

# Empowering unsung heroes

Luavut Zahid speaks to **Sara Weston**, founder of 911der Women, a community focused on women working in emergency communications



**W**here there was a gap in the support provided to 911 responders, Sara Weston stepped in to fill it. Emergency communication and response is a unique profession, one with its own inner workings and challenges. This is especially true for women, who have additional pressures to overcome as they race to the top of a broken ladder. "They can feel like they are alone, and there is no one who understands them or what their days entail," Weston told me.

"Women often face additional stress when they are the primary carers of the household. We are often expected to do the majority of the parenting, some of the care of older parents," she added.

The nonprofit began as a simple Facebook group in 2019, with the aim of assisting women in the public safety domain. "At the beginning, my goal was to inspire and effect change in 100 women; I never imagined that today, we would serve more than 15,000 women worldwide," Weston said. "This job is tough, and the women who are on the job are expected to be even tougher. We know from experience that having women mentors, or women to confide in, is extremely helpful in both professional and personal development within the 911 industry, but more importantly, it is crucial for the mental health and wellbeing of women in 911," she added.

"Our mission is to strengthen and support the women of 911 and equip them with the tools to foster professional and personal growth. We empower women to make significant contributions to the public safety industry and overcome obstacles to achieve their objectives. We provide training, scholarships, mentoring, and networking opportunities to women in this domain."

Weston aims to build a stronger 911: "In the US, more than 70 per cent of our 911 professionals are women, but only about 50 per cent of leadership positions are filled by women. The goal is to see at least 70 per cent of women in leadership, a number that at least reflects the workforce."

The challenges faced by women responders are aplenty. "When assisting someone in crisis, telecommunicators are typically the first to witness the unfolding horror; they answer each call, never truly knowing what they will encounter. Similarly, arriving on the scene to witness the aftermath can be horrifying, but hearing about it can cause long-lasting trauma that often goes untreated in a communications centre. Most centres are understaffed, while 911 professionals are overworked. This adds to the stress and makes it much harder to take care of their mental and/or physical health," Weston explained.

In the four years it has been active, the community has already had a profound effect. "The most immediate effect we saw was the increased number of women speaking at conferences. We taught women in 911 that what they think, what they have learned, and what they have to say is important, and that sharing their knowledge not only helps

the people they are teaching, but empowers them to step into their confidence and influence positive change. If you attend a 911 conference in the US, you will see that the number of women speakers reflects the 70 per cent in the workforce.


"More women in 911 are seeking and obtaining professional certifications. Because of our scholarships, training, and community support, women have been challenging themselves professionally. We help train them to increase their confidence to pursue education and career goals. We provide scholarships to ease the financial burden that prevents so many women in 911 from obtaining certifications. The 911der Women community stands by them, answers their questions, offers encouragement and advice, and supports them through the challenges.

"Women feel empowered to begin their own movements within 911. Over the past four years, we have seen many new initiatives led by women to help other professionals. Women have started creating new training materials to provide resources for other 911 professionals who may be struggling. There are many new free or online training platforms created by women inspired by 911der Women that give equitable access to quality training to all. Several women have started mental health resource pages. New podcasts, hosted by women, provide a voice to 911 professionals, reassuring them that they are not alone. All of these initiatives are part of our impact, and they are growing every single day."

Despite the rapid growth it has seen, 911der Women has no plans to slow down: "Our overarching goal is to help create a better 911 for the people of 911. We believe that empowered women empower 911. We aim to help these women with their specific struggles so that they can have the mental and physical fortitude to do their job in a healthier way.

"This has always been a grassroots effort; it was created by the 911 community for the 911 community. We know that no matter how large our organisation becomes, we will always look to the community to see what the need is. I envision our influence growing worldwide, connecting women in control rooms without borders so that we can all help bring our unique and diverse knowledge, experience, cultures, and technology together to give these heroes the tools and resources they need to not only save the lives of their callers but their own lives as well."

Women look out for each other in this community: "This is our code. This is how we draw more strength,"

Weston said. 

■ For more information, or to join the community, please visit: [www.911derwomen.com](http://www.911derwomen.com).

## Author



LUAVUT ZAHID is the Publishing Editor of the Crisis Response Journal