

Advancements & Challenges in Gender Equity in British Policing

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Within a previous edition of *Policing Insight*, two of the authors considered issues of ‘Legitimacy, democracy, decision-making’ within policing (March, 2021). The paper examined the police response to ‘the Clapham Common Vigil’ that occurred following the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving member of the Metropolitan Police Service. The article framed the discussion within a context of long-standing anxieties regarding the inadequacies of state response toward violence against women, observations regarding the disproportionate impact of Covid measures upon ethnic minorities, women and the working classes, and the alarming increase in domestic abuse (which has occurred both domestically and internationally), described by the BBC as an ‘epidemic beneath a pandemic’. Referred to as an example of ‘institutional misogyny’, the handing of the vigil raised pertinent questions regarding the service provided to women, levels of public (and particularly female) confidence in policing, police effectiveness and police legitimacy.

While this paper was externally focused, further articles have addressed the treatment of women internally as police officers, police staff, and as members of the wider policing family. Adopting an historical lens, in 2020, Peter Joyce and Wendy Laverick published two further articles. The first, written to mark the centenary of the Baird Committee Report (which advocated the employment of women as sworn officers across England and Wales), explored ‘100 years of women in policing’. The paper addressed the historical involvement of women in policing and highlighted key barriers and obstacles regarding the achievement of gender equity within the service. Contentious debates regarding the appropriate role, remit, deployment, integration, and safety of female officers, in addition to arguments regarding the enforcement of police powers, use of weapons and the capability of female actors within the police service, occurred, we suggested, within highly politicised environments. We argued that these debates were influenced by external events, financial considerations, and importantly, were negotiated against a historically and culturally specific backdrop of gender politics regarding appropriate gender norms, gendered expectations, sex discrimination and unequal pay.

A follow-up article (published in October 2020), focused upon ‘the 1980s and beyond’. The authors sought to examine key developments relating to ‘female representation and police legitimacy’. The paper discussed issues relating to police culture, career progression and representation across the rank structure and within senior roles and specialist posts. The paper highlighted that, despite recognising some modest gains in recruitment, several significant reports were published that recognised the continuing existence of institutional and cultural barriers to female recruitment and retention, representation, and progression within the police service (2008, Home Affairs Committee, *Policing in the Twenty-first Century*; 2010, Home Office, *Assessment of Women in the Police Service*; and 2013, Stevens Commission, *Policing for a Better Britain: Report of the Independent Commission*).

The Casey Review

More recently, Baroness Casey's damning review into standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service (published in March 2023), expressed an ambition to become a further catalyst for self-examination and root and branch reform. The review was commissioned following the abduction, rape, and murder of Sarah Everard that occurred within a wider context of violence against women and girls (highlighted by the 2017 #MeToo movement against sexual abuse and harassment) and homophobia (an issue currently highlighted within Matt Parr's (April, 2023) inspection report into the Metropolitan Police Service's response to lessons from the Stephen Port murders – which discussed the risk of making unfounded assumptions, stereotyping, and the effect of unconscious bias upon decision-making). Casey's review, Parr's inspection report, and Dame Elish Angiolini's, 2020 independent review of Police Scotland (see Ali Malik's article in *Policing Insight* published in April 2023), also followed other damning inquiries into high-profile scandals and examples of police misconduct (see for example, HMICFRS *PEEL Spotlight Report Shining a Light on Betrayal*, 2019 and *A Duty to Protect: Police Use of Protective Measures in Cases Involving Violence Against Women and Girls*, 2021, IOPC *Operation Hotton: Learning Report*, 2022).

Describing the Met as 'institutionally' racist, sexist, and homophobic, Casey's report highlighted the corrosive effects of such scandals on trust, confidence and the fundamental Peelian principles of policing by consent. Casey acknowledged several challenges facing the police service over the last ten years, including changes in crime patterns, greater non-crime demand, a national shortage of detectives, and other acute pressures across the criminal justice system and across other public services. Within this context, her review argued that the 'de-prioritisation and de-specialisation of public protection has put women and children at greater risk than necessary', further suggesting that the Met has failed to protect both female employees and members of the public from police perpetrators of domestic abuse, and from those who abuse their position for sexual purposes. Significantly, Casey's review additionally pointed to the existence of a bullying culture within the service, where racist, misogynist, homophobic and other discriminatory acts are tolerated, ignored, or dismissed as 'banter'.

Advances and contemporary challenges

From the discussion presented above, it should be clear that the way the service treats individuals and groups, both externally and internally, matters. Having a diverse workforce representing people of all backgrounds and groups not only goes right to the heart of policing by consent, but also remains crucial to the identification of community needs and priorities, and for tackling crimes effectively (including the reporting of incidents, and the detection, investigation, and prosecution of crimes). This point is explicitly acknowledged within Parr's inspection report which 'considered whether homophobia explained, at least in part, why the MPS didn't investigate the deaths caused by Stephen Port properly, and why it failed to provide bereaved friends and relatives with anything like an adequate and respectful service' (HMICFRS, 2023). Thus, both Casey and Parr emphasise the point that effective policing requires community engagement, cooperation, and participation – each of which remains contingent upon the achievement of public trust, confidence, and a belief in the legitimacy of the police, and faith in systems police governance and accountability.

While media discussions currently remain highly critical of British policing and its track record of addressing issues of equality and diversity, the final section of this article will endeavour to place these failings within a wider context of continuing action to improve the situation. Here, we draw

upon a book chapter, written by Wendy Laverick and Emma Cunningham that outlines significant challenges currently facing British policing, but also directs attention to several positive advances that have been made and areas of good practice nationally, and within individual forces towards the achievement of gender equity in British policing (See: 'Advances in Gender Equity in British Policing' (in Prenzler, T Ed. *Gender Inclusive Policing: Challenges and Achievements*, Routledge, 2023).

The Changing Demographic Profile of Policing

On a positive note, while total police officer strength has been subject to fluctuation over the past twenty years, between 2018 and March 2021, numbers have risen. According to workforce data, there were 43,762 female police officers in the 43 police forces on 31 March 2021, making up 32.4% of police officers in England and Wales. The 2021 HeForShe report suggests that the recent national recruitment drive for police officers has impacted positively on the recruitment of women, with more women than ever before serving as police officers. Data provided by the College of Policing (2021) and Home Office (2022) also suggests an upward trend, noting that there has been an increase in the volume of police officers across ethnicity, sex and combined ethnicity and sex, with new recruits also being from a more diverse background than their predecessors, with direct entry (including Degree Holder Entry Programmes and fast-track detective programmes) comprising a particularly attractive entry route for women.

Nevertheless, when interpreting the data, caution is required. Thus, officer representation falls short of the proportion within the general population for both gender and ethnicity. According to the 2021 Census women and girls made up 51% of the population of England and Wales, people from Asian ethnic groups comprised 9.3%, followed by black (4.0%), mixed (2.9%) and other (2.1%). Close inspection of the data also reveals considerable variation between forces. For example, While Cumbria has 41% women overall, British Transport Police has just 21%.

Workforce data reveals further trends relating to age. Thus, the proportion of police officers in older groups has also increased (44% of all police officers were over 40 years old in March 2020), with implications for the occupational health support provided for employees experiencing menopausal symptoms, and for officers and staff with caring commitments. With this in mind, it is important to note that the number of police officers in England and Wales who resigned voluntarily from the service have been increasing rapidly in recent years. College of Policing data suggests that over the last five years, female officer leavers were more likely to resign voluntarily and less likely to retire than male staff leavers. Research undertaken by Charman and Bennett (2022) found that two-thirds of participants identified the impact of their job on their personal life as a major influencing factor on their decision to leave the service, with difficulties associated with the shift systems and difficulties managing caring responsibilities highlighted as factors affecting physical and mental health.

The ambition to achieve a diverse workforce has consequently resulted in a range of initiatives to attract, recruit, retain women. This work supports the earlier aims of The British Association for Women in Policing who continue to work towards their achievement, updating the *Gender Agenda* action plan in 2006 and 2014 and publishing *Flexible Working in the Police Service* guidance in 2007. More recently, in May 2013, the College of Policing published their own '*Flexible Working in the Police Service*', acknowledged that 'caring responsibilities are likely to remain a disproportionate issue for female officers and staff', further recognising that increasing numbers of men share caring responsibilities with their partner. The guidance highlighted the need for employers to understand the potential need for flexible working across the whole workforce, with implications for retention, representativeness and diverse recruitment, sickness absence, wellbeing, in addition to staff morale and commitment. Sitting under the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Committee, the National Police

Chief's Council gender portfolio, incorporating the NPCC Gender Lead and Gender Board, oversee the work of several working groups and force action to remove barriers faced by women in policing. Positive developments include the recent publication of the College of Policing (2021) *Management of Menopausal Transition in the Police Service* guidance, and forthcoming NPCC (2023) *Family Support Guidance*.

Less positively and returning to Casey's observation that 'some of the worst culture, behaviours and practices' have been found in specialist units, it is perhaps important to note that gender-specialisation in policing functions and departments also remains prevalent. Thus, the College of Policing suggest that women remain highly concentrated in areas relating to sexual violence and domestic abuse, Investigations and Public Protection functions, and are currently much less likely to be distributed in National Policing and Operational Support functions.

Forces are currently working to address workforce balance across roles and ranks and within specialist posts. As detailed within the HeForShe annual gender equality in UK policing reports, further measures and innovative solutions have been implemented, included targeted recruitment campaigns, school liaison, pre-application workshops, positive action work, alongside the implementation of creative solutions to childcare barriers, fitness test support, and action to address uniform requirements, including the introduction of an operational hijab and the promotion of light weight uniforms made with natural fibres within menopause guidance.

Promotion and Leadership

As further evidence of progress, and as noted by the College of Policing (2021), the volume of promotions has also increased across ethnicity, sex and combined ethnicity and sex. The year 2020/21 observed an increase in promotions for Minority Ethnic Males who received slightly more promotions than the White females group. Nevertheless, national workforce data again reveals considerable variation between forces. For example, while North Yorkshire has 44% of women in senior positions, 36 forces report female representation within senior positions at less than 30%, including Wiltshire at 16%, British Transport Police at 20% and the Metropolitan Police at 23%. Minority Ethnic Females remain the lowest percentage group which received promotions from 2020/21 to 2020/22, also having the highest distribution within the constable rank and the lowest distribution in higher ranks of inspector and above.

It is therefore no time to be complacent, as argued by HeForShe 'the growth in the number of women at senior levels has not kept pace with the growth at the grassroots' with a lot of work required until the service 'reaches a reflective number of women in senior roles' (HeForShe, 2021: 8). Positive initiatives to address this gender imbalance within senior ranks includes the implementation of development programmes, buddy, coaching and mentoring schemes, alongside action to increase the gender and ethnicity diversity of promotion board panels, reform of interview and assessment processes and, within some forces, the introduction of Annual Development Audits within some forces.

Conclusion

The problems highlighted by the recent scandals and reports are not new to British policing. Discrimination, unequal opportunity, harassment, discrimination, and bias have been identified and actively challenged since women were first incorporated into the service. However, we are perhaps

currently in a unique position where specific events, cultural and social factors have come together to provide an impetus to drive forward and accelerate change. Cumulatively, these forces have reprioritised equality and diversity issues and reinvigorated a political will and public appetite to address these issues.

As proponents of reassurance policing have long known, fair decision making, and positive public interaction are ethically important in their own right, but also remain essential for effective policing and crime reduction. Public perception and the optics of policing matter because the behaviour of individual officers and the institutional treatment of staff and members of the public has a profound effect on public perception, confidence, and trust in the police, and significantly, upon its legitimacy as a body of officers representing the civil authority of government.

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