recruitment and performance. This was evidenced at the close of an interview with a longtime male member of the department. After completing the interview, in conversation with the participant, a videographer recording all of the interviews made the comment:

We are in the age of women empowerment.

The male firefighter, slightly laughing, said:

No we are not. You should have been in it 20 years ago.

He was making reference to the catalyst in the mid 1990's that resulted in Frametown's current level of gender inclusiveness today. The empowerment of women occurred at Frametown in the mid 1990's and is of little concern today due to their current level of gender inclusiveness.

Gender appears to play little role in fire department membership and operations at Frametown. Interviews among both men and women supported the paradigm of forgetting one's biological differences in favor of accomplishing the goals of the organization as a whole. Rather than considering a gender gap, the Frametown Volunteer Fire Department is an example of gender synergy. Men and women work alongside each other in incredibly stressful environments and depend on what each member can bring to the operational scene to most successfully accomplish emergency response operations as well as day-to-day activities that must be carried out in order for the department to function.

All women in the department felt they were contributing their abilities to the success of the department, absent of any concerns of gender stereotype, whether such abilities complied with gender stereotypes (in the case of female support members cooking to support fund raising to address 41% of the department's annual operating budget) or in emergency response scene operations. Gender differences, though stereotypical, are simply seen as being acceptable. In the case of Frametown, the issue goes beyond gender as the members of the department simply assess ability and desire to contribute to the success of the organization, rather than conform to stereotypes based on gender. Such a paradigm could be what has helped the department to arrive at an organizational culture to which much of our society aspires—a world in which absolute desire and ability supersedes compliance or non-compliance with gender stereotypes.

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