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Women in Policing

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Like many organisations in recent times, the police services of Australia are going through a period of rapid change. Police officers are expected to be more knowledgeable, to be capable of a wider range of skills and to keep abreast of new developments in their profession as well as major changes in the wider community.

The role of women police has changed considerably since the appointment of the first female officers in New South Wales in 1915. As the authors argue, however, although on the surface there is no barrier to the employment and promotion of women in our police services, this is not reflected in the current numbers of women police officers who are employed and who receive promotions. This Trends and Issues paper summarises the major issues which form the basis of the current policy debate.

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With around 13.5 per cent of sworn police officers being female, Australian Police Services could not claim to have a gender balance. While this reflects history, policy, practice and attitude, police organisations need to demonstrate an understanding of, and identification with, all their clients. Failure to do so compromises the crucial role of police in our society.

The main issues in the employment of women in policing are:
- the recruitment of women;
- the deployment of women as specialists or generalists;
- the representation of women in senior ranks and management;
- police culture and attitudes to women police; and
- working conditions.

Recruitment

The scarcity of female officers in Australian police services indicates a need for practices to be re-examined. Figure 1 indicates the percentage of women in policing in each Australian police service.

This disproportionate representation of women can be attributed to difficulties at the three stages of police recruitment: application, selection and police academy training.

Application

Discussion with police recruit offices throughout Australia (Wilkinson, personal communication 1995) demonstrated that the ratio of male to female applicants to join the police services is 4:1. Research on this matter is needed to determine whether this is because young women do not see policing as an appropriate occupation for females or they think that their chances of being

Figure 1. *Representation of Women in Australian Police Services as at June 1995*
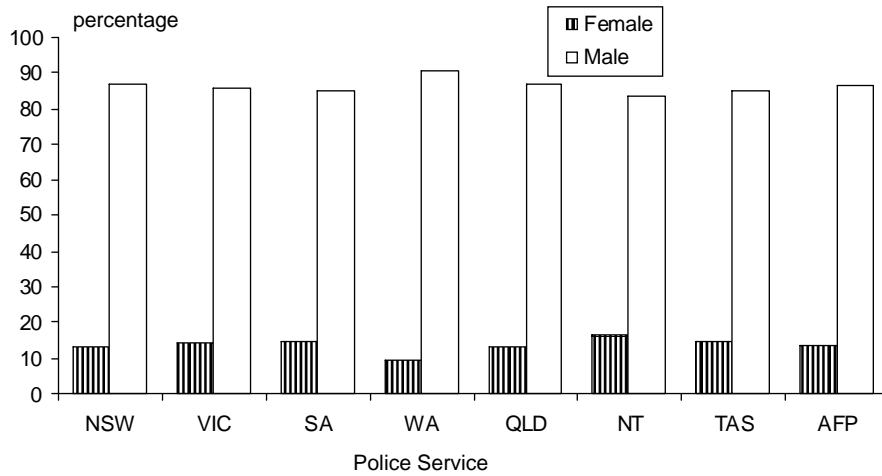
Data Source: Figures supplied to the Australian Institute of Criminology by State & Territory Police Services

selected are poor. A major research project on the attitude of young people to policing as a career would inform attempts to improve all recruiting, including that of women and members of minority groups.

Selection

Once women have applied to enter policing they have to "survive" the selection process. Prenzler (1995) surveyed Australian police groups and found uneven attrition at the selection stage. All jurisdictions rejected a greater proportion of females than males although this was most marked in Western Australia and Victoria. Only the Australian Federal Police reversed this trend (Prenzler 1995) rejecting a greater proportion of males. This probably reflects the very different roles of state and federal police and the different requirements of their recruiting offices.

Large drop-out figures at any stage of selection are taken to indicate the unsuitability of applicants but might just as easily demonstrate the inappropriateness of criteria or standards. The selection policy of an organisation reflects its values but as the organisation changes so will these values and eventually the selection policy will need to be re-examined.

Departments that operate on the implicit assumption that police work is principally physical will place great importance on physical performance in selection. Departments that see police work as largely people oriented will place greater importance on life experience and interpersonal skills. Australian police departments still see policing as a largely physical occupation and it can be argued that physical performance requirements based on strength, fitness, and agility still subtly discriminate against women.

Australian Sex Discrimination and Equal Employment Opportunity legislation requires that entry standards be job related, but while the general criteria might seem reasonable, the particular attributes of those criteria that are used in selection and the standards required on each can be discriminatory. Where police departments use aspects of physical performance relevant to male sports and social activities, males will perform better than females; that is, women will be unreasonably excluded. There are three ways this might be addressed.

Physical ability is a complex concept and success in tests will depend on the particular sorts of physical ability included. While it is generally acknowledged that males are stronger than females, the latter excel in some physical attributes such as endurance and agility. If police departments are to continue

the emphasis on physical performance in selection, and it is not suggested that this is inappropriate, they must look closely at the tasks of policing and be sure that the particular physical attributes used for selection are the most suitable and not merely based on history and the attributes exemplified by an above average fit male.

Secondly, rather than select the most physically fit of all applicants, organisations could choose to accept individuals who rank as most physically fit for their gender. The British system acknowledges the different physical stature of men and women and sets standards for each related to gender norms (Commander Alex Marnoch Retd., London Metropolitan Police, personal communication 1994).

Thirdly, the increasing complexity of the policing role leads one to question whether physical performance should be used in a consecutive hurdle manner. Modern policing requires people management skills at least as much as it requires physical speed and strength. A system could be used whereby one successful applicant might be above average on physical performance but exceptional on people management, while another might be in the top 10 per cent on physical performance and just above average on people skills. This is not to devalue the importance of physical fitness in policing, but considering how few police groups require officers to maintain their fitness after graduation, it would seem a fairer way to select recruits.

Physical requirements are probably only one reason women fail recruitment. There could be many others. Unfortunately, there has been no detailed and comprehensive review of the recruitment processes in Australia. Perhaps with the trend to civilianisation, the new human resource managers might see a detailed analysis as beneficial. They could work with academics, who are quick to criticise the low

numbers of women recruited into policing but fail to suggest ways recruiting branches might overcome selection difficulties.

Training

A first investigation has recently been undertaken into graduation rates of males and females from police academies. Prenzler (1995) reported on this in his recent comprehensive review of equal opportunity and policewomen in Australia. However, because the numbers of women selected are still small, attrition rates are unreliable when reported as percentages. In addition, all jurisdictions were not prepared to make data available. Prenzler's conclusion was that factors influencing drop-out cannot be identified.

In application, selection and training, Australian police organisations are failing in the recruitment of women. It is not that equal numbers of males and females are essential, but that until a critical mass of women in policing is achieved, it will be difficult to even begin to counter discriminatory attitudes, behaviours and practices against women. While women are in such a minority, each individual is very visible. Her performance is extremely public and her acceptance by males is often conditional. Greater numbers will help overcome this. As well they will provide support networks for women and help to establish role models. Only then will Australia move towards balanced police services, able to fulfil their policing function better by drawing upon the potential of a diverse membership.

Deployment

Issues surrounding the deployment of women in traditionally male-oriented occupations like policing are important and complex. They are important because supervising officers have to feel able to deploy staff without regard to gender, and because officers need experience in a range of positions and situations if they are to progress through an organisation to positions of leadership. They are complex because the untested notions of the attributes required for successful policing are complicated by the tension between "equal" and "equal but different".

Some women claim that they have been discriminated against in their deployment (Wilkinson 1994) and while there is little research evidence that this is so, the matter needs to be explored. If female officers are perceived as less able than male officers to perform policing tasks, they cannot expect to be similarly deployed. Early expectations of women in policing were that they would not succeed in this male oriented occupation but research has not borne that out. Female officers are considered at least equal to male officers in most areas of police work (Poole & Pogrebin 1988). They are as effective as males in performing patrol duties (Martin 1993), and have demonstrated no consistent differences in the quality of their performance in street policing (Worden 1993).

If policing is seen as an occupation requiring physical strength and stature, this could result in discriminatory deployment of females, but while the physical nature of policing is widely commented on, research does not always confirm its importance. When 32 sergeants in one British police force were asked what characteristics they considered to be most necessary for ten different policing tasks, physical force, physical strength and physical stature did not feature strongly. Even when dealing with an intruder, the ability to make an appropriate assessment of the situation, initiative, and moral and physical courage were seen as more important than physical stature. In all ten situations the characteristics most required were verbal communication and the ability to assess an incident appropriately, closely followed by effective listening and consideration of others (Brown, Maidment & Bull 1992).

Sometimes the pressure for discrimination is subtle. Largely untested stereotypes about women credit them with particular abilities such as sensitivity, people skills and understanding. The implication is that women should not only be permitted to undertake all policing duties engaged in by men, they should also be respected and even deployed on the basis of their special abilities (Brown et al. 1992; Martin 1993; Worden 1993). This would seem particularly apt in the light of a recent emphasis on "customer focus" as exemplified by the shift from "police force" to "police service" in Australian jurisdictions. A recent strategic document developed by the Association of Chiefs of Police of England and Wales (Association of Chief Police Officers 1990) stated that policing is about community reassurance as well as law enforcement and should be undertaken with compassion, courteousness and patience. These are attributes which have been particularly associated with women's traditional roles.

The dilemma, then, is equal or not equal. Do we treat women as equal in all respects, to be deployed regardless of gender or do we accept that certain special characteristics, which some consider are unique to women, make them more able to perform certain tasks? If so, then are they less able to perform others? Everyone, regardless of gender, has some special abilities. For women in policing, the argument of special abilities, other than as attributes of a *particular individual*, is counter-productive to their functioning as equal police officers.

Women in Police Management

Policewomen are scarce in supervisory positions. It is a characteristic of Australian business that women are under-represented in senior management (Karpin 1995) but in policing the situation is even worse. Figure 2 indicates the distribution of female officers at each rank as a proportion of all women police officers in Australia.

Even more striking is the shortage of female commissioned officers. Numbers reported by police service human resource managers in 1995 are presented in Table 1. Of 5741 women, only 28 have attained commissions. Queensland has the greatest number with nine Inspectors. Both New South Wales and the Northern Territory have the highest ranking woman police officer with a female Assistant Commissioner. Western Australia's highest ranking officer is a Senior Sergeant while Tasmania's most senior woman is a Sergeant. If in 1995 only 28 women held commissions in Australia, then

Table 1. *Highest Ranks held by Female Police Officers in Australia as at 30 June 1995*

Police Service	Rank	Number
NSW	Asst. Commissioner	1
Vic.	Chief Inspector	2
SA*	Chief Inspector	2
WA	Senior Sergeant	3
Qld	Inspector	9
NT**	Asst. Commissioner	1
NT**	Senior Sergeant	1
Tas.	Sergeant	6
AFP	Superintendent	2

*SA data relate to 30 June 1994

**NT data relate to 5 June 1995

Data source: Data supplied to the Australian Institute of Criminology by Australian Police Services

achieving a critical mass at this level seems almost inconceivable.

Four possible reasons for this lack of promotion are part of the "common knowledge of policing" but none has been adequately researched. Firstly, policing is traditionally an occupation where promotion is directly or indirectly related to seniority, and the acceptance of women as regular police officers is so recent that few have served long enough to qualify. This would seem a reasonable explanation and suggests that the problem will be solved by the passage of time.

Secondly, there is a belief that women, either by choice or because the system discourages them (Prenzler 1995), have worked in a more restricted range of situations and hence have more limited experience (Martin 1993). Experience is not only important on its own account, but gives an officer opportunity to "earn stars" or demonstrate competence. A lack of experience, then, makes promotion difficult.

Thirdly, by having limited access to informal association with male superiors, women are excluded from certain communication networks and thus denied information critical to their advancement (Poole & Pogrebin 1988).

Finally, there is a belief that women are not always as determined to attain promotion as their male counterparts (Lunneborg 1989). They are seen to either apply less or to "give up" more readily (*see also* section on "Working Conditions" in this paper). For some, the advantages of promotion are not worth the costs (Poole & Pogrebin 1988; Sutton 1992).

While these beliefs are part of the common culture of policing in Australia, they cannot be accepted at face value. Well planned research is necessary to assess their validity. One problem is that the numbers of female officers nearing eligibility for promotion are so small that

comparisons are difficult. Percentages are therefore irrelevant and minor aberrations are magnified in the overall data. Nevertheless such beliefs, whether justified or not, will themselves influence the careers of women and it is the responsibility of academics to test them against reality.

Police Culture and Attitudes to Women Police

It has been difficult for some men to accept women in policing; difficult because they see some policing tasks as inappropriate for women and difficult because they see women as incapable of achieving in some situations. Sometimes male officers feel the need to protect women and believe they would not be effective work partners in a brawl.

While there is scant Australian research on this subject, British academics have researched the attitudes of male officers, and by and large confirm these notions. Women officers are steered towards traditionally female tasks, are the subject of negative attitudes from older officers (but not younger ones), are seen to lack commitment and are more frequently asked to undertake those activities requiring people skills (Brown & Campbell 1991). Females consider themselves under-represented in some sections of their departments and believe their appointments to have been blocked by senior officers (Coffey, Brown & Savage 1992). In both these studies the authors caution that length of experience has been a contributing factor in the failure to achieve a posting, and this applies equally to officers of both genders.

American academics have undertaken similar research with similar outcomes. Female officers are sometimes appointed as token women in police sections and experience the pressures and conflicts common to token women in any occupation (Martin 1979).

Only about one in five patrol officers willingly accept women as partners and the same percentage express a strong preference for *not* working with them. As might be expected, officers scoring "super macho" on the Bem Androgyny Scale are most rejecting of women (Brown & Carlson 1993). Reviews of the attitudes of superior officers towards policewomen are mixed, but ordinary policemen's attitudes towards policewomen "are almost uniformly negative" (Balkin 1988, p.33).

The preliminary outcomes of a recent study (Centre for Police Research 1994) are pertinent here. The main finding is that sergeants and constables differ in their attitudes towards women police.

The sergeants believe that women are better at diffusing potentially violent situations but maintain that men, by their "physical presence", are more likely to deter violent situations. When asked what proportion of females they think should be in policing, nearly two-thirds opt for 10 per cent or less. When asked whether the police service should do more to make it possible to combine a police career with marriage and children, the overwhelming response is "No".

Constables, on the other hand, show quite different attitudes. The majority indicate no preference, male or female, for an operational work partner. Their choice, for the

Figure 2. *The distribution of Women within Policing Ranks in Australia, 1995*

Australia

Total Women Police

Data Source: Data supplied to the Australian Institute of Criminology by State & Territory Police Services

proportion of women in policing, is between 20 per cent and 30 per cent, two to three times the number currently employed in Western Australia. When asked whether the police service should do more to make it possible to combine a police career with marriage and children, 71 per cent agree or strongly agree.

It might be that time itself will eventually reduce if not eliminate this prejudice. Data on perceptions of police officers by police officers is somewhat confused (Lord 1986) and tends to confirm (Brown & Campbell 1991; Centre for Police Research 1994) what the commonsense view would suggest, that as males and females train together and work together first as probationary officers and then as constables, judgments will tend to be made on the basis of individual abilities rather than gender. Then only the more entrenched biases will need to be addressed.

Working Conditions

Flexibility in the workplace is the catchcry for the nineties and beyond. The eight-hour day has given way to twelve-hour shifts, split shifts, job-sharing and a number of other combinations deemed appropriate for both the individual and the organisation. These changes were not designed specifically for women but they are essential for anyone attempting to balance career and family responsibilities. One of the greatest barriers to women's equal participation in senior level jobs and in professional occupations is the way that work is traditionally organised (Leighton & Syrett 1989; McRae 1990).

The nature of policework can make flexibility difficult and an officer who cannot work overtime can be a real liability in a team. Police organisations, however, are having to address these issues for employees. With changing attitudes in society and changing

relationships within the family, both men and women now have responsibilities towards children and elderly family members.

For American police, Martin (1990) found child care to be significant for 16 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women surveyed. Prenzler (1992) reported that 59 per cent of officers in the Los Angeles Police Department had one or more children and found that shift work, overtime, emergencies and transfers made the balancing of home life and career very difficult.

Wilkinson (1994) found a perceived inflexibility of the organisation to accommodate women trying to balance their roles as mother and police officer to be the principal factor in the decision of Western Australian women to leave policing. This applies to both flexible weekly working arrangements and flexible arrangements for career breaks for child bearing.

In fact most Australian police organisations do allow for some flexibility of work arrangements and have provisions for maternity leave, but an official edict allowing flexibility does not necessarily mean that an officer feels he or she can make individual arrangements without incurring criticism and career disadvantage. This is an issue that will have to be worked through by all concerned. Both the organisation and the individual loses if an officer resigns for such reasons, so greater compromise on both sides is necessary.

Conclusion

In spite of the fact that the participation of women in policing is a fairly recent phenomenon, it now seems absurd that their value could have been doubted for so long. Whether their contribution is the same as that of their male counterparts or different is academic. The important point is that they have a significant
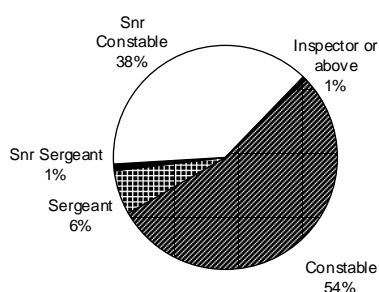
contribution to make to policing modern Australian communities.

Legislation has made the participation of women in policing possible but that participation is still limited. It is counterproductive to look for blame for this but as the contribution of women is recognised it would be productive to look to ways to overcome the barriers to their full participation in our police services.

The next steps in the maximisation of the contribution of women must be system changes, information changes and attitude changes. The actors who can make these possible are the police leaders (of both gender and at all levels of the organisation) and the police academics. They have a professional responsibility to address the issues discussed here and together they have the resources to do this.

Attitude changes are slightly more difficult but still possible for men and women of goodwill. To some extent, time alone will assist this process, but time is a slow and costly change agent. If police leaders and police academics acknowledge that women have a contribution to make to all aspects of policing in Australia, they can significantly increase both the quantity and the quality of women's contribution by their public support of effective women police.

There is no place in Australian policing for ineffective officers of either gender; the contribution to be made by token women is debatable but the potential contribution of carefully selected and well trained women is enormous. This will only be achieved by significant effort on the part of every officer in a position of leadership.

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