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## Introduction

Our research project was concerned primarily to provide a snap-shot of policing practice through the lived experience of 23 police women who voiced and explained their realities of policing. We wanted to know what it was like for them to be police officers and how they had managed their role. These officers were currently in, or had been in, the police service in England and Wales. While it is not possible to make generalisable conclusions from this small scale study the voices of these women add to 'the respectable corpus of work' that Brown and Heidensohn (2000: 2) have spoken of. Women's inclusion into policing has not been a straightforward journey and numerous studies document specific issues that women officers have had to contend with. We know that female officers have had to deal with sexist attitudes, harassment, and discrimination (Heidensohn, 1986, Westmarland 2001), and that these themes and issues have continued (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000; Brown, 2000; Renzetti, 2013; Silvestri, 2018). From our small study we were interested in seeking to better understand how police women's experiences have changed over time, specifically in relation to sexism, blocked opportunities, deployment, and culture, capturing their views of how peers in policing interacted with them. As such, our research is important and differs from many other studies as it straddles four decades of policing practice which allowed us to explore changes which were seen to have taken place during this time period.

## **Understanding Women as Police Officers**

In England and Wales, it was 1949 before women officers were employed in all forces (Rawlings, 2002). Structurally segregated from the wider police organisation, the de-professionalisation and de-feminisation of women as police officers (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000; Emsley, 2002) hindered the pace of their progress. Mid 1970s equal opportunities legislation was the catalyst that necessitated women officers be treated the same as male officers with regard to the work they undertook and the salary they received. The integration period that ensued witnessed a sharp rise in feminist critique of women working in male dominated organisations, including policing.

Gender is a basic organisational element of social life and social structure (Renzetti, 2013) that is socially created and reproduced in organisations such as the police. Kanter's early work on tokenism highlighted the negative occupational experiences of minority 'token' groups identifiable in the workplace by their low numbers (less than 15% of overall workforce) in comparison with numerically dominant groups. Kanter (1977) located gendered differences in a structural context centring on three negative experiences token groups share, performance pressures, social isolation, and role encapsulation, suggesting gender discrimination and inequality could be reduced through policy change and number balancing. Kanter's work was highly influential with findings generalised to studies on women working in a diverse range of male dominated occupations, including studies on women and policing (Gustafson, 2008; SE Martin, 1980; Stichman et al., 2010; Strohshine and Brandl, 2011). Tokenism however diverted attention from other causes of discrimination including sexism, harassment,

blocked opportunities, internal cultural resistance to positive discrimination policies, and wider social influences (Yoder, 1991). As numbers of women working in male dominated occupations increase, Yoder suggested discriminatory practices by the dominant group intensify as a reaction to perceived intrusion and increased workplace competition.

In a policing context Martin (1980) acknowledged that growing numbers of women police officers may reduce isolation and ease other effects of tokenism, but questioned whether numbers alone would have any effect on wider cultural values and interpersonal patterns of behaviour. Brown and Heidensohn (2000) similarly suggest a growth in police women numbers will not dilute the male characteristics that shape organisational culture. While gender equality policies have improved the position of women in policing, increasing numbers will not facilitate organisational change without accompanying cultural and structural change (Van der Lippe et al., 2004). Hence the strong correlation between the status of women in policing and experiences of discrimination, harassment, and isolation (Stroshine and Brandl, 2011).

Acker's concept of a gendered substructure serves as a useful analytical tool from which to further explore variations in women's experiences of policing and gendered inequalities (Benschop et al., 2001; Kurtz, 2008), shedding light on gendered processes that legitimise and sustain hegemonic masculinity within policing (Shelley et al., 2011). Silvestri (2018: 309) noting Acker's analysis of organisations as gendered, explains that women are currently almost at 1/3 of the total police workforce and questions whether structural change such as direct

entry (entering the police service at Superintendent or Inspector level) can disrupt the gendered order within policing. She notes Chan's (1996 in Silvestri, 2018: 10) suggestion of the possibility of and resistance to change alongside women's visibility and success, and how equality initiatives have led to claims of successful organisational change. However, in reference to Laverick and Cain's (2015, in Silvestri, 2018: 312) analysis of the situation in England and Wales, she aptly notes the reduction of women holding rank status and a decline in women pursuing policing as an occupational choice. In doing so she calls into question claims of progress and positive change.

Loftus's (2008) research also challenges the extent to which real change has occurred. She documents a persistent white heterosexist male culture in the Northshire Police Force that was the focus of her study occurring after equality legislation, unacceptable practices disclosed in the Secret Policeman documentary, and post Macpherson's conclusions into the unlawful killing of Stephen Lawrence. Loftus (2008) explains that while officers adhere to the new changes, resistance remains in the rank and file as well as being mirrored by the Police Federation. While Diversity Training was made mandatory in 2004, Loftus (2008) argued that a lack of overt racist language related more to disciplinary fears rather than a genuine change in assumption. Her study illustrates the persistence of male canteen culture and the use of overt sexual language.

The norm of hegemonic masculine culture, that is 'masculinities based on holding and preserving male power and privilege within society and subordination groups outside the dominant class' (Coyle and Sykes 1998; 264 In Brown and Heidensohn, 2000; 42), can still be seen within policing (Chan, et al., 2010; Cordner and Cordner, 2011). Evidence that this culture has been briefly

interrupted during certain periods as described by Loftus (2008), or perhaps provides the means as Silvestri (2018) argues of disruption during specific periods of unrest or structural change, are points of interest to our study.

## **Methods**

As females in Criminology departments feminist methodology is important as we would be exploring the once male-only bastion of policing. Liz Stanley (1993: 198) provides a clear understanding about the significance of methodology for feminists, suggesting that:

[...]methodology is, at its simplest, a set of linked procedures which are adopted because they specify how to go about reaching a particular kind of analytic conclusion or goal...they are concerned with the 'getting of knowledge' and within Women's Studies, with how knowledge is debated between different kinds of feminism, and also between feminism and the mainstream of the academy. Methodology matters then, within feminism, because it is the key to understanding and unpacking the overlap between knowledge and power.

The knowledge traced and attributed to women throughout history is central to feminist understandings of epistemology, ethics, politics and the competing positions within these (Stanley, 1993). McRobbie (1982) suggests that from the late 1970s and early 1980s more women students have enrolled for higher degrees and have undertaken projects which added to a feminist culture within distinct fields. While Heidensohn (2012) sees the impact of feminist perspectives in criminology as one of its major successes, holding great hope for its continued success, the acknowledgement of this impact is not always embraced by the student body. Feminist culture does however reveal these experiences and

contexts, helping illustrate the contemporary resonance and significance of these experiences.

While there is not one set feminist criminological stance, Renzetti (2013: 13) argues that such a feminist approach:

[...]is a paradigm that studies and explains criminal offending and victimization, as well as institutional responses to these problems, as fundamentally gendered, and that emphasizes the importance of using the scientific knowledge we acquire from our study of these issues to influence the creation and implementation of public policy that will alleviate oppression and contribute to more equitable social relations and social structures.

With these aims and methodological stances in mind we sought to explore the place of the 23 women participants in the policing profession and more widely within the women in policing literature. Our study reveals direct lived experiences of policewomen and through a feminist lens ensures their voices provide unique and individual perspectives on being a woman in policing.

### ***Sample***

As both authors had longstanding academic interests in women and policing, had written undergraduate and postgraduate police related programmes, and taught police officers, collectively we had a number of established contacts in policing that we were able to draw upon to develop a purposive snowballing sampling technique. Participants were contacted via mail, informed of the rationale of the study, and given details about participation. Typically, interviewees were candid and extensive in their explanations and experiences of policing. Their narratives capture a time before the integration of the Women's Police Service and after,

providing insight into the emergence of sex discrimination legislation, as well as the development of equality and diversity policies.

Composition of the final sample included 13 Constables, 5 Sergeants, 2 Inspectors and 3 'Senior officers'. The cover-all label of 'senior officers' is used to avoid compromising participant anonymity for the small number of respondents above the rank of Inspector. We would have liked to add to diversity and sexuality findings in police studies, and to have provided some insight into an ethnically diverse group of women, however this was not possible as our respondents self-identified as white British ( $n=22$ ) or white Welsh ( $n=1$ ) women. The lack of diversity of participants limits this study and we would hope to explore issues of diversity and intersectionality in future work.

### ***Ethical considerations***

British Society of Criminology ethical guidelines are adhered to and approval was sought from the University Research Ethics Committee to undertake this study. All participants provided written consent to take part in the research, and guarantees of anonymity were made.

### ***Procedure***

As noted, feminist theory informed interview questions to reflect upon the place of women within the police organisation so the experiences of female officers could be illustrated. We undertook 23 qualitative interviews ( $n=23$ ) within different arenas in England with women police officers with service and insight into policing from the 1970s onwards. We sought to conduct face-to-face



interviews with female officers of differing ranks and with a variety of years in service to obtain views from as diverse a group as possible. Nine of the twenty-three participants had children, fourteen did not. Interviews were conducted at participants work or home to fit with their wishes and gathered in excess of 23 hours of data which was transcribed verbatim. The narratives generated a candid and extensive amount of data about differential deployment of female officers, sexist rather than racist banter, harassment, and some changes within and between these issues over time.

### ***Data Analysis***

In terms of analysing our data and organising themes and coding we had considered feminist insights on epistemology and methodologies in order to ensure the best approach. McRobbie (1982: 46) suggests the relationship between feminism and its mainstream subject area is not necessarily easy, 'when politics, its theory and aspects of its practice, (in our case feminism) meet up with an already existing academic discipline, the convergence of the two is by no means unproblematic'. From our line by line discourse analysis and reading of the data we identified emerging themes including sexual harassment, bullying and issues about the poorly fitting and designed uniform. With knowledge of feminist research within policing (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000; ; Chan et al., 2010; Heidensohn 2009; Renzetti , 2013; Silvestri, 2018; Westmarland, 2001) interview questions were structured around prominent key themes which in turn informed our analysis of the data. The aim was to give these policewomen a voice in a male dominated institution, increasing awareness and empowerment. To make their experiences visible, raising consciousness about how life has

been, and may continue to be, difficult for them because they are women. Towards the end of the interviews we allowed space for the women to add any other issues they felt had been problematic or useful for them within their role.

### **The Lived Realities of Women Police Officers**

Findings were in part informed by the research projects' research questions and in part reflected themes that emerged in the interviews. In the sections that follow we explore these findings drawing from the women's narratives of their occupational experiences and career paths. Thematically organised around the police women's uniform, opportunities for women to engage more fully in policing during periods of social and political unrest, sexism, harassment and discrimination, data incorporates past reflection and contemporary insight. To make sense of the data extracts presented below, participants are identified numerically and the date they joined the police service is noted.

#### ***Reflections on Uniform***

Uniform issues were raised by all participants as a site of major change, but the women whose careers began in the 1970s and 1980s provided the greatest insight into the unsuitability of earlier uniforms. Their examples include wearing a skirt or flared trousers and carrying a handbag (P5, 1985); being bullied by a male Sergeant on a daily basis over wearing trousers (even though they were allowed at night) (P10, 1979); having to climb fences in a skirt, not a good experience (P12, 1976); asking for men's trousers to fit a female build that was tall and straight which caused 'uproar' (P5, 1985). The women spoke of ways in which they challenged wearing uniforms which were unfit for the purpose of policing:

*I remember it being freezing cold...in a pair of stockings like 50 denier...so I came back to work the next day with a pair of black trousers on and my Sergeant sent me promptly home (P22, 1970).*

Having begun her policing career in an era where women were not issued with batons for fear that they may be taken and used against them, (P13, 1978) she recalled being given a baton to use in self-defence that was notably shorter than those issued to male colleagues. Describing her uniform as:

*A little soft hat, like an air hostess hat, and a pencil skirt...basically you just pulled it right up and ran (P13, 1978).*

She was only permitted to wear trousers on night shifts and experienced resistance to requests to change her uniform:

*I do remember having a row with a Chief Inspector (CI)...the uniform order was smart dress, police women to wear uniform skirts, and I really took umbrage [exception] at this and I turned up in police trousers at this parade and got into trouble for doing that...I stood my ground (P13, 1978).*

She remembers the CI was so angry he wouldn't allow her to parade and was abusive to her for not conforming to his order. That she sought enquiries about a grievance but this was resolved by his apology, illustrates a maintenance of the status quo for rank rather than any real justice or institutional change during this period. When (P14, 1986) another female challenged the rules around dress code she was questioned about her appearance this included questioning her sexuality:

*When I joined...you weren't allowed to wear trousers, you had to wear a skirt and I was told off by my Chief Inspector because...I got a tie from my male colleague friend and wore that, oh and she went mad at me...we used to be called WPC...I purposely dropped mine [W]...and my*

*Superintendent dragged me in and said 'look you've dropped the W, you've had your hair cut really short, you wear a man's tie, are you a Lesbian?' (P14, 1986).*

Writing post equal opportunities era, C Martin's (1996: 519) research documented police women's dislike and dissatisfaction with the neither practical nor comfortable uniform that was designed for men not women. The women in our study joining the service 2000 onwards did not raise significant issues around the uniforms they wore as police officers. While a sensible and functional approach to uniform would appear indicative of how times have changed markedly:

*It's not a fashion show, you wear practical clothing, how can a pair of combats and a shirt not fit you? (P2, 2000).*

Some found riot gear difficult to wear and use effectively, and although one had (P3, 2004) disliked detail that distinguished women from male officers:

*Can't stand the fact that I've got a cravat and they've [male officers] got a tie. I'd rather just have a tie so we're all just the same (P3, 2004).*

She was very much aware that to keep pace with contemporary policing equipment adapting the uniform to accommodate the female form remains an afterthought:

*The best laugh was [supervisors] wanted to me to wear a headcam last year, your headcam went on your shoulder and the main power pack went in your pocket. They gave me this special vest to wear...so I had to make [the pocket] as big as possible and when I did the camera then pointed at my feet. The Inspector at the time couldn't understand what was wrong. I said well it's obvious there's no darts in it, its aimed for men not women, he went bright red (P3, 2004).*

Without question contemporary police uniforms for women have improved substantially compared to the unsuitable dress codes of the pre and post-integration period. Despite a more relaxed approach to uniform for all officers [example of 'combats' above], ensuring women's uniforms are fit for purpose will be an ongoing issue. We allude here to the caveat of checking that uniforms continue to adapt to accommodate key pieces of kit and technical equipment so as not to impede on women officers' routine experiences of doing policing.

### ***Socio-Political Unrest and Opportunities for Women***

In England and Wales, the early 1980s witnessed unprecedented levels of social and politically charged disorder. During this period women police officers working in affected geographical areas utilised career opportunities which arose when male colleagues were deployed on high profile incidents of disorder and unrest:

*After only two weeks' service in division I got with the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) to follow up this investigation from my first arrest [stolen credit card]. I thought this was marvellous, it was what I wanted to do. I just had that passion for CID from the start, it was almost a bridge too far as you didn't have women in the CID and there was usually one female detective or woman detective which they were called in those days in each CID. Opportunities were few and far between (P5, 1985).*

She went on to explain that a lot of (male) CID officers were seconded during the late 1980s to deal with IRA (terrorist) incidents resulting in an unusually high number of CID vacancies. As a result, she was able to join CID after only 18 months' service. Similarly, while opportunities were normally limited (P7, 1977) she had been allowed to join CID as the woman who was in CID was pregnant.

Even though this participant clearly saw the gendered division of labour within her role in CID she also noted the opportunities which arose during the 1981 Toxteth riots:

*All the men were off to the front and all women were left manning the defences back home and looking into the ordinary stuff because we weren't allowed to go to the front riot area (P7, 1977).*

This period of unrest allowed her to move focus from predominantly 'all the sexual offences, anything to do with children' (P7, 1977) to engage in the wider masculine male dominated side of policing. Despite recalling forms of initiation women had been subjected to, summarising her role she thoroughly enjoyed her job:

*I did have quite a long career in the CID most of which I was the token female officer...[I]...wouldn't have swapped it for the world (P7, 1977).*

Participant 10 gave insight into her experience of structural segregation during the 1981 Miner's Strike noting blocked opportunities for women:

*The Miner's Strike hit and there were no places for females to go at all as it was set up in large dorms. In terms of policing there were no places to sleep, change, or wash facilities for females. So I went onto the Special Enquiry Unit, which is now called the Vice (P10, 1979).*

This officer made the best of the opportunities open to her while her male colleagues policed the Miners' Strike, acknowledging areas which otherwise would be reserved for male officers only:

*Then it was very much you had to be in the know to get into the Dog section, basically you had to be male, females didn't get a foot in the door, we didn't have any females in the dog section (P10, 1979).*

These examples are reminiscent of the role of women during the Great Wars, where women were allowed to step up to take the place of men in the war effort even though it would be difficult to relinquish this once they came home and pre-war 'normality' returned (Andrews and Lomas, 2017). Such periods of threat and instability 'could enable women to stretch the boundaries of their gender ascribed roles' in a similar way that Andrews and Lomas (2017: 525) explore in studies on women's experiences during the Second World War. The gradual immersion of women in all areas of police work has been realised as women officers are now embedded within all areas of policing, including specialist departments (BAWP, 2006; BAWP, 2016). Such progress was apparent in the career paths of our respondents and some of the specialist roles held during their service:

*P2, 2000, Drugs Unit, Murder Investigation Team; P16, 1998, Organised Crime Unit; P18, 1995, Force Hostage Negotiator; P11, 1987, Armed Response Unit; P20, 1982, HMIC secondment Police Standards Unit; P12, 1976, Major Inquiry Team, Special Branch; P17, 1975, Vice Squad, Serious Fraud Squad.*

The pioneering women participating in our study who were very candid about how the IRA threat, the Toxteth Riots, and the Miners' Strike had impacted on their experiences, undoubtedly contributed to changing the role and status of women police officers as evidenced in our study.

### ***Sexual Harassment, Discrimination and Bullying***

Talking about experiences of sexual harassment, discrimination, or bullying generated the largest section of data examples from our participants. The majority of these women did experience sexual harassment and or discrimination/

blocked opportunities ( $n=17$ ) and where this was not an issue ( $n=6$ ) half of those officers did encounter bullying, so only a minority of women in this study ( $n=3$ ) did not experience any of these issues. This third and final part is broken down into sub-sections to contextualise data across the four decades spanning the policing experiences of our participants.

### **1970s**

Perhaps unsurprisingly given what is already known about women police officers' experiences of policing during the 1970s post-integration period, respondents recounted many examples of sexual harassment, sexism, and bullying:

*It was the norm for police women to undergo initiation ceremonies which were normally of a sexual nature. I don't mean full sex, but it was not unusual for police officers to grope police women up, make lude remarks and jokes (P7, 1977).*

*I was not exactly the best looking woman in the force, but I know of other female police officers who were attractive and they couldn't walk into a room without their backsides being pinched, really overt sexism, sexual harassment really (P10, 1979).*

*It was very sexist then, you know and you were subjected to some abuse, you know, sexist jokes, and things like that...I suppose it's a form of bullying as well... it's all good solid grounding for dealing with what there is out on the streets (P13, 1978).*

These respondents shed light upon what it was like to be a woman in the overwhelmingly male dominated policing landscape of the 1970s. Their



recollections of overt sexual harassment are illustrative of casualised attitudes towards sexualised treatment of women that have been documented in previous studies (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000). The data also provides some insight into how women contextualised their treatment. Participant 13 for example considers surviving this treatment as a form of training in preparation for real world operational policing, rather than something to make a formal complaint about.

On the one hand the women officers' we spoke to tended to talk about the skills required for successful policing rather than thinking of sex as a key determinant, even though on the other hand quite often their sex had a real impact on blocked opportunities and harassment. Participant 19 spoke of having fertility problems and that occupational health had called the IVF clinic to check that she was actually having treatment (P19, 1979). Her word had simply not been accepted.

Participant 12 recalled the following incident occurring at a formal interview:

*Once being asked in an interview if I was married or had a boyfriend and at that time I didn't and so then the next question was erm well what about children...and my response to that was well actually that's going to be a bit of a struggle if I haven't got a boyfriend yet and it was left at that (12, 1976).*

Both participants 12 and 19 had joined the police service on and just after the Sex Discrimination Act was introduced, though this did not prevent these lines of questioning. Equality policies did ensure women, albeit in 'token' numbers, were integrated into previously all male departments. Participant 17 for instance, considered herself to be at an advantage when she joined the police because:

*They [male supervisors] would send me to different departments because there were no women (P17, 1975).*

She had seized upon opportunities to work in the Vice Squad and CID, yet accompanying such breaks was resistance from some male colleagues:

*A couple...didn't accept that a female was coming in to do a man's job...and I took a lot of stick...and I got abuse and people wouldn't sit on the same table as me at lunchtimes (P17, 1975).*

Even her Inspector suggested the reason she had joined was to find a husband.

Our research also revealed historical examples of the gender pay gap in relation to the Policewomen's department. When Participant 22 joined she was on 9/10 of the pay of a policeman on the streets (P22, 1970). Participant 10 noted a later era in relation to pay and conditions. She explained the potential gender pay gap when she spoke about policing the Miner's Strike and how women were excluded from the financial benefits arising from the policing of that unrest which ensured high overtime payments for her male police colleagues:

*Men were going out earning £2000 a month overtime and I was sat at home, because I couldn't go as they didn't have the facilities (P10, 1979).*

On first glance these examples seem to denote a certain time and long gone era regarding female and male officers pay, deployment and conditions. However, a consideration of the gender pay gap for the Metropolitan Police in 2016 illustrates a gap of 11.6% with female officers on £19.34 per hour while the male officers were on £21.88 per hour. (London City Hall, 2016). Silvestri (2018) has noted that despite being in an unprecedented period of change for women in policing with "The appointment of Cressida Dick in April 2017 as the first female Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in its 180-year history...policing and police leadership remains the preserve of White men" (p. 310). The dominance of male officers in leadership positions influences the gender pay gap, illustrating

the need for more women and Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) officers to be represented at the highest levels if this anomaly is to be addressed.

### **1980s and 1990s**

In terms of their experience of blocked opportunities Participant 4 had been denied a place in the horse section as she had the wrong coloured hair:

*I applied for the Mounted Police in London and I was told that my hair was the wrong colour...My hair, I dyed my hair red, not red as in scarlet you know but you know as women do and I was told my hair was the wrong colour (P4, 1989).*

This was verbal feedback and she did not take it further however she did not feel this would have been a reason given to deny entry to any male colleague,

*No, they wouldn't have told a bloke his hair was the wrong colour, never (P4, 1989).*

Other women spoke of being 'tested'. Participant 14 reflected upon occasions where she was expected to stay back after 10pm for a drink and recalls:

*They [male colleagues] always used to test me you know if they were going to a strip club or something like that, they'd always ask me along and you know to see whether I'd go or not, sometimes I did you know... that pressure was there yeah (P14, 1986).*

Or having to 'fit in' in order to stay in a particular role:

*There had to be a woman in CID to pick up the sexual offences, the child protection issues and they needed a woman in there but I don't think they were happy with the woman that was there...it was quite a shame...we became friends...and she's bitter to this day...but she's flying now and she's an Inspector (P14, 1986).*

She explained that in order to fit into such a male dominated environment, women either need to be the feminine side of the face of policing or acquiesce with the male culture in policing (See Martin 1980 in Heidensohn, 2002).

Participant 6 considered gender to be irrelevant within policing despite having been a victim of horrendous harassment when a male colleague had taken a picture of her from her desk drawer when she was heavily pregnant with her first child:

*He's taken it, photocopied it, chopped my head off and placed it on the body of a grossly overweight woman. He sent them, drip fed them to me anonymously. I found out who it was through fingerprints on paper. He was my colleague, someone I sat opposite to on my desk every day and I thought it was just awful (P6, 1984).*

Although she did receive an apology of sorts from the Police Federation she did not feel this was heartfelt. That such complaints were smoothed over rather than dealt with fairly was a recurring theme in the data (examples were provided from participants 6, 1984; 10, 1979; 13, 1978; 14, 1986; and 22, 1970).

Participant 9 had heard derogatory and demeaning sexist comments:

*One being 'split arse' we were called "split arses" which was absolutely horrific and the first time I heard that thinking I can't believe, but you just put up with it to fit in, you did back then (P9, 1992).*

This participant went on to recall a female officer leaving the job because of the way she was treated on an all-male unit where male colleagues looked at pornography but she explained this was in the mid 1990s. Participant 15 considered resilience as important to enable her to remain in post and she

considered the phrase 'dull tart' as a survival mechanism to get her through the sexual banter:

*my nickname on the shifts was dull tart you know, and you're young aren't you, and you think it's a bit funny...and it's a kind of survival mechanism because these people that were kind of having the banter with you, the sexual banter, a lot of it was I think a survival mechanism if you show that you've got a sense of humour (P15, 1992).*

Participant 18 explained that policing is about individuals rather than gender and she did suggest that:

*I do think there is still a culture of banter within the police, but I don't think that is different to any other workplace (P18, 1995).*

But she also felt dark humour was something of a coping mechanism for the most difficult and haunting aspects of the job.

## **2000s**

Participant 1 had a relatively short level of service as a response officer and thought that her job was more about individual strengths and weaknesses rather than differences between men and women officers. Despite believing personality or the individual to be more important than gender in relation to policing, this same participant also explained that:

*One thing I always found, and it was a really popular comment, was that if you had a female in a high position, the most popular comment used to be, 'What's she doing up there, it's 'cause she's female' (P1, 2008).*

She felt comments of this nature were used to explain women's presence in senior positions, insinuating they couldn't do the job but got it *because* they were a woman, contextualising these attitudes as specific towards women of rank:

*I wouldn't say it was bullying and I wouldn't say it was sexual harassment at all. It was a comment. But then again that comment came on the back of someone being female. If a male was rubbish at their job and didn't do, 'he's rubbish at his job', and it wasn't because he was a male (P1, 2008).*

Her belief that numbers of females are irrelevant and personality and the individual is paramount does not neatly fit with the anti-woman in power rhetoric she had heard from front line male officers. As she had not encountered such arguments in relation to race (see Chan et al., 2010), it seems unlikely that ethnicity would be used explicitly in this way post-Macpherson (See Chan et al., 2010; Loftus, 2008; Rowe, 2002).

Participant 2 also perceived the role of a police officer to be about skills and personalities, yet recalled working on the Murder Investigation Team where female officers were undertaking the administrative jobs while the police men were undertaking their 'heroic' roles (Silvestri, 2018). She explained:

*I'm not saying that this was because it was wrong, I think there were skills getting used in the right areas, but I think in another ten years, you'll probably see a different progress (P2, 2000).*

Participant 3, hearing sexist banter from colleagues about women coming out of pubs, had tried to challenge this by making a similar comment about a man's physical appearance which did not go down well with her male colleagues. The same participant, having undertaken the SOLO course, expressed annoyance that whenever sexual assaults came in the norm was to ask a female rather than asking for a SOLO-trained officer (See Gregory and Lees, 1999):

*You are told when you do a SOLO course whether it's a man or a woman  
you act in your professional capacity not as to what sex that person is and  
I think they should be reminded of that (P3, 2004).*

The experiences of those participants whose occupational journey in policing began in the latter part of the twentieth century are striking, and for those who gave graphic accounts of sexual assault particularly troubling. Furthermore, that only a small number of participants did not experience sexual harassment, bullying or discrimination, is concerning. Internal resistance to female officers from male officers, including those in senior ranks, was evident in the treatment of women who challenged the rules, complained about bullying, and were subjected to socialisation 'tests'. Post millennium participants continued to provide examples of their experiences of sexist views, derogatory perceptions of ranked women officers, banter, and gendered problems around use of equipment and uniform. This concurs with findings from many existing studies regarding the persistence of hegemonic masculinity (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000; Chan et al., 2010; Coyle and Morgan- Sykes, 1998), yet differs from Southern's study of women officers in the RUC where he discusses the exposure of women to '...the rough and tumble of sexual horseplay by males' (2018; 55) but noted that he had not come across this type of problem from all but one respondent (one of his six participants) which differs markedly from our study. That certain problems remain for women illustrates a genuine need for support and for women officers to be able to access networks and use resilience strategies to challenge any form of sexual discrimination.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

We sought to explore women officer's experiences of policing using a feminist analysis to examine their treatment within the male dominated police organisation. We sought to consider how they did their job alongside the challenges they faced, and whether institutional and cultural changes could be seen over a period of time. The inclusion of lived experiences of women professionals and practitioners is as Renzetti (2013) argued, a core feminist principle. We hope that in producing new empirical data and meshing this with recent research and thinking about women police officers, we are adding to knowledge on the history and contemporary role and practice of women police officers in England and Wales.

Feminism remains a useful and critical lens by which to examine criminological areas, allowing important points to be made (Heidensohn, 2012). Kringen's (2014) systematic review of literature on women and policing from 1972 to 2012 examined how gender was used within these studies noting:

*'Feminist critiques illustrate that androcentric research fails to consider the impact of gender on crime and criminal justice. Importantly, feminist scholars have advocated increasing knowledge about crime and the criminal justice system through the inclusion of women rather than by ignoring men' (Sharp and Hefley, 2007 cited in Kringen, 2014: 368).*

Our findings add to feminist discourse illustrating women's role in criminal justice. Publishing feminist articles in places where practitioners as well as academics may see the findings widens knowledge and limits marginalisation. It is also hoped they will inform other female officers, and key stakeholders in policing with responsibility for key decisions around policy and practice.



Importantly that the data captures a distinct period of time illustrates clearly that changes did happen, especially at the site of much resistance in relation to the uniform. Women officers do develop strategies for navigating masculine terrains (Brown and Heidensohn, 2000; Coyle and Sykes, 1998). Similarly, in our study women did not passively accept the ill-suited uniform imposed upon them, seizing opportunities to defy the adherence to a uniform that was not fit for purpose with regard to the job they needed to do. Even though they knew they would be in trouble and would have to tolerate orders from on high, some participants put up a brave resistance to the inappropriate uniform, despite bullying and disciplinarian supervisors. These women challenged the rules and pushed the boundaries of what was considered respectable. Their tenacity helped to shape discussion about rethinking the uniform for female officers and their 'different' physical forms.

Women's experiences of police work and deployment have also changed. Their immersion in all areas of operational roles and work is a far cry from the equal opportunity decades of the previous century where they were prohibited from attending serious incidents of riot and unrest while male colleagues would go to the front line leaving female officers to manage policing tasks at the station. Indeed, the situation now is one where the feminisation of policing is seen as useful in terms of avoiding the most problematic elements of macho policing styles in public order incidents. Silvestri (2018) suggests direct entry has the potential to disrupt the entrenched views about the 'ideal' worker being male in policing. We suggest examples from our data capture an earlier disruption of the 'ideal' male police officer whose removal from their normal role during periods of socio-political disorder allowed women officers to leave the gendered division of

labour and undertake the heroic PC role while the men were busy being 'heroic' at the source of threat and unrest. Perhaps this might also be considered the 'interruption' of police occupational culture as explained by Loftus (2008).

Exploring female police officers lived reality through the lenses of women whose collective experiences of policing span four decades has also allowed us to identify ways in which women have been subjected to sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying, how they reacted to this, and how they made sense of and managed this within their work. Identifying shifts and changes across time typically suggest that while instances of overt sexism, discrimination and bullying have diminished at the formal policy level they continue to occur informally in everyday workplace interactions, including the persistence of 'banter'. Changes in the turnover of police officers who will now leave after completing their 30 years' service, and who have memories of all-male areas of policing, may well have some impact upon policing culture, as all-male areas of policing will become seen as something from the past, however this will be limited while women remain in a minority position within policing. Cordner and Cordner (2011) argue that male-dominated culture remains an obstacle in both the recruitment and retention of officers and that problems with an all-boys club and hostility to women persist. Numbers of women within policing are still not representative of women in society (Dick and Metcalf, 2007; Silvestri, 2018), and while this is not the only place progress could be made, it remains an important element of addressing inequalities and representation in policing. To retain legitimacy policing needs to become more representative of the citizens it serves in terms of women, BAME officers, and officers from different sexual orientations (Squires, 2007). Valuing demographic diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and representativeness has

been argued for more recently in Australian debates about women and policing too (EHRC, 2018; McLeod and Herrington, 2017).

The conclusion we come to is that the experience of policing for women officers in England and Wales has undergone major changes and monumental transformations. Women police officers wearing stocking and air hostess type headwear are images from a bygone era and contemporary representations of women in policing see women in full riot gear, and Cressida Dick as Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. Yet elements of the same old story stubbornly persist. Paradoxically little has changed with regard to the gender pay gap within policing and there is still progress to be made in terms of internal perceptions of women in policing based on their sex. For instance, questioning their promotional achievements, and presumptions around their suitability to specific areas of work including administration and dealing with female complainants of sexual assault. Given the ongoing need to ensure uniforms for women keep pace of technical kit requirements, overcoming some elements of the same old story requires structural and cultural change, particularly as numbers of women officers increase.

The final point we want to make is that given the challenges these women faced, as well as undertaking their policing role, it must be remembered that on the whole they loved their time as police officers and had really enjoyed the fact that every day at work was different. All officers in our study shared a commitment to seeking justice and making a difference as well as being determined to do as good a job as they possibly could as police officers. Our participants enjoyed that they could not predict what would come up next and they rated being part of a team, often citing sporting interests and networks which helped them to do a good

job in the police service and to have the camaraderie that they appreciated in their pursuit of justice. We want the final word to come from one of our participants who, despite having experienced some of the problematic issues raised in our research, summed up her policing career as follows:

*Policing is a brilliant job, there are still barriers, and my dad said to me when I joined, 'it's no job for a woman', but it is, it really, really is, it's a brilliant job for a woman (P9, 1992).*

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