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Speaking out - female firefighters want parity

By Liz Minchin
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They don't want special treatment, they just want to fight fires. And so, for the first time, most of Melbourne's 14 female firefighters are speaking out against what they call a "social experiment" to favour women recruits.

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While keen to see more women join their ranks, they argue that positive discrimination - such as the Metropolitan Fire Brigade's recent attempt to give female applicants extra training to pass their physical - is unfair and unnecessary.

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"If you treat women applicants like they're second-rate and need extra help, it just makes it easier for people to say we're not up to the job," said Gena Kenny. "None of us are huge Amazon women, yet we passed the same physical as the men. All we want is consistency."

MFB management has defended its attempt to redress its huge gender imbalance - only 14 female firefighters work next to more than 1500 male colleagues. Deputy chief fire officer Keith Adamson said he was "willing to do whatever we have to do to get more women in the job, although we won't lower standards".

"We're in a difficult position," Mr Adamson said. "On the one hand the government and people from the equal opportunity field expect us to do something about this (imbalance), but when you do anything, you cop it internally."

At a recent first MFB forum for female firefighters the women suggested the brigade broaden its male image and boost the numbers of female recruits by sending women firefighters to schools, universities, TAFEs and sports clubs.

But then the new recruiting strategy was announced: women who failed their physical test would be given extra training and another chance to pass.

After the United Firefighters Union complained, the MFB opened the training sessions to men also, but the 11 women firefighters who spoke to The Age - two could not be contacted and one declined to comment - said they were sick of being "seen and not heard".

"They're quite happy to trot females out when there is a photo opportunity, yet when they finally ask us what we think about the job, they don't pay any attention to what we say," Mac Hanson said. It's a charge strongly denied by Mr Adamson: "There is no way we don't want to hear what they have to say."

Former London firefighter Michelle McKay said she had seen well-intentioned policies backfire before. "The guys here are fine," she said. "They treat you at face value, but that's being put at risk. When positive discrimination was introduced in London, the men became resentful of the opportunities given to women, and rightly so."

Angry, but still committed, the women consider they have the best job in the world.

"Becoming a firefighter takes serious running, serious weight training and serious chocolate denial," Sharon Scott said. "But it's worth it."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/07/07/1057430137415.html>