

Last week, the Victorian Parliament debated, and rejected, the inclusion of three women-specific cancers to the list of cancers for which forest firefighters are eligible for medical compensation, as part of the Forests Amendment (Forest Firefighters Presumptive Rights Compensation) Bill 2021.

This bill is crucial to shifting the burden of proof to accessing medical compensation for certain types of cancer, in favour of forest firefighters. Similar legislation, which also omits these women-specific cancers, exists for career and volunteer firefighters in Fire Services Victoria and the Country Fire Authority.

Despite the urgings of Member for Northern Victoria Tania Maxwell that cervical cancer, ovarian cancer and uterine cancer be added to the list – which, in its existing state includes several male-specific cancers – the Victorian Parliament in this instance, decided not to vote on this issue.

The reason for this rejection was that the small number of female firefighters did not allow for substantial enough epidemiological studies in order to conclusively link these three cancers to firefighting.

American research, though recognising the gendered knowledge gaps that exist when it comes to the connection of women-specific cancers to firefighting, suggest that [“women firefighters may be at an elevated incidence for breast, cervical, thyroid and bladder cancers”](#), and recommend a “precautionary approach” when it comes to safeguarding the health of women firefighters.

Including these three women-specific cancers to this Bill would constitute such a precautionary approach. Absence of sufficient gendered data for what continues to be considered a male-dominated industry, does not imply absence of risk.

This is an issue that strikes to the very heart of the gender inequality that exists not only in our communities and workplaces, but also in the gendered gap in the datasets that guide the decisions that are made about women’s lives.

As a feminist organisation working towards gender equality and women’s health in regional and rural communities, and with a particular interest in the gendered nature of emergency management via our partnership project Gender and Disaster Australia (formerly the Gender and Disaster Pod), we are deeply concerned about the lasting health and financial impacts this legislative omission will have on Victoria’s growing community of women firefighters.

Furthermore, we’re concerned about how a lack of legislative protection for women firefighters might serve as a barrier to women pursuing careers in this field and encouraging diversity among the ranks of the state’s emergency management teams.

We are also disappointed at this missed opportunity for Victoria to create genuinely inclusive and equal legislation that would protect the rights and health of women firefighters, particularly considering the leadership it has shown in implementing the Gender Equality Act this year.

We do note, however, the commitment by the Minister for Emergency Services to undertake further consultation and investigation into this issue, and we look forward to parliament revisiting this critical amendment in the not-too-distant future.