

ANALYSIS:

Celebrating a century: The 1980s and beyond – female workforce representation and police legitimacy



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In their second of two articles marking the centenary of the Baird Committee Report, which recommended that women should be employed as sworn police officers across England and Wales, Dr Wendy Laverick and Professor Peter Joyce look at the role of women in policing from the 1980s to today – including discrimination, the Gender Agenda and contemporary thinking.

The Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) did little to increase the representation of women within the senior ranks of the police service.

The progress of female officers was impeded by the entrenched nature of 'cop culture' that made the service resistant to any changes conflicting with long-established practices and attitudes, so that policing remained dominated by men and male values.

This was referred to by Nigel Fielding in his 1994 essay *Cop Canteen Culture* as 'an almost pure form of hegemonic masculinity' that emphasises 'aggressive physical action, competitiveness, preoccupation with the imagery of conflict, exaggerated heterosexual orientation and the operation of patriarchal misogynistic attitudes'.

Sandra Jones [argued in 1986](#) that such attitudes were manifested in suggestions within the service that 'women as police officers are physically and emotionally inferior to men, police work is not women's work and is unfeminine, and that they do not stay in the job for any length of time'. For such reasons, it was not until 1995, 20 years after the passing of the SDA, that the first female chief constable (Pauline Clare in Lancashire) was appointed. And only in 1999 was the designation WPC phased out.

Discrimination and the Gender Agenda

During the 1990s, there were several well-publicised cases of female officers alleging sexual discrimination. These included Wendy De Launay, who successfully claimed sex discrimination by the Metropolitan Police on the grounds of her sex in 1983 (Brown and Silvestri, 2020: 98), and Alison Halford, who in 1992 took the Merseyside Police Authority to an industrial tribunal alleging that sexual discrimination accounted for her failure to secure promotion to the rank of deputy chief constable. The 'serious problem' of sexual harassment within the police service was officially recognised in by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) in 1993 and 1995.

To respond to issues of this nature, the [British Association for Women in Policing](#) (BAWP) was set up in 1987. This was open to all ranks and aimed to enhance the role and understanding of the specific needs of women employed in the police service.

Between 1990 and 2010, influential reviews of policing by the Home Office, HMIC, Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and other organisations highlighted the association between workforce representativeness, police legitimacy and police effectiveness.

Although initially concerned with issues of race, the link between workforce balance, police effectiveness, community-police relations and public trust soon extended to address gender representation across the police workforce.

In 1992, an executive group representing the BAWP and a group of senior women officers and representatives from the [Police Federation](#) of England and Wales, ACPO's Women's Group and the [European Network of Policewomen](#) initiated the [Gender Agenda](#), which aimed to highlight the working environment experienced by women in the police service.

The Gender Agenda was updated in 2006 (Gender Agenda 2) and 2014 ([Gender Agenda 3](#)). Together with work undertaken by the Home Affairs Committee [Policing in the Twenty-first Century](#) (2008), the Home Office *Assessment of Women in the Police Service* (2010), and Stevens Commission's [Policing for a Better Britain: Report of the Independent Commission](#) (2013), these publications highlighted the continuing existence of institutional and cultural barriers to female recruitment and retention, representation and progression within the police service.

While the 2010 Home Office report acknowledged that 'women have made considerable headway in progression to all levels of the police service', women were nevertheless found to have 'lower representation than men in the majority of ranks' and also in access to specialist posts.

Reforms were subsequently introduced to provide opportunities for part-time working and job-sharing, alongside career breaks and alternative working patterns, to make employment practices compatible with the requirements of family life. This included the publication of [Flexible Working in the Police Service](#) guidance in 2007.

Changes over the past 10 years

More recently this mixed picture has continued, prompted by the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2010 change in government, austerity, and organisational reform, including the publication of the [Winsor review](#) into police pay and conditions, and Peter Neyroud's [Review of Police](#)

Leadership and Training.

These developments have resulted in a number of challenges and opportunities for the employment and recognition of women police. Significantly, key bodies tasked with the monitoring and oversight of diversity progression were scrapped or phased out, with the female voice experiencing further losses through the departure of the Women's National Commission and the Women in Policing Steering Group.

As financial constraints became felt by forces, research (in particular that of Laverick and Cain, [*The Gender Agenda in an Age of Austerity*](#), 2015) revealed a reduction in flexibility and an unwillingness by line managers to accommodate part-time working and alternative working arrangements. This has had a disproportionate and detrimental consequence for particular sections of the female police workforce including parents, carers and the older female police workforce.

Between 2010 and 2018, the overall number of officers declined by 15% with men disproportionately bearing the greater impact. During the period of financial restraint, the number of female police officers also reduced, reaching a numerical low of 35,401 in 2013, after which time the numbers rose to reach 37,428 in 2019.

Despite slight fluctuations and variation between individual forces, in March 2019, female officers reached 30%, the highest proportion since 2003, with the number and proportion of female officers increasing across all ranks, except constables. Here, although the proportion of female constables increased (from 29% in 2010 to 32.2% in 2019), the number of female constables remained lower than in 2010 (30,965 compared to 31,362).

Nevertheless, it remains noteworthy that this figure fell short of the previous Home Office target of 35% representation, also failing to reach the 50% representation required to reflect the proportion of men and women in the wider population.

Contemporary developments

With female recruitment, retention and progression within the workplace, the gender pay and pension gap, the reconciliation of work and family life, and sexual harassment in the workplace obtaining priority within both international and domestic forums, action is currently being taken

to advance equality and remove or minimise discrimination within UK police forces.

In 2019, [HeForShe](#) thematic champion, Giles York (Chief Constable of Sussex Police), [made a commitment](#) as part of the UN's Global Solidarity Movement for Gender Equality, to make diversity and inclusion an operational policing imperative and on behalf of all UK police forces committed to accelerate the increase in the overall proportion of women police officers to reach parity across senior leadership by 2020.

While it is unlikely that this objective will be achieved by the end of 2020 (given that in March 2019, only 26% of officers ranked chief inspector or higher were female), it is nevertheless the case that a great deal of progress has been made over the past few decades. As noted by one female inspector, "policing of the 1970s is certainly not the police that we have today".

While there is continuing gender specialisation within some specialist posts, and while training and fitness requirements continue to pose considerable difficulties for particular sections of the police workforce (particularly parents, carers, and women experiencing menopausal transition), forces are now beginning to address gender parity in relation to childcare and placing increasing significance upon welfare issues.

The [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) (NPCC) gender lead and individual force #HeForShe champions, together with representative staff associations and equality, diversity and inclusion specialists, continue to drive forward change.

Thus, several forces report action currently being undertaken to support officers, staff and line managers in relation to the parenting journey, addressing fertility treatments, pregnancy, maternity, surrogacy, and adoption, and addressing miscarriage and baby loss. For example, pregnancy-related sickness absence is ignored as absence and is not used to the individual's disadvantage in relation to disciplinary action, dismissal or redundancy.

Addressing cultural barriers and stereotypes

Coinciding with the creation of the [National Police Wellbeing Service](#) by the College of Policing, several forces have introduced Wellbeing Passports to identify potential issues which could impact on an individuals' wellbeing and to facilitate discussions between individuals and line managers, enabling them to understand and better support officers and staff in the workplace.

Action is also being taken to encourage the take up of parental leave and alternative working arrangements, as noted by HeForShe's *Gender Equality in Policing* report (2019).

Addressing the cultural barriers and stereotypes which prevent men from taking parental leave and/or working part-time or flexible hours is a key inhibitor to women's career progression. It is also detrimental to the wellbeing of the significant growing number of men who want to fully participate in their family life.

With officers in older age groups now making up an increasing proportion of the police workforce, wider caring responsibilities, menopause transition and menopause are also becoming occupational issues of growing importance, with almost a third of the police workforce likely to experience the menopause during their working lives.

Created in 2013, the national police Menopause Action Group (MAG), which sits within the NPCC's gender portfolio, has grown significantly and drives forward local, regional and national strategy for managing issues involving the menopause within the police service.

One-third of female police officers in England and Wales are now aged 45 or over, with women comprising 62% of police staff, the majority of which are aged over 41. In 2019, the NPCC MAG and the Police Federation, in association with the [College of Policing](#) and [UNISON](#), published a [Management of Menopause Transition in the Police Service](#).

The guidance prompts line managers to become aware of occupational health provision, to modify sickness reporting systems, and to become aware that there may be a legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments; it also encourages line managers to employ discretion and adopt a proactive and supportive approach in the types of adjustment made.

In May 2020, the Government Equalities Office confirmed that given the severity of some of the effects of menopause transition, the definition of disability in the Equality Act 2010 is broad enough to ensure that any person with a condition that may be temporary, progressive, life-limiting or exacerbated by physiological factors or symptoms such as those relating to the menopause will be protected.

Significantly, the Government confirmed that the condition does not necessarily have to be medically diagnosed by a health professional, so long as the physiological factors have an

impact on a person's ability to carry out normal, day-to-day activities.

The Act places a duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments for employees who fall within its definition of disability, to ensure that they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to employees who are not disabled.

Reasonable adjustments could include providing extra support and auxiliary aids or services to enable a disabled employee to carry out their job, ignoring disability-related sickness leave for the purposes of absence management purposes, or allowing a period of unpaid leave depending on the circumstances.

The Act is very clear that a failure of an employer to make reasonable adjustments for a disabled employee could amount to disability discrimination under the Act.

In response, forces across England and Wales have introduced a range of measures to support women experiencing menopause transition including the provision of an extra uniform allowance for officers and staff to be able to change during shifts if required, the inclusion of the menopause within the Reasonable Adjustment Passport for disabilities and the introduction of 1-1 fitness tests prior to annual officer safety training.

A lot achieved, and much more to be done

On 5 August 1920, The Baird Committee presented its report to Parliament, recommending the employment of women police. Nevertheless, a cursory historical overview of women in policing reveals that women's struggle for official recognition continued long after women were sworn in and granted the power of arrest.

As an increasing number of women entered previously masculine domains, the accounts of early female police officers detail common experiences of opposition, racial and sexual discrimination and other forms of harassment and bullying. These are themes that remain today, requiring that more work should be undertaken to address cultural and institutional barriers to gender equality within the service.

Gender disparity in relation to the gender pay gap has also received attention from the HeForShe campaign in 2019, which has been accounted for in relation to the over-representation of women as police staff and their disproportionate representation in the lowest

paid roles within policing.

Over more than 15 years, the BAWP's Gender Agenda has sought to have women's voices represented within key policy forums, to achieve workplace representation across the role and rank structure and within specialist posts, and to provide women with a working environment and equipment of the right quality and standard. Further objectives include improving work-life balance, and for the police service to demonstrate consistently that it values women in policing.

This work remains ongoing with sections of the female police workforce facing additional challenges and barriers for recruitment, retention, training and development, progression, and representation.

While challenges remain, it is evident that over the past 100 years, women within the service have made substantial gains. As the proportion of women increased, women become founding members and significant contributors to a range of representative staff associations and networks, collaborating domestically and internationally, driving forward gender equality within the service.

Key players (including practitioners and academics) have also recognised the intersection of gender with other protected characteristics and aspects of identity, to provide support, influence policy change and eradicate discrimination more generally. They have worked to place wellbeing and mental health as central rather than peripheral concerns for the benefit of both male and female officers and staff at various stages of their life and career cycles.

In terms of gender specialisation, while the duties of early female policing pioneers remained tied to welfare issues – including the protection of children and women, and responding to incidents of marital assault and rape – protecting the vulnerable has more recently become a priority concern and 'core police business', with the Home Office, the College of Policing and the NPCC remaining at the heart of improving the police's response to the vulnerable.

This coincides with international action to address violence against women and girls; together these changes have impacted on the effectiveness of external service delivery and police legitimacy, while also prompting welfare considerations to be directed internally within the police service.

With the launch of the National Police Wellbeing Service, investment has been made to provide psychological and physiological support to staff and place responsibilities upon leaders to create an environment in which everyone can get the right support at the right time. Mental health, trauma, suicide prevention, and the wellbeing and inclusion of officers and staff are all tied to these developments.

In 2020, Jennifer Brown and Marisa Silvestri noted that ‘in 1995, 20 years after the passing of the Sexual Discrimination Act, the glass ceiling was finally breached with the appointment of Pauline Clare as the first woman chief constable’.

Although women remain underrepresented in senior ranks and gender specialisation in tasks remains within some key policing areas, women are now largely accepted and recognised within the service, with gender equality gaining increasing purchase alongside action to ensure that women are valued at all stages of their life and career cycles, and the intersection of protected characteristics.

About the authors

Dr Wendy Laverick is a senior lecturer in Criminology at the University of Hull. She is currently developing an international research profile on transnational crime, hate crime and gender and policing scholarship and is the author of [*Global Injustice and Crime Control*](#) (Routledge, 2016). She co-authored (with Peter Joyce) [*Racial and Religious Hate Crime. The UK from 1945 to Brexit*](#) (Palgrave, 2019).

Peter Joyce is Visiting Professor in Criminology at Glyndŵr University. He is widely published, specialising in policing and the policing of protest. He served as a member of the Independent Police Ethics Committee in the Greater Manchester Police Force Area between 2014 and 2018. He has recently co-authored (with Wendy Laverick) a second edition of the text *Policing: Development and Contemporary Practice* which will be published by Sage in 2021.

Read the first article in the series

[**Celebrating a century: The Baird Report and 100 years of women in policing**](#)

This year marks the centenary of the Baird Committee Report, which recommended that

women should be employed as sworn police officers across England and Wales. In the first of two articles, Dr Wendy Laverick and Professor Peter Joyce present a historical account of the involvement of women in policing, the barriers and obstacles they faced, and the current and future situation regarding equality of opportunity.

This article can be found here:

[Celebrating a century: The 1980s and beyond – female workforce representation and police legitimacy](#)

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