



Why Gender Equality in Policing is Important for Achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 16

Jacqueline Sebire

Bedfordshire Police, United Kingdom

Abstract

United Nations (UN) sustainable development goal 5 calls for the elimination of violence, and goal 16 calls for strong and stable judicial institutions (United Nations 2016). The composition and culture of a nation's police force play an essential role in its ability to achieve these goals. Employing a diverse workforce, particularly in terms of female representation in all ranks within the policing command structure, is a vital determinant for setting a police force's culture. However, many police forces remain as traditional, male-dominant hierarchical institutions (Rabe-Hemp 2018). In England and Wales, although the proportion of female police officers has reached 30.4 per cent of the police force, the progression of women to the highest police ranks has declined (Home Office 2019).

This article considers the influence that female representation can have within police forces on the effective management of domestic and sexually violent crimes that disproportionately affect women. It will highlight the barriers to female recruitment and their progression, as well as suggest a series of recommendations to improve opportunities for women in policing. In doing so, the article will consequently suggest improvements to women's access to justice, thereby providing a platform for achieving these UN goals.

Keywords

Policing; female policing; women in policing; gender.

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Background

Two words continually resonate when reviewing the objectives of the 63rd Commission for the Status of Women and the United Nations' sustainable development goals 5 and 16: elimination and equality (United Nations 2016). These two words relate to the elimination of violence towards women and girls and to the promotion of equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. Transparent ethical policing is vital for achieving the elimination of such violence and for securing a stable government.

The Metropolitan Police Service—the United Kingdom's (UK) largest police force—has celebrated 100 years of women in policing as of 2019 (Rees and Strange 2019). This presents an appropriate moment to reflect on how far British policing has progressed. Despite women being represented in two of the most senior positions (Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and Director of the National Crime Agency), men continue to outnumber women in the most senior ranks by a ratio of almost four to one. Currently, only four out of the 43 police forces in England and Wales are led by women (Daily Telegraph 2019).

Home Office data illustrate how the gender composition of the police workforce has changed in the past decade. In 2010 the proportion of female officers was 25.7% by 2019 it has risen to 30.4%. (Home Office 2019) In terms of the number of women in the police force, England and Wales rank above the international average level of female police representation, which ranges approximately between 5.1 per cent and 28.8 per cent (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013). However, in terms of promotion within English and Welsh police forces, the number of women reaching the most senior ranks did indeed have an upward trend, but then failed to reach any form of parity at the executive officer level. Such limited sustained progress of women reaching senior and commanding ranks has also been experienced in the United States (Guajardo 2016), Australia and New Zealand (Prenzler, Fleming and King 2010).

Gender-Based Violent Crime

Although women are less likely to be victims of violent crime in general, they are disproportionately likely to be victims of domestic and sexual violence. Figures from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) indicated that an estimated 1.3 million women (7.9 per cent) and 695,000 men (4.2 per cent) experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2018 (Office for National Statistics 2018, 3). Police-recorded figures for incidents of rape in 2017 revealed an increase of 15 per cent, of which 88 per cent of the victims were women. The CSEW estimated that 20 per cent of women (approximately 3.4 million women) and four per cent of men have experienced some type of sexual assault since the age of 16 (Office for National Statistics 2017, 2). UK legislators, and thus policing, have now recognised new sexual assault offences—such as female genital mutilation, modern-day slavery and forced marriage—that also have high levels of female victimisation. The increases in recorded crime rates for these specific crime types can be due to improvements in recording processes, as well as to an increased public awareness of these crimes (Burman and Brooks-Hay 2018). However, due to the gendered and disproportional victimisation of such crimes, the increases in crime rates primarily represent an increase in the crime levels against women. Therefore, police must be in a position to ensure their effective response to the rising numbers of female victims and their needs; they must bring offenders to justice and prevent such increasing rates of violent criminality, as aligned with the UN's sustainable development goals.

Although limited, certain research indicates that female officers have specialised skill sets that are more advantageous for community relations, support functions and investigations concerning child protection and vice than for other more traditional areas of law enforcement (Dick and Metcalfe 2007; Irving 2009; McCarthy 2013). Workforce data from one English police force, with an overall female staff representation of 33 per cent, indicate that a significantly higher

proportion of female police officers and staff are represented in units that specialise in 'vulnerability' and gender-based violent crime, such as child protection (71 per cent) and domestic and sexual offences (50 per cent). A lesser proportion of female officers are represented in other more traditional masculine areas of policing, such as firearm units (seven per cent) and roads policing (19 per cent). Although these gendered and disproportionate areas of policing specialisations should be addressed, it is essential that police services develop and deploy their workforce capabilities to manage the greatest areas of threat, risk, harm and need. The continuing increase in recorded rates of sexual and domestic violence signifies that police forces must be in a position to deploy their most effective assets for preventing and reducing such violent crimes (which serves as the ambition of UN sustainable development goal 5). Ensuring increased female recruitment has thus never been more important, as female officers seemingly dominate the work in these areas. Female officers must also be trained and supported to deliver a high quality of service to female victims, as well as to bring suspects to justice.

Strong and Stable Police Leadership

Research has shown that diversity in, and an egalitarian culture surrounding, the executive board positions of the commercial sphere promote greater effectiveness, productivity and decision-making (Creary et al. 2019; Sarhan, Ntim and Al-Najjar 2019). The same is true for policing. It would be greatly beneficial to shift away from the 'group think' of predominately white, male and autocratic senior officer stereotypes to a senior officer team that is much more diverse and reflective of the communities that it serves. Greater diversity in senior ranks—including increased numbers of female senior leaders—indicates higher levels of procedural justice and police legitimacy among citizens. If a police force is more reflective of society and treats its own staff with equality and fairness, it is more likely to treat its citizens with fairness and thus increase social peace and cohesion; this is the police force's fundamental objective for ensuring strong and stable institutions (i.e., UN sustainable development goal 16) (Novich, Kringen and Hunt 2018). However, despite numerous positive action initiatives that were implemented in the past decade, the lack of diversity within the senior ranks of police forces in England and Wales has been recognised as a significant impediment to developing community confidence and to establishing a police service that truly represents the communities that it serves (HMICFRS 2019). Building strong and stable law enforcement institutions that communities can trust remains a great challenge if there is no sustainable model of diverse senior leadership within police forces.

Policies for Change

Several barriers to the recruitment, retention and progression of female police officers and staff have been identified. Female officers' ability to progress their careers greatly relies on the prevalence of the 'old boys' club and machismo exclusionary culture of the police force, as well as on their physical fitness requirements and caring responsibilities (Chan 2013; Rabe-Hemp 2018). Further, policing is no longer considered the traditional career for life where you would sign on at 18 years old and serve for a full thirty years joining as a constable and taking a career to progress through the ranks. The millennial generation has different work expectations, to which policing has had to respond by offering different exit and entry points. Policing has had to adapt to allow individuals a number of career pathways in order to attract and recruit a younger and more diverse workforce. Individuals can now join at different ranks rather than only progress from a constable pathway. There are options to leave mid-career with limited financial penalty, take career breaks and are often not expected to serve a full 30 to 40 years within a single career structure. For instance, 'Police Now' is a graduate course for officers involving an intensive two-year program based on community rather than response policing (Police Now 2019). Accelerated detective programs with fast tracking and direct entry to higher ranks strongly appeal to women because they can bypass the longer time required to progress in the more traditional response

ranks, and because the programs are more flexible and provide enhanced promotional support (May 2015).

Policing cultures that embrace the necessity of a work–life balance are essential for recruiting and retaining female staff (BBC 2019). All police forces now employ flexible working policies and strategies to ensure that when staff are on maternity or carer’s leave, they are kept updated with legal and force developments. When they return to the workplace, which often involves a period of great anxiety, staged returns with enhanced support are provided.

Mentoring and coaching through formal and informal mechanisms have been employed and coordinated through the UK’s College of Policing to talent manage aspiring female officers. Peer support and staff associations are also instrumental in raising the profile of gender-based issues within policing. The British Association of Women Police (BAWP 2020) and the Police Federation of England and Wales (Police Federation 2020) have convened conferences and policies regarding gender-specific officer issues, such as menopause¹.

Since 2017, all UK organisations employing 250 or more employees must publicly report their gender pay gap (i.e., the difference in average earnings between all men and women in an organisation). Through this requirement, the police force was identified as still having an inequality of gender pay levels due to the small number of women employed in senior ranks (see GOV.UK n.d.). Publishing this data ensures that a public focus is retained on policing, which in turn ensures that sustainable support programs are commissioned for junior officers and recruits, as they are the empowered senior officers of tomorrow.

Recommendations and Considerations

Gender-Based Violence

Sustainable development targets 5.2, 5.3, 16.1 and 16.2 (United Nations 2016) essentially relate to the elimination of violence, especially violence towards women and children. One part to achieving this is for victims to trust the police and report incidents to them. The police must be truly representative of all the communities that they serve, and they should have high levels of gender equality in all ranks and throughout the organisation to gain the trust of victims. Positive action in the recruitment and retention of officers who specialise in gender-based crimes must be a prioritised policy for police forces.

Strong and Stable Judicial Institutions

Goals 5.5 and 16.7 involve ensuring women’s full and effective participation, in political, economic and public life. In this space, police services should offer various flexible talent management schemes to assist under-represented groups in the police force with their promotion and career pathways. Best practice for such schemes involves mentoring, further education, mindfulness and supportive networks. Additionally, police forces should publish their workforce statistics annually. Decisions regarding the most senior policing appointments should be made through an open and transparent process by a diverse appointments panel that includes community representatives. The process should also be published for public scrutiny.

In goal 5C, the UN urges countries to adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality. Consideration should be given to establishing legislation by which all police forces are obliged to publish gender pay gap statistics. This would reveal those police forces who have gender parity in all ranks.

Sustainable development goal 16 asserted that both the judiciary and the police are among the institutions most affected by corruption. Target 16.6 is to develop effective, accountable and

transparent institutions in all levels. Having diverse senior leadership teams who promote transparent and accountable cultures can prevent corruption and autocratic leadership styles from becoming established within police services.

Correspondence: Dr Jacqueline Sebire, Assistant Chief Constable, Bedfordshire Police, Police HQ, Woburn Road, Kempston, MK43 9AX, United Kingdom. Email: Jacqueline.Sebire@Bedfordshire.pnn.Police.uk

¹ (see <https://www.polfed.org/news-media/latest-news/2019/change-needed-when-it-comes-to-menopause-in-policing/>)

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