

World Fire Congress Communities of Practice

Topic Abstracts — 2026 London Congress

7. Women in the Fire Service

Women remain dramatically underrepresented in fire and civil defense services worldwide — yet the global picture is far from uniform, and the variations across nations offer some of the most valuable lessons this Community of Practice can explore. In some countries, women lead national fire agencies and comprise a meaningful share of the operational workforce; in others, female participation remains near zero. In the United States, female firefighters currently comprise just 4–5% of the career workforce, a figure that has grown only slowly over four decades despite the removal of formal barriers. Globally, the obstacles are structural, cultural, and practical: physical testing designed without female physiology in mind, personal protective clothing that fits poorly for approximately 80% of female firefighters, workplace cultures that have yet to fully welcome women, and limited pathways to leadership. At the same time, globally, about 57% of volunteer work is performed by women — a clear signal that the barriers are not about willingness or capability. Expanding workforce capacity and effectiveness in the face of a growing fire crisis will require increased investment in more equitably supporting all firefighters, and recruitment and retention challenges specific to women and other underrepresented groups have too often been overlooked. This Community of Practice convenes fire service leaders from diverse national contexts to share what is working — in recruitment, retention, equipment design, culture change, leadership development, and policy — with the shared conviction that a fire service that reflects the communities it protects is a more capable, more trusted, and more resilient one. [Minneapolis Government R&D](#) [Science Daily](#) [NVFC](#)