OBSTACLES TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN POLICING

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In the last 30 years enormous advances have been made in women’s access to the benefits of a police career. Despite this progress, however, specific problems remain and the percentage of sworn female officers will increase only very slowly and will not reach parity with men unless more dynamic efforts are made to improve participation. This paper synthesises research on the status of women in Australian policing to identify key areas where discriminatory barriers persist or where enhanced action is required under equal employment opportunity legislation. The main areas of concern are pre-entry physical ability tests, low application rates, lack of union support, managerial indifference, and inadequate EEO review. Two key strategies for improvement suggested by this analysis are targeted recruitment and the application of a ‘problem oriented’ approach to management of EEO.

Pre-entry Physical Ability Tests

One way to begin to assess equity in police recruitment is to compare male and female application rates with male and female recruitment rates. Appointment by merit means that parity should not be assumed. However, significant differences should give cause for further research into possible sources of discrimination. The only Australian survey of recruitment trends, from 1988 to 1993, showed considerable differences between agencies in Australia (Prenzler, 1995). Overall, for the period under review, women averaged 27.5% of applicants and 23.5% of recruits. The gap was much wider in Victoria and Western Australia, and moderate in South Australia and Tasmania. In the early part of the period the gap was wide for New South Wales and Queensland but this changed significantly in the latter half when these two agencies began recruiting a higher percentage of women than applied. The effect is evident in Figure 1, showing a convergence of the two rates.

Figure 1: Female Applicants and Female Recruits, Australia, 1988/89-1991/92*

* 1993 data were incomplete. Source: personnel sections.

Most agencies attributed the loss of female applicants in the recruitment process to the effect of physical ability tests. The tests appeared to be particularly damaging to female applicants in WA and Victoria. NSW had a test which women failed at a higher rate than men but the effect was compensated for by preferential recruitment of women. Queensland introduced a test in 1994, which reduced the intake of women (Figure 2). The effect was
then counteracted by changes to the test time and the introduction of preferential selection following the NSW model.

Figure 2: Female Applicants and Female Recruits, Qld Police Service, 1987-96*


A recent evaluation demonstrated that physical ability tests lack task validity and are probably illegal under EEO legislation (Prenzler, 1996). Discrimination cases in the United States confirm this view. A contextual analysis suggests that physical tests have functioned as a rearguard defence by male police faced with increasing competition from women as a result of the phasing in of anti-discrimination legislation.

Recent figures suggest an increase in the recruitment of women in Australia largely as a result of improvements in WA and Victoria. The last two intakes of recruits in WA had approximately 25% females, up from 16%. This has been related to a relaxation of the physical entry test. In Victoria, the last intake had 27.2% females, up from approximately 20% in 1990. This was attributed to female applicants’ greater awareness of, and preparedness, for the test. Exact figures are unavailable, although women are still failing at a greater rate than men (personal communication, PSWA Recruiting Branch, VP EEO Unit). Modifications to tests or the provision of pre-test information rarely, if ever, create parity between men and women, and the mere presence of tests deters female applicants. States which retain the tests while being committed to EEO are forced to modify rank ordering of applicants to recover lost ground.
Low Application Rates

The number of female sworn officers in Australia has been steadily increasing since the late-1960s at the rate of approximately 0.5% per annum. Prenzler’s (1995) study suggested that this might eventually level out. The study suffered from difficulties in obtaining reliable and comparable figures for all jurisdictions. At the time it appeared that application rates were either fairly stable or declining slightly (Figure 1) and that there would be an eventual convergence of recruitment rates and the number of sworn officers at around 22%. The current figure of 28.5% female recruits suggests a slightly more optimistic scenario with possibly steadily improving recruitment rates buoying overall numbers (Figure 3). Nonetheless, the increase will remain at a snail’s pace. If this trend is maintained it will take until the year 2060 before women make up 50% of officers (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Female Sworn Officers and Female Recruits, Australia, 1996*

Sworn officers current as of May/June 1996. Recruits in most recent intake. The latter figures are designed to provide a snapshot of recruiting in mid-1996. They should be treated with caution because of fluctuations in numbers. For example, the last recruit intake in SA (29-4-96) was 36% female, but the previous intake (16-3-96) was 64% female!

A more pessimistic scenario is that increases in female recruitment in WA and Victoria have reached their peak so that recruitment across Australia will level out at 30% at best in the near future. This means that the number of sworn females may also stabilise around 30% in about 25 years’ times (Figure 5).
* The figures for recruits are rough approximations based on the calendar year 91/92 and on the latest intake to June ‘96.

A follow up study on recruitment is planned for the end of the decade and this should provide more reliable trend data. Figures now readily available from Queensland show a remarkably stable application rate of approximately 27.8% from 1990 following the Fitzgerald Inquiry and the introduction of appointment by merit (Figure 2). This suggests several things. If the Queensland case can be taken as providing some confirmation of stable application rates for the whole of Australia, then it appears that recruitment rates can only be improved by three strategies. One is to close the gap in those states where recruitment rates fall below those of application rates. The obvious immediate strategy here is to remove physical ability tests. A second option is to advance affirmative action in
selection. There are limitations to this, however, because of the compromise with appointment by merit.

The third option is to improve application rates. NSW has had a targeted recruitment program aimed at female high school students but the effect is uncertain. Other agencies have tried different approaches, such as newspaper advertisements aimed at women. There is very little research on targeted recruitment, although increases in application rates of up to 14% have been reported in some occupations. More generally, results have not been spectacular, but neither have the resources put into the programs (AAA, 1990; Draper, 1985; Eisenstein, 1985). Targeted recruitment campaigns should be built on knowledge about male and female perceptions of policing as a career option and there is scant information on this. (The author is currently developing a questionnaire on the topic for a survey of high school and university students.)

**Lack Of Union Support**

Unions have had a fascinating and highly unstable relationship with women police. In Queensland, for example, the union vociferously opposed the belated appointment of women in 1931. Then, from the 1950s, it fought sustained campaigns to give women equal powers as well as equal pay, superannuation and overtime rights. At one point the union even argued for the deployment of women into the full range of duties. However, alarm over increased female numbers in the 1970s provoked a successful campaign which devastated women’s numbers in the 1980s (Prenzler and Wimshurst, 1996). Union concerns about women’s physical ability also facilitated the introduction of the pre-entry physical ability test in Queensland in 1994. In general, the union was noticeably silent in the post-Fitzgerald period on women’s issues such as flexible working arrangements, maternity leave and child care. Despite occasional support for causes such as equal pay and swearing in, police unions in Australia have held to a fairly consistent view that women belong in small numbers in an adjunct role to male police in cases involving women offenders or victims.

This view is supported by the very limited amount of research on police unions and women in Australia (e.g., Tynan, forthcoming). Little or nothing has been done to encourage female participation in unions, and policewomen’s networks have been created of necessity outside unions. Policewomen who experience discrimination or harassment are more likely to turn to EEO units for assistance, rather than unions. Unions certainly are not at the cutting edge of equity policy, and given the claims for police union power, this would seem to be an area where they should be using their influence for good.

**Managerial Indifference**

Only on rare occasions have police leaders voluntarily introduced open door policies for women. Change has been driven almost entirely by anti-discrimination legislation and has often been fiercely resisted by the administrative hierarchy (Jones, 1986; Martin, 1990). Although discrimination legislation produced fundamental change in many occupations, by the 1980s the limitations of this approach were becoming apparent. Aggrieved parties can be deterred in seeking justice by ignorance of the law, fear of retribution, fear of financial costs or unfavourable publicity, and difficulties in proving bias (Thornton, 1990). In policing, considerable discretion is exercised by male supervisors in deployment, rostering and
promotion, and gender bias can easily be disguised by ostensibly job-related criteria (Jones, 1986). Promotion is often dependent on semi-formal networks which are usually closed to women. Career expectations generated in childhood, the potential conflict between shift work and child rearing responsibilities, and expectations of discrimination are also likely to mean that women ‘self-select’ themselves out of applying for employment, promotion or specialist roles (Martin, 1990; Potts, 1983). Major changes have occurred in women's access to a career in policing. Nonetheless, there is a persistent problem with disproportionately high levels of complaints by women police about sexual harassment, discrimination and inadequate support for special needs (e.g., Anderson, Brown and Campbell, 1993; Martin, 1990).

Historically in Australia the attitudes of individual commissioners have been crucial for the fortunes of women in different agencies (Prenzler, 1994). Despite the universality of anti-discrimination legislation, it appears that differences in agencies’ performance in equity must relate in part to different management approaches. The new generation of EEO and affirmative action legislation is designed to capture the original vision of anti-discrimination legislation, which was not just to prevent discrimination but to promote equal participation. A number of writers in this area emphasise the distinction between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law (Felkenes, Peretz and Schroedel, 1993), or ‘formal equality’ and ‘substantive equality’ (Thornton, 1990, p. 15ff), in the manner in which organisations count equity as part of their mission. A generally lukewarm attitude is reflected in the scant regard given to systematic analysis of male/female dynamics within police organisations (see below).

**Inadequate EEO Review**

The 1993 survey of the status of women in Australian policing (Prenzler, 1995) involved writing to police agencies for data on male and female rates of application, recruitment, academy graduation, employment separation, and sex discrimination complaints and their resolution. No agency had all this information immediately to hand. All agencies eventually provided some data but none was available on a regular basis. The data on complaints and separations were particularly limited and virtually useless for analysis. Where differences of significance between males and females were apparent - in the transition from recruit to probationary constable for example - follow up requests were made for possible explanations. Most agencies were unable to provide breakdown data or verifiable explanations. Cases of favourable treatment of women similarly could not be explained.

Police personnel managers committed to fulfilling the spirit of EEO legislation are faced with a wide array of possible strategies. To find the most effective measure, problem areas need to be identified and remedial action evaluated for its impact. Scrutiny of specific elements in a discrimination problem involves the same set of procedures necessary for effective crime prevention from a situational or problem oriented perspective. For example, the idea of a degree of rational choice in crime (Clarke, 1992) coincides with the concept of ‘rational bias’ seen to operate in police services whereby middle management acts on clues from senior management about the desirability of promoting or restricting equal opportunity (Martin, 1990, p. 92). More broadly, the research on gender equity in policing clearly shows that the precise sources of discrimination (or of disparate impact) need to be located and relevant remedies applied (e.g., Jones, 1986). Thus, from the perspective of situational crime prevention, discrimination should be specifically located within an organisation (or elements of its social context). Where possible, the environment should then be manipulated to increase the efforts and risks of discrimination, and to reduce the rewards (Clarke, 1992).
Goldstein's formulation of ‘problem oriented policing’ has been the *locus classicus* for the application of situationally specific crime reduction strategies by police. Like Clarke, Goldstein (1990) emphasised the importance of specificity in analysing problems of crime or disorder, assessing the impact of current policies, widely canvassing alternative responses, and evaluating new ‘tailor made’ strategies. While the application of this approach to the crime problem remains imperative, what is also needed is for police services to apply these principles to ‘crimes’ such as discrimination and sexual harassment within their own ranks. A common and inadequate form of ‘research’ conducted by police is to write to other agencies to canvas what is current elsewhere. The results of this, as in the case of physical ability tests, is a process of shared error. The process is sometimes reinforced by inadequate oversight by EEO bodies. The physical ability tests in Victoria and Queensland were supported by each state’s EEO watchdog despite the absence of scientific evidence.

Annual reports on progress in EEO have provided some useful data on topics such as staff training in EEO, knowledge of sexual harassment referral networks and perceptions of promotion opportunities. Findings of this nature have resulted in action such as career planning workshops and the creation of women’s networks. Nonetheless, agencies are normally not required to provide the kind of detailed data that would allow for adequate diagnosis and treatment of problems (e.g., EEB, 1992). At present it is extremely difficult to identify and prove discrimination against policewomen in deployment or promotion (see for example, Hotchkiss, 1992; QPS, 1993; Victoria Police, 1990).

**Table 1: South Australia Police Department - Reasons for Separations of Male and Female Officers, 1987/88 - 1992/93**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resignation</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>90 (19 M/L) (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalidity</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissed</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M/L - Resigned whilst on maternity leave. Source: SAPD.

A good example of the kind of reporting required was provided by the SA police on employment separations for the 1993 study (Table 1). Women averaged approximately 11% of sworn personnel in SA in the period 1987-93 but made up 18.1% of resignations. Twenty-two percent of these were women resigning while on maternity leave. This raises questions about the adequacy of maternity leave or maternity related options such as part time work and flexible rostering. The adequacy of departmental recognition of maternal obligations can only be judged by further enquiries. Similarly, the disproportionate male rates of dismissal, invalidity and death also raise questions about the impact of what may be unnecessary risk-taking behaviours related to masculine values.

Proper evaluation of equity entails recognition of the fact that a career in policing, as with most occupations, progresses by negotiating a series of gates. In policing, the primary gates, in order, are:
• recruitment
• training
• deployment
• retention
• promotion.

Each of these leads to initial employment, certification, desirable locations or positions, secure employment, and desirable levels of authority and reward. Within each gate is a series of sub-gates. To pass through the recruitment gate, applicants must pass through the sub-gates of minimum education, intelligence test, medical check, criminal history check, physical ability test and interview. In academy training, recruits are faced with the sub-gates of operational skills, firearms, driver training, officer safety and conduct standards (possibly including managing outside pressures of family commitments or personal problems). Success or failure in promotion can similarly be related to work experience, qualifications, referees’ reports and interview presentation. As with recruitment, the first stage in promotion is application, and different factors may apply here such as knowledge of vacancies, encouragement by superior officers, confidence in the fairness of the selection process or inability to take on added responsibilities because of outside responsibilities as a care giver.

The variety of possible causes of different outcomes in these processes shows the need for a comprehensive check list. The establishment of a standard schedule for EEO reports would allow for much more comprehensive evaluation. This would also involve upgrading procedures, such as separation interviews, in order to be as precise as possible about causes. A significance test can be applied to application and pass rates for males and females to determine if there are grounds for suspecting discrimination. From that point, further research is required which is specific to the problem. If it were found, for example, that a large number of women applicants in recruitment was failing in interviews, records of interview could be examined for precise reasons. This might show that a significant percentage of females was failing the interview because it was felt that they had an unrealistic view of policing. Panel members may have felt that applicants might not be able to cope with the real demands of the job. Further judgements would then need to be made about the appropriateness of these perceptions and possible modifications to the process such as better education of panel members or information classes for applicants.

Comprehensive evaluation would also need to go beyond reliance on significance testing as a clue to gender based problems. Appointment by merit may have a distorting effect on outcomes. For example, the fact that there is parity between female application rates and female recruitment or promotion rates may disguise the fact that women are better candidates and on the basis of merit should be selected at a higher rate. Regular checks on applicants' qualifications would be needed to cover this possibility.

**Conclusion**

Police services now have the means available to effectively evaluate strategies aimed at creating equality of opportunity for women and men. Problem oriented policing provides a philosophy and a method germane to policing which needs to be applied in a detailed and systematic manner to identify the specific locations of discrimination and test remedial strategies. EEO legislation creates a rationale and an obligation for the application of an EEO problem identification schedule. The final ingredient required is the will to achieve.
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REFERENCES


