

## FEMALE FIRE-FIGHTERS FACE DISCRIMINATION FOR BREACHING MALE BASTION



Female firefighters are the target of harassment and discrimination and despite federal laws that prohibit it, it continues rampant and unbridled. "It is 2012, but we still have a lot of issues out there," said Jeanne Pashelek, president of the International Association of Women in Fire and Emergency Services. "It ranges from verbal abuse to physical assault to rape." At least 10 female firefighters, who are currently working or have left, the Davie Fire Department have filed complaints with the EEOC alleging discrimination, leading to a visit to the department premises by the officials of U.S. Department of Justice. Marlenis Smart, from Miami Shores, a mother of four alleges that she found her bathing suit covered in semen, her bra was hung in the firehouse bay and that she was openly called "stupid bitch." She recalls that on her first day of training she was referred to as a chick, for whom the work was a hobby, something that she did not really need to do as her husband was well off. Other firefighters made her feel unwelcome and said, "Women belong in the kitchen." She was constantly accused of having affairs with other firefighters and many declined to work with her, as she was a woman. She said that a male co-worker walked in on her in the shower in 2007. Her request for a lock on the bathroom door was not met; instead her supervisor gave her a broom handle with "Smart Wedge" written on it. Smart was awarded \$700,000 in March, when a federal court upheld her federal lawsuit she had filed two years ago alleging sexual harassment. The court said that they "subjected her to a sexually hostile work environment," and caused her "emotional pain and mental anguish." The city's attorneys are seeking to get the verdict overturned or win a new trial, failing which they said they were likely to appeal. Smart claims that someone took a photo of her with two other firefighters and crossed out her face with an 'x' mark. Underneath they wrote 'liar' and "Next fire last fire" and put the picture in her bunker gear bag. She believes it was a death threat. "I don't want anyone to go through what I went through," Smart said. "My worst nightmare was walking into the firehouse and worrying that I'd go into the fire and these guys wouldn't have my back. People look up to firefighters. But in reality, I have been working with monsters." Mike Teslar, a California firefighter, who frequents industry conferences and keeps abreast of hiring and harassment trends said that what is happening is hardly credible, "In 2012, to read this stuff is going on is unbelievable," he said "In Dallas a couple years ago a chief got caught ejaculating into a woman firefighter's coffee cup. It's going to cost the city money. They can either spend it training or they can spend it defending all these lawsuits." Fire departments were thought to be a male prerogative and female firefighters were not welcome in the firehouse. Teslar said that some of fire department reflected this mindset and were a "throwback to the 1960s." Linda Stokoe's said that at the Davie Fire Department, supervisors, to her embarrassment and chagrin, timed her daily bathroom visits. She was terminated in 2009. This was meted out to her only and her male colleagues were not subjected to the same treatment, she claimed. She further said that the fire department's leaders left her in no doubt that she did not belong here and neither was she welcome there. Women, they said, were second-class workers because they might get pregnant. Federal investigators, upon finding that a woman worker lost her baby, because her supervisor refused to put her on light duty until her second trimester, have ordered the Davie Fire Department to rewrite its policy on how it treats pregnant firefighters. Herminio Lorenzo, former fire chief for the Broward Sheriff's Office Fire Rescue and Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, says that such cases are not new and during his career he has been witness to many such issues. He advised the fire chiefs to acknowledge the problem, face it head on instead of denying that it exists and implement measures to ensure that it is curtailed, if not eradicated altogether. "You have to set the tone and make sure that things are happening the right way," Lorenzo said. "But it's a lot easier said than done. The job is demanding physically and emotionally. And sometimes [the firefighters] have to blow off steam. Sometimes they go too far and you have to rein them in." He has warned that if they don't self-legislate the courts will. John McNamara, president of the Broward County Council of Firefighters, alleged that the subordinates behave this way because they are not reined in by their leaders. He said, he is unconcerned who addresses the problem, as long as it is addressed. Moreover, he said, that the behavior of the subordinates reflected the leader's attitude to women firefighters. "If the leader acts a certain way, the subordinates reflect that. I think it does start from the top down," he said. There are many options available to female firefighters who want to seek redress from discriminatory behavior at the workplace. They can approach their union representative, a lawyer or the International Association of Women in Fire and Emergency Services. "We get inquiries on a regular basis, once a week," said Pashelek, the group's president and a battalion chief in Lincoln, Neb. "There has to be zero tolerance. You can't treat people this way. It's illegal." Women firefighters are part and parcel of the fire professions, a profession where teamwork is of the utmost importance. "It is very important that you do have that trust and camaraderie knowing that everyone you work with on that team is competent to perform," Pashelek said. "So that when you do get a call, you know they have your back. You have to have that trust."