Perceptions and Realities of Workplace Sexism: A Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Women in Leadership Positions in the England and Wales Police Forces

by

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Abstract

The issue of gender inequality in the workplace continues to be very topical, traversing academic and public social discussions. This study contributes to these discourses by focusing on gender inequality through the lived experiences of women in leadership positions in police forces in England and Wales. It explores what the lived experiences of these senior police officers reveal about the challenges and opportunities that women aspiring for leadership positions face as they progress through the police force, a traditionally masculine institution. A narrative analysis of the stories of these women highlighted the persistent barriers they faced, ranging from subtle biases to overt discrimination, as they climbed the ranks, especially the challenge of navigating a work-life balance in a particularly demanding 24/7 job. This enabled the study to examine the various ways in which policewomen in leadership roles perceive and respond to sexism within the police force. The resultant themes showed that most of the barriers faced by policewomen in the workplace are institutional, for instance, assigning women to roles requiring pastoral care. The stories showed how these women viewed pastoral roles as something that happened to them rather than something they wanted. Other themes showed that sometimes women downplayed the effects of sexism or even inadvertently promoted sexism. The queen bee phenomenon (QBP) is one known example of this; however, unlike other studies that have presented QBP as a binary occurrence, this study found that QBP can take the form of a spectrum, with each woman in this study occupying a different position on that spectrum. The stories and themes showed the different ways the policewomen navigated the obstacles they faced, which might be helpful to younger policewomen building a career in the force and informing future reforms in the police. The need for further reforms is evident, based on the direct claims of the policewomen and evidence from their narratives that indicate an organisation skewed towards benefiting certain social dynamics such as family make-ups. The study detailed some of the women's reform suggestions, including practices around promotion and maternity leave.

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Chapter One

1.0 Introduction

Workplace gender inequality as an area of research is rife with extensive academic literature, legal regulations, and social commentary. With women making up 49.7% of the world population and 50.8% in the UK, an exclusion or mistreatment of women means excluding and mistreating half of the population (World Bank Group, 2024). Yet, the issues of gender inequality persist, with the gender wage gap among all employees in the UK in April 2024 reported as 13.1% in favour of men, with women under-represented in senior positions and over-represented in lower-level positions (Office for National Statistics, 2024b). This inequality is also present in the UK police force. In England and Wales, for instance, the proportion of women in the police force was 35.4% in 2024, but the rank of constable (i.e., entry-level) was the only rank where women constituted up to that percentage, with their representation at 37.5% (Duncan, 2024).

This thesis focuses on women leaders in the police force in England and Wales to explore their lived experiences and how they faced and navigated gender barriers. Through this, it explores gender inequality in the police and Wales, how it is perceived by the women who experience it and how they manage gendered barriers in their quest for success. The thesis also analyses how the stories revealed by these women illuminate not only their own experiences but intertwine to highlight commonalities and differences in the experiences of women across the institution. Particular attention is paid to the mechanism that participants use to cope with these inequalities, another area of gender inequality that is under-researched.

To tackle these problems, this thesis employs narrative inquiry as a tool to understand participants' experiences. It also establishes what these lived experiences reveal about the challenges and opportunities that women aspiring for leadership positions are likely to face in their progression through the police force.

This research found that gendered barriers in policing are sustained through three overarching themes: Gendered organisational culture, institutional

constraints of care and work, and intragender dynamics and identity negotiation in leadership.

1.1 Contextualisation of Research

The issue of gender workplace inequality has been at the forefront of debate since the 1960s, with the rise of second-wave feminism. The second wave of feminism refers to the period in the 1960s when a surge in the Civil Rights movement saw the propelling of movements for women's liberation in legal and political systems and for gender equality in the workforce (Brady, 2023). Considering the sustained popularity and relevance of feminism in the current social space, the subject of gender inequality in the workplace continues to be a hotbed for political, legal, and intellectual debates (Hardacre and Subašić, 2018; Bullock, 2019; Gaiaschi, 2019; Hardey, 2019). In 1996 the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966a) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966b) were enacted by countries in the United Nations to signify their commitment to the “equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social, and cultural rights” (UN General Assembly, 1966b: 3). To meet the intentions of these provisions and incorporate their values into the domestic legal culture of the United Kingdom, the Sex Discrimination Act was brought into law and later replaced by the Equality Act (2010).

Despite these provisions at the national and international levels, workplace inequality persists, and this persistence has necessitated continued research into the causes, patterns, and possible solutions to these inequalities (Mjøsund *et al.*, 2017; Hardacre and Subašić, 2018; Adisa, Cooke and Iwowo, 2019). There is a scarcity of women in top leadership positions globally despite most developed economies experiencing a rise in female labour participation (Sojo *et al.*, 2016). The percentage of women executives in Fortune 500 companies rose to 7.4% in 2020, although the global figure still stood at just 2.6% (Hinchcliffe, 2020).

Researchers have offered different theories and concepts to explain the continued existence of gender inequalities despite decades of legislation and

activism. For example, gender essentialism purports that “men and women are innately and fundamentally different in interests and skills” (Pološki Vokić, Sinčić Ćorić and Obadić, 2017, p. 254), leading to men and women picking different kinds of jobs and industries. Leadership theories[1] and concepts, such as the glass ceiling,[2] have also been proposed as explanations for pay and progression disparities between men and women. Owing to the disparity between the number of women in entry-level and lower-level management positions and their underrepresentation at higher-level management positions[3], there have been calls for “future research [to] focus on identifying the particular worker and firm behaviours which can explain this” phenomena (Jewell, Razzu and Singleton, 2020), which this thesis sets out to do within the Police Force of England and Wales.

Experiential evidence was particularly important for this thesis as it focuses on an issue (gender inequality in the police) which traverses intimately between the work and life of those who experience it. A lack of such documentation of people’s lived experiences represents a gap in knowledge that necessitates further research. For instance, Potter and Banyard (2011) cite the lack of knowledge “about the experiences of victimisation among women in middle and high-income positions” (p. 514) as justification for their research.

1.2 Women in the England and Wales Police Force

The culture of a nation’s police force plays a crucial role in determining the gender composition of the police and its standing in attaining gender parity within the force (Sebire, 2020). This culture is determined by the diversification of the workforce personnel represented across all ranks of the

[1] Studies have suggested that this gender-based discrimination originates in part from linking men with effective leadership traits such as aggression and competitiveness. However, it is more likely that the overwhelming presence of masculine traits in the workplace have shaped the perception of good leadership traits.
[2] The glass ceiling concept refers to invisible barriers which restrict the progression of women through the ranks of their workplace.
[3] For instance, despite women making up 45% of the academic workforce, only one quarter of UK professors are women.

police command structure. Given that the UK police force has historically been male-dominated, with women integrated into the police ranks as recently as 1975 (Silvestri, 2017), the culture of the institution has been dictated and guided by masculine values (Sebire, 2020). As of March 2021, only three of the forty-six police forces in the UK had a higher percentage of women in senior roles (Chief Inspector and above) than their overall female average. Four forces had gender representation equal, with the other thirty-nine police forces having an over-representation of men in those positions.[4]

The diversification of the police force (especially at the leadership levels) is beneficial not only to the women but also to the force by facilitating a broader range of ideas and values. The inclusion of women in all levels of the organisation goes beyond fulfilling affirmative actions and serves an economic benefit by constituting "an important reservoir of ability that companies must employ to cope effectively with changes in [the] business environment" (Pološki Vokić, Sinčić Ćorić and Obadić, 2017). By not promoting women equitably to leadership positions, the police force loses out on the unique talent and perspective that women can impart (Appelbaum, Audet and Miller, 2003). For example, evidence suggest that having more women enhances a more citizen-focused approach by the police as opposed to a crime control philosophy (Schuck, 2017; Strobl, 2020).

1.3 Workplace Gender Inequality and Lived Experiences

As earlier stated, one of the gaps in knowledge identified by the researcher is the paucity of studies focused on lived experiences of gender inequality in workplaces in the UK. The academic literature on gender inequality in UK businesses (Davies and Joshi, 1998; Manning and Petrongolo, 2008; Solera, 2009; Bennett, 2018) is sparse once the attention shifts from direct measures of such inequality (e.g., pay gap, theoretical analysis) to the more

[4] See Gender Equality in UK Policing: Third annual report (2021). Available at https://www.northwales.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/north-wales/north-wales/news/heforshe-gender-equality-report.pdf accessed 28/08/2022.

specific matter of the lived experiences of women working through this inequality.

Every new research focusing on the experiences of women with regard to workplace inequality adds to the knowledge base (Kirton and Robertson, 2018). This thesis has sought to make significant contributions to the field by analysing the experiences of women leaders in the police force of England and Wales.

One knowledge gap identified by the researcher is the lack of sufficient research on the techniques that women who experience inequality in the workplace employ to tackle the challenges that arise due to those inequalities. Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi (2019) recognised that although the theoretical aspect of gender inequalities in the workplace is well known by scholars, little is known about how women internalise and deal with these constraints to affect their career path (Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi, 2019), thus necessitating future research.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

Following the contextualisation of the study and gaps in scholarship, the aim and objectives of this research are listed below.

Aim: To explore and analyse the perceptions of women leaders in the police force of England and Wales regarding gender inequality.

Objectives:

1. To examine the lived experiences of women leaders in the Police Force of England and Wales, and how these have shaped their view of gender inequality in the Police Force.
2. To identify the key obstacles that women leaders face in their career progression and the mechanisms they employ to navigate these obstacles.
3. To explore how gender-based barriers influence the career trajectories of women leaders.

1.5 Thesis Structure

The thesis is divided into seven chapters, organised as follows:

Chapter One is an introduction to the research aimed at analysing the lived experiences of women leaders in the Police Force of England and Wales.

Chapter Two analyses the relevant academic and grey literature.

Chapter Three presents the methodology of the research. It discusses the narrative inquiry, interpretivism and inductive research.

Chapter Four is the first part of the findings and explores the narratives of the study participants using IPA to unveil their experiences.

Chapter Five, the second part of the findings, is a presentation of the results of the thematic analysis.

Chapter Six is a discussion of the findings in light of relevant literature on the subject of gender-based barriers in policing.

Chapter Seven, the final chapter of the thesis, is the conclusion of the study and gives a summary of the research, including findings, practical recommendations, and suggested areas for further research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in senior policing leadership roles in England and Wales continues to raise pressing questions regarding organisational culture, gender equality, and the effectiveness of equality reforms. Given that leadership is central to shaping institutional priorities and workforce experiences, understanding women's pathways into police leadership offers valuable insights into how inequality is constructed, reinforced, and potentially transformed.

This chapter explores the theoretical and empirical research on gender and leadership, with a particular focus on the policing profession. It shows that although formal equality has become more embedded in national legislation and policing policy, informal norms and long-standing assumptions about gendered leadership still restrict women's opportunities for advancement.

The chapter contextualises these issues historically, tracing women's evolving participation in policing and the shifting legal and organisational frameworks intended to support equality. Contemporary promotion structures and leadership pathways are critically assessed, alongside organisational cultures that continue to privilege masculine norms and devalue roles disproportionately undertaken by women.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Inequality

Gender stereotypes contribute significantly to discrimination, and are actively policed through cultural mechanisms that preserve male dominance within organisations (Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Benard and Correll, 2010; Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). Moreover, women may internalise perceptions of reduced legitimacy within male-dominated environments, compelling them to overperform and prove their worth in ways not expected of men (Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024). Below are three theories/concepts that aim to explain the existence of gender inequality.

2.2.1 Gender Essentialism

Gender essentialism is the theory that “men and women are innately and fundamentally different in interests and skills” (Pološki Vokić, Sinčić Ćorić and Obadić, 2017). This theory purports that men and women are likely to favour different kinds of jobs, which leads to the pay gap (e.g., women opting for traditional female roles such as secretary, receptionist, etc.) (Skewes, Fine, and Haslam, 2018). This sex-based preference for certain types of jobs is supported by populist conservative feminism, which claims that adhering to gender roles in the domestic household will lead to happier relationships between men and women (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005). Taken together, these two strands of gender essentialism (GE) complement each other by providing, firstly, a descriptive quality (i.e., men and women pick different jobs because they are naturally different) and then a prescriptive quality (i.e., men and women should adopt different roles to create more efficiency and happiness) (Manzi, Caleo and Heilman, 2024).

Although there are differences between men and women, the causal link between these differences and the social inequality gap between men and women is debated amongst gender essentialists (GEs) and feminist scholars (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005). Whilst GEs argue for the descriptive and prescriptive nature of these differences as intrinsic in nature and biology, feminists dispute this by associating most of the differences expressed in gender hierarchies to social construct. More detailed reviews of the various objections of feminism to gender essentialism have been conducted by feminist scholars, such as (Stone, 2004)(Friedrichs and Kellmeyer, 2022). Of relevance to this thesis is that the distinction between GEs and feminist interpretations of gender differences is crucial to how gender inequalities are perceived. If the GEs are right and a direct link can be drawn from innate gender qualities to persisting patterns of inequality, “then not only may these inequalities be rendered legitimate, but also, there can be little justification for change” (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005). If this argument is right, then the gender inequalities observed in organisations are simply a natural consequence of the qualities that women possess and not to be attributed to an inequality of circumstance or discrimination. This would suggest that

women are inferior to men by naturalising “unequal allocations of cultural value and material resources as the inevitable result of inborn, gendered bodily differences” (Master, 2021, p. 158).

2.2.2 Preference Theory

In making an argument for GE, (Hakim, 2003) proposes a “preference theory” highlighting the pattern of women’s employment and their tendency to take up part-time and flexible working, leading to an over-representation of women in lower-level occupations (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005). She presents three different types of women: the “home-centred” women who prioritise their family and will sacrifice their work in part or wholly to service family life; the “work-centred” women who prioritise their work and consequently are often unmarried and/or childless; the “adaptive” women who switch the focus of their commitment over their lives between family and work. She submits that whilst these categories also exist across the male population, the concentration across each group is different for men and women, with most women populating the “adaptive” group and most men the “work-centred” category. Consequently, given the freedom to choose, Hakim argues that women would be unable to challenge the male dominance of the labour market and politics because only the “work-centred” women, who form a minority of the total female population, would be prepared to prioritise their job and compete in the same way as the men. However, in examining Hakim’s “preference theory”, Crompton and Lyonette (2005) found that contrary to the claim that lifestyle preferences cut across social class, education, and ability, there are other factors which affect the working arrangements of couples. One such factor is the woman’s level of education, as women with higher levels of education are also more likely to be in higher social classes. Another factor is age, with younger women more likely to work a full-time job (35-40 hours a week) than other women.

2.2.3 The Backlash Effect

The detriments of GE go beyond just the expectation that different genders should perform different roles; it also encourages penalties for those subverting the execution of this prescription (Skewes, Fine and Haslam, 2018). Known as the backlash effect, this negative characterisation of an individual who subverts prescribed gender roles serves to maintain the status quo by dissuading women from seeking "masculine roles". Although men are also constrained by gender roles, men's social roles overlap with roles required in leadership positions; thus the constraints on women are more problematic (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). For instance, in a US study on perceptions of political candidates, it was found that candidates who deviate from gender norms often elicit negative attitudes, which has "the potential to translate into effects on perceptions of candidate likeability and traits" (Swigger and Meyer, 2019, p. 719). Importantly, the likelihood of disapproval for deviating from stereotype increases with the level of affinity to gender essentialism, so that high essentialists are more likely to disapprove of a power-seeking female candidate than a male candidate (Skewes, Fine and Haslam, 2018). Consequently, female candidates who run on platforms focusing on stereotypically female issues are more positively assessed than their counterparts who focus on perceived masculine domains (Swigger and Meyer, 2019).

The kind of stereotyping that GE advocates leads directly to limiting women to only specific types of jobs. Given the tendency to equate leadership qualities such as strength and decisiveness to masculinity, GEs will more readily prioritise men for leadership positions than women (Swigger and Meyer, 2019). The backlash effect has also been observed in hiring, salary negotiations, promotion, leadership evaluation, and so on (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). In their research, Swigger and Meyer (2019) found that although women did well in legislative elections, they were less successful when vying for executive positions because "voters struggle to accept a woman in a stereotypically male-leadership role" (p. 722). Consequently, women running campaigns are advised to run on "women" issues (e.g., health care and childcare) where they are seen as experts, because running

on counter-stereotypic issues may work only to their detriment. Interestingly, although GE refers to innate qualities and roles for both men and women, Swigger and Meyer (2019) find that when running campaigns, emphasising stereotypical issues was less of a concern for men than women, and contrary to women candidates, men can benefit from running counter stereotypic campaigns. However, this acceptance of male candidates running counter-stereotypical campaigns does not necessarily mean that men are excluded from performing their roles as prescribed under GE. As Skewes, Fine and Haslam (2018) discovered, not only were power-seeking women evaluated negatively by GEs, but non-power-seeking men also faced negative evaluations. Whilst this shows that GE applies to both men and women, it does not negate the fact that it is particularly unfair to women. After all, 'If gender essentialism supports an unequal gender status quo for those who adhere to gender norms and amplifies backlash against women and men who do not adhere to them, then its only real beneficiaries are norm-adhering men' (Skewes, Fine and Haslam, 2018, p. 13).

2.3 Gender Inequality in the Workplace

With gender perceived in many societies as attributing status to an individual, women are often seen as inferior to their male counterparts, when considering various skills, as well as in general competence (Foschi, 1996). Thus, it is usually women who are often disadvantaged, relative to men in similar situations, when gender inequality is spoken about (Lorber, 2001). Some manifestations of this inequality include imbalance in the amount of housework and child care even when they are in paid employment as their male partners and reduced earning potentials when working in women-focused fields, such as nursing. Although there might be cultural evolutionary reasons for gendered division of labour, "the modern forms of gender inequality are not a complementary exchange of responsibilities but an elaborate system within which, it was estimated by a United Nations report in 1980, women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive 10 percent of the world's income, and own 1 percent of the world's property" (Lorber, 2001).

The situation has slightly improved since 1980, with women now earning 28% of total income before tax globally (Galan, 2025).

Sexist practices against women are often associated with cultural beliefs about sex, which then translate to workplace discrimination (Foschi, 1996; Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). As Glick and Fiske (2001, p. 110) argue: "On the basis of cross-cultural indicators of status and power, women are clearly a disadvantaged group." These cultural beliefs about sex often lead to gender stereotypes and segregation, which typically manifest in two ways: descriptive and prescriptive (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). The former postulates traits that women are expected to have, such as being nurturing, whilst the latter stipulates being nurturing is a trait that women should have (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). These two categories of stereotyping lead to discrimination in different ways. Descriptive stereotyping leads to discrimination arising from an incompatibility between the described stereotype and the required traits for the job. On the other hand, prescriptive stereotypes lead to more hostile forms of discrimination as a consequence of women's "deviance from gendered expectations" (p. 767). There are, for instance, sentiments among some observers that the recent surge in female prominence in the business world has seen women competing in a system largely designed by, and for the benefit of, their male counterparts, thus creating an expected unfair disadvantage for women (Hardacre and Subašić, 2018). Subsequently, there have been debates on apparent manifestations of these inequalities. One such debate has been on the discrepancy in the earnings of males and females working at similar levels in the same company and/or line of business (Gaiaschi, 2019).

There is mounting evidence collected via gender pay gap measures that show women earn less on average than their male counterparts, as well as pointing to the difficulties associated with getting a pay raise or promotion as a woman (Lindley and Machin, 2016; Pološki Vokić, Sinčić Ćorić and Obadić, 2017). In the UK, this pay gap is evident and persistent—in 2022, it stood at 7.9% (ONS, 2022) and in 2024, 7% (Office for National Statistics, 2024) in favour of men. It is hardly any different in the police service: 2021 figures show that female police officers (Sergeant and below) earn 2.4% less than

their male colleagues, earning £19.75 per hour to the men's £20.24 per hour. In the Metropolitan Police Service, between 2023 and 2024, women's median hourly pay was 10.8% lower than men's.[5]

The encouragement of gender stereotyping in the labour force leads to women being the larger proportion of workers in many low-skilled and low-paying positions (Pološki Vokić, Sinčić Ćorić and Obadić, 2017), whilst their male counterparts tend to populate relatively higher-paying positions. For instance, despite women making up 50% of the higher education workforce, only 31% of UK professors are women.[6] This also supports research findings showing that gender wage disparity presents itself more within firms/industries than between them, with calls for "future research [to] focus on identifying the particular worker and firm behaviours which can explain this" phenomenon (Jewell, Razzu and Singleton, 2020). Women are also stereotyped as less committed than their male counterparts. This is especially true for mothers, who experience a lot more disadvantages in the workplace, in addition to the discrimination commonly associated with women (Correll, Benard and Paik, 2007).

Women workers are seen as prioritising their personal roles as wives and mothers over their professional roles as workers, and there is a sentiment that they make for less reliable workers (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Tabassum and Nayak, 2021) Studies however show that mothers are held to stricter work standards than fathers and pay "the motherhood penalty" (Fuegen *et al.*, 2004; Benard and Correll, 2010), therefore, these sentiments of less reliability may be unguided. Even when employers value essentialist traits like nurturance for certain positions requiring those traits, women are still generally considered inferior workers and may be subjected to sanctions if they fail to fulfil their expected gender characteristics (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011).

Although primarily caused by cultural beliefs and ideologies, sex discrimination is also attributed to the impact of organisational structures, policies, and practices, which, whilst often appearing gender-neutral, serve

[5] See Metropolitan Police Service gender pay gap report for 2023-24 reporting year
[6] See Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2022/23 | HESA

the purpose of entrenching men's privilege in the workplace (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Policies requiring employees to work full-time, although appearing gender-neutral, may impact women more than they do men. For instance, Knights and Richards' study of UK universities in 2003 showed the gendered nature of academia, at least at that time. There were differences in contract status and access to academic hierarchies, and the typical career path was better suited to men (Knights and Richards, 2003).

Studies show a scarcity of women in top leadership positions worldwide, despite the rise in global female labour force participation (Sojo *et al.*, 2016; Madsen, Townsend and Scribner, 2020). It has been suggested that this represents a form of gender-based discrimination, partly stemming from the association of men with certain leadership traits, such as aggressively competitive behaviours. However, reverse causality may also be at play, as it is more likely that the dominant presence of masculine traits in the workplace has shaped perceptions of what effective leadership traits are (Adler, 1997; Lincoln, 2012; Eagly and Carli, 2018).

One of the problems with eradicating sexism is that its existence as a feature of the workplace is often disputed and denied, sometimes by the leaders who should be responsible for driving change and equity in their organisations (Lo and Lim, 2023). King (2020) interviewed 72 men and women executives from two different organisations, a majority of whom were in denial about gender inequality in their workplaces, claiming that men and women have identical opportunities and that women do not succeed because of their individual choices. This attitude from top executives perhaps explains the persistence of gender inequality in workplaces.

2.3.1 Gender Inequality in Policing

The inequalities between men and women across the workforce are also present and evident within policing. Policewomen have reported that organisational resources were withheld from them because of their gender and that, owing to their existence in a male-dominated space, they constantly had to prove their worth as officers (Illias, Riach and Demou,

2024). Thus, in an attempt not to be seen as less committed than their male colleagues, female officers have taken steps detrimental to their needs, such as electing not to take breaks from work and even considering terminating their pregnancies (p. 14). This illustrates how traditional structures not designed for the success of women in the workplace can be detrimental to their careers and well-being.

There exists in policing the contradictory persistence of sexism within an organisation, which purports to tackle it. This contradiction can be categorised within four justification frames: abstract liberalism, naturalisation, cultural sexism, and minimisation of sexism (Stoll, Lilley and Pinter, 2016). The abstract liberalist argues that although men and women have the same opportunities, women simply decide not to go into occupations such as policing (Lo and Lim, 2023). The naturalisation advocate argues that women do not possess the physicality required to be police officers (p. 1890). Natural sexism purports that women prefer occupations such as nursing, where their nurturing attributes may be put to better use, rather than policing, which necessitates engaging in conflict (p. 1890). Finally, the minimisation of sexism argument is that women prefer to be nurses because they are not good enough to compete with policemen in crime-fighting (p. 1890).

Outside of those four frames of justification, discriminatory parties may also invoke counter-discussions about political correctness and nationalism when engaging with claims of sexism (Landqvist, 2015). This is because the issue of gender discrimination is typically portrayed in the media as leftist in nature and arising from stereotypical liberal feminism (p. 316). Superficial methods aimed at gender neutrality, including policies and languages, may not effectively address gender-specific issues because, among other reasons, gender neutrality can perpetuate existing inequalities by failing to recognise gender-specific challenges (Smith and Bamberger, 2021). Thus, attitudes and cultures that overlook women are overlooked.

The complexities surrounding sexism extend to its application and the mental process that violators go through before committing to discriminatory actions (Armor, 1998; Norton, Vandello and Darley, 2004). When presented

with a job opening for Police Chief, Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) noticed that evaluators tailored the requirements for the job towards the person of the preferred gender. So if a male applicant was media-savvy and a family man, then they valued those characteristics as important to the role, but when the male applicant did not possess those qualities, they were considered not vital to the role. The same leniency was not shown to female applicants, and this selective trait evaluation was more prominent among male participants than female participants. Additionally, even though male participants favoured male job applicants over an identical female applicant, the female participants evaluated male and female applicants equally (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005). They conclude that this is a result of the men valuing masculinity for the role more than women and being less comfortable with female leadership (p. 477).

In order to soothe their conscience, discriminators develop a method to convince themselves of their objectivity in deciding the right candidate (Hodson, Dovidio and Gaertner, 2002). Instead of deciding between male and female, they analyse each applicant against the characteristics of their desired candidate, skewing the results in their favour whilst maintaining the illusion of objectivity (Norton, Vandello and Darley, 2004). Consequently, even when research participants had discriminated against female applicants, they were convinced that their selection was completely objective (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005, p. 477). It is important to note that when participants were presented with the traditionally female job of women's studies professor, the reverse was the case (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005). Using the same method of tailoring the requirements, female applicants were favoured for the job, and male applicants were tacitly excluded from fair competition.

In conclusion, the task of eliminating gender discrimination is a major undertaking, requiring a combination of structural gendered policies, enforcing those policies, individual decision-making, and a change in the current cultural ideas on gender (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011).

2.4 Barriers to Career Progression for Women

In investigating barriers to women's progression through the ranks of their institutions, several themes have emerged, including work-life balance, the existence of a glass ceiling, stereotyping, gender bias and discrimination, performative behaviour, and networking. These themes are discussed below, looking across multiple industries, and overlapped with information on the experiences of women in the police.

2.4.1 Career Progression and the Glass Ceiling

When discussing the issue of gender inequality in the workplace, one of the major concerns is that despite an increase in labour market participation, the representation of women at upper levels of leadership in organisations is still low. It appears that women stay longer in grades before getting promotions and seem to “disappear from the pipeline to leadership roles in significant numbers” (Young, 2017, p. 14). This has led to the female career progression process being referred to as the leaky pipeline, sticky floor, and glass ceiling, among others. The glass ceiling is a metaphor that describes obstacles that prevent women from advancing to senior leadership positions in the workplace, regardless of their qualifications or achievements. Consistent with the themes discussed in this literature review, it “refers to the set of social and organisational pressures that form barriers that exclude women from upper-level management positions in organisations” (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 17).

Participants in Joel’s (2019) study of UK universities revealed that progression in their careers had been stifled due to issues involving pregnancy, taking adoption leave, and difficulties associated with a lack of maternity cover arrangements, hindrances faced by women which put them at a disadvantage to their male work colleagues. The women highlighted that, post maternity, their career progression had slowed down due to a combination of two reasons: “organisational rigidity with flexible working, and lack of promotional opportunities for part-time working mothers” (Joel, 2019, p. 1). A lack of promotional opportunities for part-time workers is particularly

relevant in this instance as women are a majority in this category, making it an issue that affects women disproportionately more than men.

It is important to emphasise that eliminating this perception of injustice is as important as eliminating the injustice itself. As is often quoted in UK legal practice, the now famous words of Lord Hewart in the landmark case of *R v Sussex*, “It is not merely of some importance but is of fundamental importance that justice should not only be done but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done”.[7] The rationale here is that the perception of unfairness or inequity is just as important as being fair and equitable. Following that logic, it is not enough to be equitable with workplace promotions; it must also be seen that these promotions are awarded equitably.

The existence of a glass ceiling may also be connected to the issue of motherhood and maternity. As evidenced by Stoddart (2021) where one participant revealed how she had observed a male boss ‘suggesting that women who did not disclose pregnancy to potential employers were “trapping” them. The same participant recalled how a female colleague had said she would not be having children, because she did not want it to affect her career (p. 136). Overall, participants agreed that being a woman with children meant one had to over-perform and prioritise their work over their maternity role in order to be respected and taken seriously in the workplace.

While collecting data for her study, Stoddart (2021) came upon an unexpected theme on workplace inequality and career progression. Some of the women participating in the study recalled bad experiences working under female managers who showed aggression or feelings of competition towards the younger female writers. The researcher found the recurring theme of competition interesting and likened the situation to a diversity quota in production. The rationale is that “there are limited positions available for those in minority demographics (such as women, writers of colour or those with disabilities), and that writers who fell within the catchment of those demographics needed to compete with one another, rather than support one

[7] *Rex v. Sussex Justices,* [1924] 1 KB 256.

another, in order to maintain their hold on employment and advancement in the industry” (Stoddart, 2021, p. 189). The glass ceiling is even more pronounced in male-dominated industries. Kräft (2022) study of the male-dominated British oil industry shows that even when the glass ceiling “cracks” and women get into executive positions, there is still a pay bias in favour of men.

2.4.2 Work/life Balance

The task of balancing work and personal life plays a significant role in determining the career progression path of women. The argument is that women are required to simultaneously juggle the responsibilities of both their work and domestic lives, to a degree that is not usually expected of men (Young, 2017). In a study involving participants from Scottish universities, both male and female academics were concerned with the long hours their job required, although females found it of greater concern “in their dual roles as academics and as the main carer at home” (Dick, 2013, p. 137). Given the higher demands on women with regard to their domestic life, Young (2017) argues that upward social mobility is increasingly more difficult for women, especially those with primary responsibility for children.[8] Chen and his colleagues (2024) found that at junior levels, women value work-life balance more than men, but that this difference disappears at the managerial level. This suggests that it is the women who care less about work-life balance that go into career paths that lead to management positions Chen et al. (2024).

By highlighting the childbearing and childcare differences for women, gender theorists point to the “impact on commitment and how organisations have to compete for a woman’s loyalty since she has greater family responsibilities than men” (Dick and Metcalfe, 2007, p. 83), thus stemming their entry and growth in the organisation.

[8] To strengthen her argument, she references Neuberger et al.’s (2011) analysis which revealed that switching from full-time to part-time hours by women during first childbirth frequently resulted to a change of employer, a reduction in job status, and a decrease in relative hourly earnings.

Women have also expressed displeasure at the process of returning from maternity leave and the challenges they have had to face (Young, 2017). They had a poor experience with line managers regarding details of their return dates, working patterns, and other matters. Some recalled "security passes failing to grant them access to the office building because they were no longer on the system; not being notified of an office relocation and going to the wrong place on the first day; not having an allocated desk or chair … [and] in a few cases women arrived without a job to do or a line manager to report to" (p. 107). This highlights the central concern addressed in this thesis: women in the workplace are often subjected to circumstances unique to their gender, which may put them at a competitive disadvantage.

Although this conflict between work and family life may be mitigated to some extent by flexible working options, participants in Opoku and Williams (2019) study revealed that even when the option for flexible working was available, managers still preferred employees to be in the office. Flexible and part-time work, even when offered as a possible solution to problems around work-life balance, still presents a major barrier to the progress of women in the workplace (Silvestri, Tong and Brown, 2013). Women who take up these alternative working patterns are perceived as less committed to their work and thus not ideal candidates for promotion to leadership positions (Silvestri, Tong and Brown, 2013).

2.4.3 Stereotyping, Personality Trait, & Bias

Gender stereotyping is a significant barrier to the career advancement of women. Gender stereotypes refer to widely held conceptions about the attributes of men and women, including personality, cognitive and physical attributes, interests and abilities (Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024). Stereotypes about men depict them as taking charge and getting things done, whereas women are concerned about others and building relationships (Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024). In a research by Stoddart (2021), female directors were often stereotypically assigned the task of directing films considered to fall within the category of a "female" genre. Stoddart (2021)

argues that it is this systematic unconscious bias within the production industry which causes the disparity between male and female career progression. This is also relevant for industries outside movie production as it is typical for internalised beliefs about stereotypes to lead to bias (Heilman, Caleo and Manzi, 2024).

Women may also face behaviours and be subject to decisions made wholly or partly in acknowledgement of their sex. Although agreeing that structural obstacles exist which hinder their progress, two-thirds of the participants in Dick's (2013) study opined that the appearance of a gender pay gap was simply due to more men occupying more senior positions and not due to any explicit bias against women. Of course this position disregards the prevailing reasons for why men occupy more senior positions to begin with.

Speaking on how women are stereotyped into roles considered feminine or domestic, a participant in Coates's (1997) study recalls how being at work is like being at home with all the domestic chores (such as "cleaning things up") she is expected to perform (p. 9). A female lecturer who took part in Dick's (2013) research opined that it is simply in the nature of female lecturers as women to take on pastoral roles, with men less likely to do so. She reveals that in her experience, there is also an expectation for them to do so, with students more likely to approach female lecturers over personal or medical problems. Most of the other female participants agreed with that account, suggesting that because of their tendency to occupy pastoral roles (counselling, student support, etc.), their research and publication work suffered. Consequently, this affects their career progression. Some female lecturers also referred to lifestyle choices and the flexibility that comes with lecturer grade roles versus senior academics as reasons why women were less likely to apply for promotions.

Looking towards the future, people surveyed on their perception of future women in the workplace attributed increased levels of agency to them, however, the perception of women as possessing communal qualities necessary for home-making persisted (Rudman *et al.*, 2010). So as more women make it to top leadership positions, gender discrimination may

continue to decline, albeit alongside the continuing expectation that women continue performing nurturing tasks.

However, the issue of stereotyping goes beyond assigning domestic chores at work and taking up pastoral duties. It may also affect the way that leadership positions are appointed and distributed across an organisation. Given that a "successful leader" has historically been perceived to possess masculine traits, women face an additional hurdle when competing with men for leadership positions (Collings and Singh, 2006). The "think manager, think male' phenomenon was reinforced by Collings and Singh (2006), who stated that previous research had "consistently found that participants' perceptions of leadership style of 'successful middle managers' matched that of their general male stereotype" (p. 6). This means that women are more negatively appraised in their performance and denied promotion opportunities because they are not perceived to be up to it (Opoku and Williams, 2019).

It is important to note that whilst gender plays a significant role in forming stereotypical bias, belonging to a different social category may also contribute to stereotyping. The intersectionality of belonging to multiple social groups (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) plays a key role in explaining some of these discriminatory biases. For instance, whilst researching on the effects of gender on the perception of political candidates in the US, Swigger and Meyer (2019) found that although gender was a determinant to how a candidate's message was received, other identifiers such as "race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and caste are often essentialized to some degree as well" (p. 720).

2.4.4 Performative/Fitting-in

Performative behaviours are traits that women in the workplace adopt in order to fit in with the masculine culture that exists within an organisation. This phenomenon was observed by Stoddart (2021) and Coates (1997) in their respective studies. Participants in the Stoddart study repeatedly referred to their "work voice", which they used to present a more acceptable personality at work. This work voice often involved sounding non-

confrontational, “feminine”, building the boss’s ego, etc., with one participant calling it her “dumb assistant voice”. Even one participant who generally disputed the idea of gender bias in the workplace, recognises the importance of being able to “gel” with the bosses and male colleagues (Stoddart, 2021, p. 159). Women who try to assimilate themselves in this way pay the psychological cost of losing their femininity and replacing it with masculine attributes (Coates, 1997).

This need to fit in means that women will tolerate and normalise behaviours from male colleagues that would not normally be acceptable (Silvestri, Tong and Brown, 2013). For instance, one participant suggests that the pursuit of harassment claims by women was making men “scared of being … targeted in return” for committing acts which they would otherwise get away with (Stoddart, 2021, p. 211). The implication of this phrasing is that men are being victimised by this process and holding them accountable for sexual harassment is retributory.

2.4.5 Mentoring, Role-modelling and Networking

Following a long history of male dominance in the workplace, certain vestiges which evidence this period remain and serve to perpetuate current inequalities. For instance, cultures of mentorship, role modelling, and networking established over the years are predominantly utilised by men, with women finding it harder to gain access (Opoku and Williams, 2019).

Participants across studies recognised the benefit of having access to such networks and the benefit it provides for career progression (Collings and Singh, 2006; Opoku and Williams, 2019; Stoddart, 2021). Men have more informal networks, especially with other men, and the restriction on women to access these networks as readily as their male counterparts[9] means they are excluded from resources, information, and opportunities as a result of their gender (Collings and Singh, 2006). Some of the female CEOs who were

[9] These networks have been referred to as the “old boys” network to signify the masculine nature of their membership. See (Opoku and Williams, 2019)

interviewed as part of that study attribute the dominance of male informal networks to the fact that there are more male chief executives than female. This creates an unending loop of problems because male-dominated informal networks lead to fewer women in leadership positions, and fewer women in leadership positions preserve male-dominated networks. Crucially, these female CEOs perceived the restrictions on women's access to such networks as a deliberate attempt to keep them from progressing (Collings and Singh, 2006).

When asked about mentors and influential people in their careers, most female writers referred to male managers, producers, and their fellow male writers (Stoddart, 2021). This further highlights a lack of female representation at senior levels of organisations. The importance of such representation is emphasized by Collings and Singh (2006) to show women "that the barriers to their progression within their organisation are permeable, if they are good enough" (p. 15). This point is echoed by one of the female CEOs in their study who described her resignation as a loss because it meant one fewer female leader for upcoming women to look up to.

Another concept that interacts with the topic of support and progression is the Queen Bee Phenomenon. The queen bee phenomenon (QBP) describes a specific response mechanism to achieving success in a male-dominated organisation by women who then proceed to treat their female subordinates more critically than male subordinates (Goff *et al.*, 2024). This phenomenon implies that women who succeed in the hardships of traversing through the hierarchy of a discriminatory workplace serve to perpetuate rather than challenge the existence of gender discrimination (Goff et al., 2024, p. 6).

In the process of overcoming masculine environments, women leaders adopt those masculine qualities which are usually associated with leadership, success, and power (Goff *et al.*, 2024). Sometimes, these women profess to have as much as or more masculine traits than the men in their organisation (p. 2). Although manifested by women adopting masculine traits, the phenomenon is attributed to the existence of gender discrimination, the consequence of women having to navigate sexism in their careers (Derks *et*

al., 2011; da Rocha Grangeiro *et al.*, 2024; Goff *et al.*, 2024). In order to succeed in such sexist environments, women leaders are compelled to adopt masculine traits, achieving success by highlighting how different they are from other women (Derks *et al.*, 2011). Following the hardship that leads to women leaders adopting the QBP, they are more critical of female subordinates who are perceived as unwilling to undertake the same levels of sacrifice and will distance themselves from those subordinate women (Goff *et al.*, 2024).

The effects of the barriers to women's progression examined so far are exercerbated in policing due to its hyper masculine history and disregard for traits and attributes considered to be feminine. Below, we look at how these barriers present in the police force.

2.5 History of Women in Policing

The year 1920 marked a pivotal milestone for policewomen in England and Wales as it saw the publication of the recommendations of the Baird Committee, also known as The Committee on the Employment of Women on Policing Duties. Following the conclusion of World War I and in light of women's role in policing communities, the committee reported that women had demonstrated their usefulness in performing certain policing duties that had previously been considered exclusively within the purview of men. Consequently, the committee recommended that women be recruited and trained as members of the police forces in England and Wales. However, these recommendations had limited real-world impact due to significant institutional resistance (Laverick & Joyce, 2020; Women's Legal Landmarks, 2017).

In the early 20th century, women gained involvement in policing through organisations such as the Women Volunteer Police (WVP) and the Women Police Service (WPS). However, they still faced resistance to their progression into the police force (e.g., opposition to giving evidence in court and to wearing a uniform). Both the WVP and WPS were focused on 'policing public places for young working-class women going astray'(Laverick

and Joyce, 2020, p. 5), and other welfare issues, with the WPS specialising in cases involving protecting children, assisting battered women, protecting girls from abuse, etc.

Despite disputes over the suitability of women in policing (i.e., the ability to meet the physical requirements, make arrests, and use weapons), there were calls for their integration into the police as permanent members (Silvestri, 2016). Women were officially incorporated into the police forces following the Police, Factories & c (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1916, which made provision for pay for women who worked full-time for the police. It was only a year earlier, in 1915, that Edith Smith was sworn in as the first official policewoman in the United Kingdom with the power to arrest (Jackson, 2025). These disputes over the role of women in the police continued through the 20th century, with issues such as pay equality, working conditions, and progression prospects being of particular contention (Woodeson, 1993).

Before the Baird committee's recommendation to employ women in policing, women who worked in policing (e.g., the Metropolitan Women Police Patrols) had temporary contracts that were reviewed annually, resulting in a lack of pension benefits and low pay (Laverick and Joyce, 2020). They had no powers of arrest, had to be accompanied by male constables, and were restricted to gender specific roles. Although the Baird committee recommended providing these benefits to women as police officers, it presented women police as supplementary to regular police rather than as a substitute. Additionally, when its recommendations were sent to the constabularies, they came with an advisory from the Home Office to disregard the recommendations for better pay and granting women the powers of arrest. These restrictions highlight the resistance that women in policing faced owing to their gender, even post-1920 report of The Committee on the Employment of Women on Policing Duties.

The role of women in policing continued to go through turbulence as resistance to the integration of women persisted. For instance, the 1922 Geddes Committee recommended discontinuing women's policing in London

due to its negligible utility and restricted powers; a report that led most police forces to reduce the number of female officers in their rank. Despite the opposition to women in policing by the Police Federation of England and Wales, some Chief Constables across the force voiced their support for the involvement of women in policing, although they typically stressed their suitability for gender-specific, often secretarial, tasks within the police service. In 1924, two years after the Geddes Committee, the William Bridgeman Committee pointed to the employment of policewomen as beneficial to improving efficiency within the force. For instance, defenders pointed to substantial figures that in 1921 alone, women police were credited with cautioning thousands and assisting tens of thousands, a robust rebuttal to claims of their limited usefulness (Hansard, 1924). The involvement of women in policing continued to develop in the 1930s, with Lilian Wyles becoming the first female Chief Inspector (1932), highlighting progress in welfare and investigative roles, and the formation of the Women's Auxiliary Police Corps (WAPC) in 1939, expanding the roles of women in clerical and support functions (Workforce Development Trust, 2025).

The 1970s were a vital period for the legal equality of women in the police force with the enactment of the Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975), which abolished the segregation of women within policing, harmonising pay and creating opportunities across roles within the force (BAWP, 2025). For example, women in Greater Manchester by that time were integrated into diverse specialisations, such as mounted units and dog sections, which was a step forward for women in the force (Greater Manchester Police Museum, 2025). However, gendered barriers persisted throughout the twentieth century, with women being disproportionately allocated to welfare-related roles and lower ranks, and the continuation of cultural resistance against the integration of women within police institutions (Laverick and Joyce, 2020).

Following progress in the 1970s (both legal and otherwise), the Metropolitan Police abolished its separate women's department in 1972. This integration of women into the force had both pros and cons regarding the progression of policewomen. Although women achieved formal equality and pay parity, their

specialist expertise in welfare issues was devalued, and “women’s work”, such as dealing with victims of sexual assault, became marginalised. Accounts from this period reveal ongoing discrimination, degrading recruitment practices, sexual harassment, restricted duties, and barriers to progression (Cunningham and Ramshaw, 2019; Jackson, 2025). Consequently, despite official integration, women remained concentrated in lower ranks and were excluded from specialist squads and positions of authority. These barriers to the integration and advancement of women in the police force persisted throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The persistence of a hyper-masculine police culture which valued aggression, competitiveness, and misogyny has been highlighted by scholars like Fielding (1994) and Jones (1986). Although the British Association for Women in Policing (BAWP) was established in 1987 to advocate for female officers, progress in leadership was slow. It was not until 1995 that Pauline Clare became the first female chief constable, and the gendered title “WPC” was only abolished in 1999 (Laverick and Joyce 2020). The 2010 Home Office report acknowledged that although women had made progress across all ranks, they remained underrepresented in senior positions and specialist posts (Home Office, 2010). By 2019, female representation in the police workforce had reached 30% (Home Office, 2019), although it was still below government targets and far from achieving parity with the wider population. In the same period, the focus on welfare issues expanded to encompass occupational health concerns such as menopause. The creation of the National Police Menopause Action Group in 2013 and the publication of management guidance in 2019 signalled growing recognition of gendered health needs within the police service. In 2020, the Government Equalities Office confirmed that the Equality Act 2010 could extend protection to those experiencing severe menopausal symptoms.

Ultimately, although legislative reforms and advocacy networks have secured substantial progress, entrenched cultural barriers, gender specialisation, and underrepresentation at senior levels continue to hinder equality. Early associations of women with welfare and vulnerability remain evident, though reframed as part of “core police business” in the twenty-first century. The

table below visualises the progression of women in policing from the 19th century.

Table 1: History of Women in Policing

Date / Period	**Event / Development**	**Change / Impact**
19th century	Wives and relatives of jailers, warrant officers, and constables undertook duties (searching, supervising women/children) without pay or recognition.	Women are informally involved but unrecognised and unpaid, reinforcing policing as a male occupation.
Early 20th century (pre-WWI)	Women Volunteer Police (WVP) and Women Police Service (WPS) were formed.	Gave women an entry point into policing, but roles were welfare-based; they faced hostility and resistance.
1915	Edith Smith (WPS) was sworn in, with powers of arrest.	First official policewoman in the British Isles.
1916	Police, Factories &c (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act.	Allowed the Home Office to fund women police pay; the first legal recognition of women as police employees.
1918	Police strike → Commissioner Macready establishes Metropolitan Women	First official women's patrols, though with limited powers (no arrest, no uniform, accompanied

Date / Period	Event / Development	Change / Impact
	Police Patrols.	by men).
1920 (5 Aug)	Baird Committee Report.	Recommended women be attested, pensionable, given arrest powers, and integrated (though "supplementary" to men). Limited implementation due to resistance.
1922	The Geddes Committee recommends the disbandment of women police.	Led to cuts in female officer numbers; London was reduced to 24. Home Secretary claimed women's work was "not police work."
1924	William Bridgeman Committee.	Recognised policewomen improved efficiency, but reinforced gendered roles (clerical, child/women welfare).
1931	Police (Women) Regulations.	Standardised pay/conditions for women, but no compulsion for forces to employ them. Reinforced specialist welfare roles.
1933	Children and Young Persons Act.	Required female officers to deal with juveniles; legal recognition of

Date / Period	Event / Development	Change / Impact
		gendered specialisation.
1939 (WWII)	The Women's Auxiliary Police Corps (WAPC) was created.	Expanded women's opportunities; some attested constables, broadening functions.
1945–1980	Gradual growth in numbers/status; continued prejudice.	Women confined to specialised welfare roles, hindered from mainstream policing.
1970	Equal Pay Act.	Legal requirement for pay parity.
1972	Metropolitan Commissioner Sir Robert Mark abolishes the separate women's department.	Integration into the main force, but loss of welfare expertise; "women's work" devalued.
1975	Sex Discrimination Act.	Abolished separate women's police departments nationally; equal pay and conditions.
1970s–80s	Despite integration, women faced restricted duties, harassment, and barriers to promotion.	Parity remained aspirational; women concentrated in lower ranks.
1986	Sandra Jones highlights sexist attitudes.	Cultural barriers persisted: women were

Date / Period	Event / Development	Change / Impact
		seen as unsuitable, inferior, and unfeminine.
1987	The British Association for Women in Policing (BAWP) was established.	A platform for women to support and advocate for gender equality.
1993–1995	HMIC reports highlight sexual harassment as a "serious problem."	Recognition of systemic sexism within policing culture.
1995	Pauline Clare was appointed as the first female Chief Constable (Lancashire).	Breakthrough into senior leadership, 20 years after SDA.
1999	"WPC" designation phased out.	Symbolic step towards gender equality and normalisation of female officers.
2007	Flexible Working in the Police Service guidance.	Promoted part-time work, job sharing, career breaks; aimed at work–life balance.
2010	Home Office report on women in policing.	Women made progress but remained underrepresented in higher ranks and specialist posts.

Date / Period	Event / Development	Change / Impact
2013	The National Police Menopause Action Group (NPMAG) was established.	Recognition of menopause as an occupational issue; drives strategy on workplace adjustments.
2015	Laverick & Cain: austerity reduced flexibility, harming women (esp. carers/older officers).	Exposed the impact of cuts on female workforce participation and progression.
2019 (Mar)	Female officers reach 30% of the workforce.	The highest proportion yet, but still below targets (35% / parity with the population).
2019	NPCC MAG publishes *Management of Menopause Transition in the Police Service*.	Introduced policy support (reasonable adjustments, uniform allowance, flexible tests).
2020 (May)	The Government Equalities Office confirms that menopause may fall under Equality Act disability protection.	Strengthened legal protections for female officers experiencing menopause.
2020	100 years since the Baird Report (from 1920).	Recognition of substantial progress over a century, though women are still underrepresented in

Date / Period	Event / Development	Change / Impact
		senior roles, and gendered tasks persist.

2.6 The Concept of Leadership Within Policing

Leadership within the policing profession, particularly in relation to gender dynamics, is a subject that has garnered increasing scholarly and policy attention. Yet, a notable underrepresentation of women persists in senior leadership roles across UK police forces, despite national and organisational initiatives aimed at addressing this imbalance (HMICFRS, 2022; College of Policing, 2019). This review section examines the current debates, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings relating to women in police leadership. It explores how leadership is conceptualised in policing, the historical and contemporary structures that shape women's career trajectories, and the broader socio-institutional factors that contribute to gender inequality. Particular attention is given to literature from the fields of policing studies, criminology, sociology, and leadership studies, including both peer-reviewed academic sources and grey literature such as government and inspectorate reports.

2.6.1 Theories and Relevance to Policing

Leadership within policing has traditionally been understood through hierarchical, command-and-control models, reflecting the paramilitary structure of police organisations. However, contemporary scholarship has increasingly advocated for inclusive and transformational leadership styles that emphasise communication, empathy, and adaptability (Silvestri, 2020; Brown, 2021). Transformational leadership, in particular, has been associated with higher organisational commitment and performance in policing contexts (Campbell & Kodz, 2011). The College of Policing (2015)

recommends such models as part of its leadership review, arguing that future leaders must be able to foster inclusive and ethical cultures. Authentic leadership, defined by self-awareness, transparency, and ethical conduct, has also gained prominence in the literature. Research suggests that this style is especially beneficial in promoting trust and mitigating organisational resistance to diversity initiatives (Brown & Silvestri, 2021). These frameworks offer a valuable lens through which to understand women's leadership in policing, particularly given the structural and cultural barriers they often face.

When inspecting and assessing leadership within police forces, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) conceptualised police leadership in two main forms, "enabling" and "transforming". Enabling leadership focuses on motivating staff, clarifying objectives, and fostering a shared organisational identity to ensure smooth operational functioning. Transforming leadership seeks to extend organisational boundaries by responding innovatively to external change (HMICFRS, 2017). Although expressing different facets and goals of leadership, the investigation found that both leadership styles often coexist in tandem, with one style often feeding the other. Whilst transforming leadership seeks to expand the boundaries of the organisation, enabling leadership is required to motivate the staff and enable them to achieve set objectives. The report assessed leadership as existing at both the individual and collective levels. At the individual level, emphasis was placed on the capability of hierarchically superior officers, typically judged by inspectors or subordinates. At the collective level, attention is centred on organisational culture, governance structures, and performance indicators, recognising that leadership is also embedded within wider institutional arrangements.

In 2018, the HMICFRS released its PEEL leadership report (HMICFRS, 2017), underscoring the importance of leadership at all levels of policing, emphasising that effective leadership is not confined to senior ranks but is a core competency throughout the police service. The inspection focused on leadership in relation to legitimacy, efficiency, and effectiveness, with themes including fair and ethical leadership, cultural change, workforce development, and taking effective action. These qualities are identical to

those of the ‘authentic leader’ advocated for by Brown and Silvestri (2021) as beneficial for building trust and aiding diversity initiatives. The HMICFRS found that strong leadership correlates with supportive organisational cultures, where wellbeing and ethical behaviour are prioritised, thereby increasing workforce motivation, trust, and overall effectiveness. Leaders who sought and acted upon staff feedback were particularly effective in improving working conditions and embedding cultural change. However, the report cautioned that wellbeing initiatives must be integrated into everyday practice rather than remaining as superficial or isolated schemes.

Many forces lacked a deep understanding of their workforce’s skills and leadership potential, undermining their ability to plan for future demand (HMICFRS, 2017). Few forces consistently utilise performance and development reviews (PDRs), a shortcoming that hinders both workforce development and the ability to ensure fair access to progression opportunities. To address this, the report recommended greater use of PDRs, aligned with the College of Policing’s guidance, to strengthen understanding of leadership skills, support targeted development, and improve communication around wellbeing. The introduction of force management statements, covering demand, assets, workforce wellbeing, and leadership capability, was proposed to improve long-term planning and accountability. Encouragingly, the HMICFRS found that some forces demonstrated innovation in making promotion processes fairer and more inclusive. Thames Valley Police redesigned its system to minimise favouritism and unconscious bias, introducing new assessments linked to the Competency and Values Framework (CVF). Similarly, Cumbria Constabulary enhanced transparency and accessibility through pre-briefings, structured reviews, and feedback for unsuccessful candidates, alongside opening vacancies externally to widen the talent pool. Other forces, such as West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire Police, began to emphasise “softer skills” including emotional intelligence, resilience, and procedural justice, recognising their importance in leadership alongside operational command.

The report also highlighted the value of mechanisms such as 360-degree feedback and reverse mentoring, which provided senior leaders with insight

into the experiences of junior and underrepresented staff. Such practices were seen as integral to improving organisational justice, promoting diversity, and addressing barriers to progression. Overall, while there were examples of strong practice, the report emphasised that significant improvement was needed across policing to ensure that leadership development is systematic, fair, and responsive to the changing demands of the profession.

2.6.2 Leadership Structures in UK Policing

The UK policing hierarchy is structured across several ranks, starting from Constable up to Chief Constable and Commissioner levels. Promotion within the system typically follows a time-served and performance-based approach. However, recent reforms have introduced schemes such as Direct Entry and Fast Track to accelerate leadership diversity (College of Policing, 2022). These programmes aim to disrupt traditional career pathways and attract a more diverse leadership cadre. The table below shows the hierarchy of ranks in the England and Wales police force.

Despite such efforts, women continue to be underrepresented at senior levels. As of 2023, women constituted only 32.6% of the total police workforce in England and Wales, and just 27% at the Chief Officer level (Home Office, 2023). Barriers include the persistence of gendered occupational norms, inflexible working arrangements, and a lack of transparent promotion processes (HMICFRS, 2022). These structural constraints are compounded by workplace cultures that often marginalise or devalue female leadership styles (Silvestri, 2017). The College of Policing has recently introduced a test phase for a new Sergeant and Inspector Promotion and Progression (SIPP) process, which aims to create a simpler, fairer, and more accessible route for advancement in policing leadership. This reform responds to long-standing criticisms of the existing National Police Promotion Framework (NPPF), which many officers have described as overly complex, overly exam-focused, and discouraging to otherwise capable candidates (Hales, 2017). The new system aims to address these issues by placing greater emphasis on leadership capability, professional

development, and practical experience, alongside a legal knowledge examination tailored to the rank for which an application is made.[10]

The SIPP process, being piloted between April 2024 and March 2026 across selected forces including Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, and Avon and Somerset, is structured around three stages: development, selection, and promotion (College of Policing, 2024). Candidates will be assessed through a combination of performance reviews, leadership training, and practice-based evidence, with continuous support provided by their forces. The initiative reflects broader efforts to align promotion practices with national leadership standards and cultural change in policing, with the goal of identifying and supporting future leaders who can enhance both organisational adaptability and public trust. The outcomes of the trial, informed by feedback from participants and consultation with key stakeholders such as the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Police Federation, will determine whether the SIPP framework will replace the current promotion system nationally (College of Policing, 2024).

Focusing on the progression of women specifically, the female leadership development programme at Humberside Police is one example of an initiative which responds to the underrepresentation of women at the substantive ranks of sergeant and inspector (Humberside Police, 2022). Developed in line with commitments to the UN's HeForShe initiative, the scheme was designed to support and empower women in policing by enhancing their access to progression pathways, building leadership capacity, and creating sustainable networks of support. The programme allows all female officers at constable, sergeant, or inspector rank to apply through an expression of interest form that assesses career aspirations, development efforts, and the potential benefits of participation. Applications are evaluated using evidence-based criteria to ensure fairness and consistency, with the moderation process safeguarding against bias (College of Policing, 2025).

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[10] Discussion and reactions to the SIPP from stakeholders in policing can be found here: https://policepromotion.blog/2023/11/09/nppf-vs-sipp-promotion-update-college-postpone-process-for-most/

Between 2022 and 2024, 90% of participants in the female leadership development programme successfully achieved promotion to sergeant and inspector boards. Meanwhile, female representation in specialist departments increased by 64% since 2023, largely attributed to targeted mentoring and sponsorship initiatives. Beyond individual career progression, the scheme has fostered the creation of a robust support network, exemplified by large-scale networking events that connect candidates with senior leaders across the public and private sectors (College of Policing, 2025). Feedback suggests participants gained not only professional advancement but also increased self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. Additionally, alumni continue to engage with the programme, helping to sustain its legacy and embed a culture of gender equality and leadership development across the force.

Table 2: England and Wales Police Ranks

Rank	Notes
Chief Constable	Highest rank in all territorial police forces outside London
Commissioner (Metropolitan Police)	Met Police: equivalent to Chief Constable
Deputy Commissioner (Metropolitan Police)	Met Police only: unique deputy to the Commissioner
Deputy Chief Constable	Second-in-command in territorial forces outside London
Assistant Commissioner (Metropolitan Police)	Met Police only: equivalent to Deputy Chief Constable
Assistant Chief Constable	Senior rank in territorial forces outside London
Commander	Met Police only: equivalent to Assistant

Rank	Notes
(Metropolitan Police)	Chief Constable
Chief Superintendent	Senior operational command rank
Superintendent	Senior management rank: usually in charge of policing for a specific area or specialist department
Chief Inspector	Senior supervisory rank: often manages multiple inspectors or specialist units
Inspector	Responsible for managing a team of sergeants and constables
Sergeant	First supervisory rank: directly oversees constables, usually as a shift or team leader
Constable	Entry-level rank: frontline officer

2.7 Gendered Organisational Cultures in Policing

The literature consistently documents a deeply embedded masculine organisational culture within UK policing, which constructs leadership as inherently male and frequently sidelines or devalues alternative leadership styles (Loftus, 2009; Westmarland, 2020). Such cultures are reinforced through informal norms, humour, and everyday practices that privilege traditionally “male” traits such as assertiveness, control, and physicality, while overlooking or undervaluing collaborative or empathetic approaches (Silvestri, 2003; Dick and Jankowicz, 2001). This dynamic sustains the perception of policing as a male domain, despite formal commitments to equality and diversity.

The theory of gendered organisations by Acker (1990) is particularly useful here, as it explains how workplace structures, practices, and power relations are systematically embedded with gender bias. For example, seemingly neutral policies on working hours, promotion criteria, or physical fitness tests can disadvantage women by privileging male life patterns or physical attributes (Martin, 1999; Metcalfe and Dick, 2002). Even where equality policies exist, their impact is often undermined by cultural resistance, leaving gendered inequalities intact.

It is important to recognise that cultural barriers do not operate in isolation but interact with broader inequalities in society. Intersectional analyses reveal how gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality to shape the diverse experiences of women in policing (Crenshaw, 1991; Holdaway and Parker, 1998).

Studies such as Brown et al. (2019) highlight how police occupational culture creates compounded barriers for women, particularly those from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. These women often face what has been described as a 'double marginalisation' (Alhayek, 2014; Abdellatif, 2020): excluded both as women in a masculine institution and as racial minorities within a predominantly white workforce, with tangible consequences for their career progression, mentoring opportunities, and organisational legitimacy (Brown et al., 2019). In practice, this has meant lower rates of promotion for BAME women compared to both white women and BAME men, limited access to informal mentoring networks, and greater vulnerability to stereotyping and scrutiny (Brown et al., 2019; HMICFRS, 2019). For instance, HMICFRS data shows that while women comprise 30% of police officers overall, less than 5% are women of colour, with even fewer reaching supervisory or senior ranks.

A range of policy initiatives have been implemented to support gender equality in police leadership. The Equality Act 2010 underpins legal requirements for equal opportunity, while organisational policies, such as flexible working arrangements, mentoring schemes, and gender-specific leadership training, have been adopted by many forces. The National Police

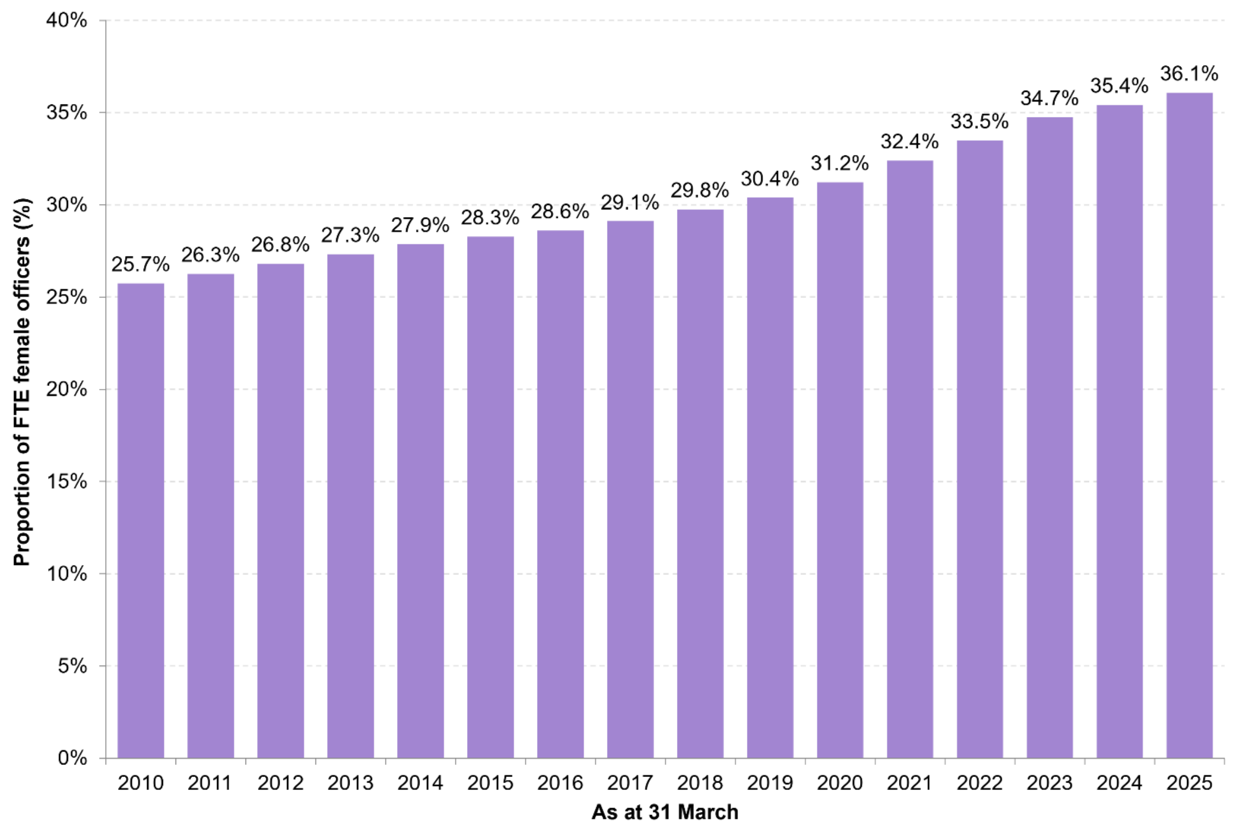
Chiefs' Council (NPCC) Gender Equality Strategy 2025 outlines strategic priorities for increasing female representation, including targeted recruitment and promotion processes (NPCC, 2022). Although mentoring schemes are widely viewed as beneficial, they often fail to address structural inequities unless accompanied by cultural change (Silvestri, 2018). Moreover, the implementation of flexible working policies varies significantly across forces, with some female officers reporting stigma or reduced promotion prospects when opting for such arrangements (HMICFRS, 2021).

Historically, debates over the integration, safety, and capabilities of female officers were shaped by highly politicised contexts, reflecting broader resistance to their inclusion (Laverick, 2023). Despite incremental gains in recruitment, evidence continues to show that institutional and cultural barriers constrain female representation, retention, and progression. Recent high-profile reports, including Casey's review of the Metropolitan Police, have revealed entrenched problems of sexism, racism, homophobia, and bullying, with harmful effects on both public trust and the safety of female employees (Casey, 2023). Failures to prioritise public protection were seen to place women and children at greater risk, while discriminatory cultures, often dismissed as mere 'banter', continue to undermine progress (Laverick, 2023, p. 5).

There have been steps taken to address these issues and advance women's progress meaningfully. National recruitment drives have increased the proportion of female officers, with direct-entry schemes and detective fast-track programmes offering attractive routes into the profession (O'neill, 2021). Data from the College of Policing and the Home Office indicate that recent cohorts are more diverse than previous generations; however, representation still falls short compared to the wider population, and considerable disparities remain between forces (Home Office, 2025). Retention remains a pressing issue, as women are disproportionately more likely to resign voluntarily than men, citing the impact of shift work and caregiving responsibilities (Laverick, 2023). In the past year (concluding March 2025), 61.4% of female leavers left the police via voluntary resignation compared to 49.1% of male leavers (Home Office, 2025). In

response, initiatives have sought to promote flexible working, address childcare barriers, and provide guidance on issues such as menopause transition and family support. Other measures include targeted recruitment campaigns, pre-application workshops, positive action programmes, and reforms to uniform requirements. The figure below shows the steady improvement in the number of women in the police (full-time) from 2010 to 2025.

Figure 1: Women in the Police (Full-time)



This improvement is owing to efforts made by the police as an institution to build a more diverse ecosystem, moving away from its historically mono-gendered workforce. One such effort is the recognition that creating a work environment that encourages flexible working leads to the improvement of a gender-diverse workforce. For the police service, these benefits include improved retention of experienced officers and staff, enhanced diversity in recruitment and retention, reduced training and recruitment costs, better alignment of working patterns with operational demands, lower levels of sickness absence, and improved staff morale and commitment (College of

Policing, 2013). Importantly, the report stresses that there is no ‘one size fits all’ (p. 7) model of work-life balance. Instead, police forces must provide a flexible range of working patterns that accommodate individual circumstances while still meeting operational needs.

In a practical example illustrating how customised solutions can benefit both staff and employers, a worker was allowed to start work at 4 am, with the option to leave by lunchtime to attend to caring responsibilities (College of Policing, 2013, p. 9). This arrangement allows her to maintain full working hours while meeting operational needs, demonstrating how flexibility can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. This highlights the importance of police forces evaluating the needs of individual officers and staff when making decisions about flexibility issues. For instance, a woman going through menopause with the accompanying symptoms such as irritability, loss of sleep, mood swings, etc, will require a higher degree of consideration from her manager and police force (College of policing, 2021).

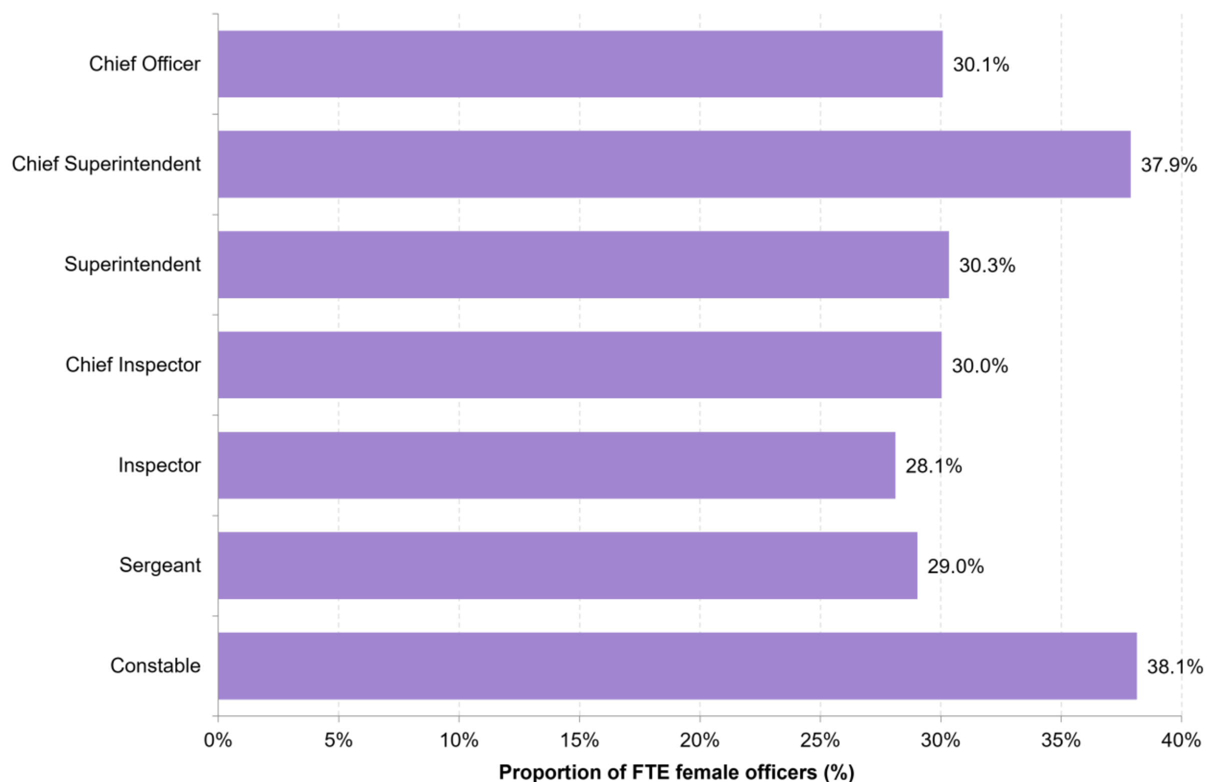
The report by the College of Policing also addresses the legal and equality implications of flexible working, stressing that where forces fail to handle requests in line with legal requirements, officers and staff may be entitled to bring claims before an employment tribunal. In particular, unjustified refusals can amount to indirect discrimination, especially against women who disproportionately bear childcare responsibilities. Forces are therefore required to demonstrate that any refusal of flexible working constitutes a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate operational aim, rather than relying on rigid working requirements.

The need for women to be afforded flexible working opportunities is reflected in the employment statistics. In 2011, nearly 6% of officers worked part-time, with 93% of these part-time officers being women. Additionally, 24% of all police staff worked part-time, with 85% of them being women. By March 2023, 14.5% of all women police officers worked part-time (Charman, 2024). These figures reflect the disproportionate impact of childcare and caring responsibilities on women, particularly as the peak age of childbirth [30] overlaps with the average age of police recruits [27] (College of Policing,

2013). These findings reinforce the notion that flexible working and policies accounting for women's specific needs (i.e, menopausal symptoms) are crucial to creating an inclusive policing environment, promoting work-life balance, supporting retention, and mitigating the structural disadvantages that disproportionately affect women in the service.

While these developments signal progress, significant gaps persist, particularly in advancing women into senior ranks. The HeForShe initiative has warned that growth at the entry level has not translated into leadership roles, necessitating further interventions such as mentoring schemes, development programmes, and more diverse promotion boards. Laverick's (2023) analysis, therefore, underscores a dual reality: policing has taken notable steps toward gender inclusion, yet entrenched structural and cultural challenges continue to restrict women's full participation and advancement. Below is a table illustrating the prevalence of women at the lowest rank (constable) of the police leadership structure.

Table 3: Women's Rank Representation



Reports by HMICFRS (e.g., *A duty to protect: Police response to violence against women and girls*, 2021) and the College of Policing (e.g., *Barriers to progression: Women in policing*, 2020) offer detailed evidence of systemic barriers, including unconscious bias in promotion panels and a lack of flexible leadership development opportunities. The Police Foundation and the Women in Policing Network also offer practitioner-led evaluations and recommendations that foreground the voices of female officers and challenge normative assumptions about what constitutes effective leadership. For instance, "Breaking Barriers: Women in Senior Policing" (Police Foundation, 2020) underscores the need for restructured talent pipelines that are sensitive to gendered career disruptions. These sources underscore the importance of integrating experiential knowledge into academic discourse. Without it, policy prescriptions risk being detached from the organisational contexts they seek to reform.

2.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has delved into the academic literature surrounding workplace gender inequality, and the theories that purport to explain these inequalities (e.g, gender essentialism, preference theory, and the backlash effect).

The chapter also discussed barriers to career progression which women face in the workplace. The following six themes were identified as affecting women's career progress: (1) the existence of a glass ceiling; (2) issues with work/life balance; (3) stereotyping and bias; (4) sexist banter and harassment; (5) performative and fitting-in behaviours; and (6) the effects of mentoring, role-modelling and networking. Following the discussion of these barriers, the chapter narrowed its focus to policing and how gender inequality manifests in that institution, examining the history of women in policing, leadership structures, and gendered organisational cultures.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the philosophical paradigm and methodology underpinning this study. Divided into three parts, it restates the thesis's aim and objectives, examines the research approaches employed in the study, and introduces the research method, narrative inquiry.

Given the qualitative and experiential nature of this study, which explores the lived experiences of women leaders in the police force of England and Wales, it relies on the philosophical paradigm of interpretivism. Interpretivism allows for every policewoman's story and experiences to be unique and different. In keeping with interpretivism, the qualitative method, narrative inquiry—a method that prioritises exploring and understanding experiences—is used to collect and analyse the "stories" of these women.

3.2 Aim and Objectives

Aim: To explore and analyse the perceptions of women leaders in the police force of England and Wales regarding gender inequality.

Objectives:

1. To examine the lived experiences of women leaders in the Police Force of England and Wales, and how these have shaped their view of gender inequality in the Police Force.
2. To identify the key obstacles that women leaders face in their career progression and the mechanisms they employ to navigate these obstacles.
3. To explore how gender-based barriers influence the career trajectories of women leaders.

3.3 Research Approach

This section introduces the philosophical positions (ontology and epistemology) adopted in this research to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in the police force of England and Wales. While ontology refers to the nature of reality and its characteristics, epistemology refers to the study of knowledge and addresses fundamental questions such as “How do we know what we know?” (Slevitch, 2011, p. 75). The subjective nature of qualitative research means that, ontologically, participants in a study can view and express their “realities” differently. Therefore, in adopting an ontological position in qualitative research, researchers should embrace the idea of multiple realities and “conduct a study with the intent of reporting these multiple realities” (Creswell, 2012, p. 20). Similarly, epistemologically, in qualitative studies, as the data is usually subjective and based on individual views, it is useful for the researchers to try to get as close as possible to the participants of the study because “knowledge is known through the subjective experiences of people” (p. 20).

Therefore, this research adopts the philosophical research paradigm of interpretivism, whose ontological position is relativist and its epistemological position is subjective. A relativist ontological position views reality as multiple, subjective, and socially constructed (Ryan, 2018). Thus there are no shared realities as, for example, in the context of this study, every policewoman would have her own unique experience of being a woman in the police force.

3.3.1 Interpretivism

Interpretivism exists in contrast to positivism, both ontologically and epistemologically, with the purpose of understanding and explaining human and social reality (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Whilst positivism concludes that we can only know observable facts, interpretivism asserts that we can know much more than that (Raadschelders, 2011). Interpretivists consider the intricacies of the social world too complex and intimate to be analysed

properly by positivist methods, with findings reduced to “law-like generalisations” (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p. 80).

Its ontological position is relativism, which holds that reality is subjective and varies from one person to another. People, through their consciousness, make sense of the world and give meaning to it so that there are as many realities as there are individuals (Scotland, 2012). The interpretivist submits that “before there were consciousnesses on earth capable of interpreting the world, the world held no meaning at all” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). The epistemological position of interpretivism is subjectivism, which dictates that the world and its phenomena do not exist independently of our knowledge (Scotland, 2012). Knowledge is created from the interaction between humans and their world; therefore, “reality is constructed in the mind of the individual and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection” (Ponterotto, 2005). In other words, understanding the social world can only be achieved by examining it through the standpoint of those who are participating in it (Scotland, 2012, p. 12).

In assessing its subjectivity, the difference in meanings attributed to the same phenomenon by different people does not negate its reliability; instead, truth is to be found in the “consensus formed by co-constructors” (p. 12). Essentially, an interpretative study employs a methodology which seeks to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of an individual or a collection of individuals. The objective of the study is not simply to produce a simplistic interpretation of events but to uncover new layers of understanding using inductive means (Scotland, 2012). To understand actions and motivations from the participant’s perspective without dominating or significantly influencing that perspective, methods such as open-ended interviews, observations, role-playing, focus groups, etc., are used in an interpretive study. With that objective in mind, this study utilizes open-ended semi-structured interviews to get a full, unimpeded narration of the participant’s story.

3.3.2 Inductive Research

This research employed inductive analysis to examine data extracted primarily from interviews conducted by the researcher. In contrast to deductive approaches, which begin with theories or hypotheses to be tested against data, inductive approaches allow insights to emerge directly from participants' accounts (Thomas, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the analysis did not begin with predefined categories; instead, codes and themes were developed through close collaboration with the narratives generated during the interviews.

Inductive research is central to qualitative inquiry, where the aim is to explore lived experiences in depth while remaining responsive to participants' perspectives. Its key features include (Thomas, 2006; Bingham and Witkowsky, 2022):

- Data-driven coding: Analysis began by generating codes directly from the transcripts, rather than applying pre-set labels. For instance, codes such as "imposter syndrome" or "Upward Social Comparison" were not imposed beforehand but arose directly from what participants described.
- Theme development: Codes were progressively clustered into categories and broader themes that capture recurring patterns across the data.
- Flexibility and openness: Inductive approaches prioritise responsiveness to unexpected findings. For example, participants repeatedly highlighted the disproportionate burden of women feeling the need to prove themselves beyond reproach, a theme not anticipated at the outset.
- Contextual grounding: Themes are always interpreted with reference to the organisational and social context in which participants' experiences were situated, rather than as abstract constructs.

This inductive stance was particularly appropriate given the research aims of understanding women's experiences of policing. By grounding the analysis in participants' own words, the study ensured that the 11 themes reported in Chapter 5 were closely tied to the data itself rather than to an external

theoretical framework. Below is a table visualising the process of inductive analysis as contrasted with the deductive approach.

Table 4: Inductive vs Deductive Research

Feature	Inductive Approach	Deductive Approach
Starting point	Raw data	Pre-existing theory/hypothesis
Coding	Emerges from participants' accounts	Based on the theoretical framework
Aim	Build concepts and themes from data	Test or confirm existing assumptions
Flexibility	High: open to unexpected findings	Lower: constrained by theory

3.4 Role as Other

In conducting this research, interviewing participants, interacting with the data and presenting findings, my role as 'other' in relation to the investigated group was at the forefront of my consideration. My positionality as a researcher was marked by multiple layers of 'otherness'. Firstly, I was a non-member of the police force. Secondly, and more significantly, my 'otherness' lay in being a man conducting research into women's lived experiences of policing and gender inequality. These dual dimensions of my outsider status relative to the participants shaped the research in complex ways, requiring intentional and continuous reflexivity.

Investigating the police

As someone not affiliated with the police service and institutions, I recognised that my outsider status would come with both challenges and

advantages. At the outset, there was an acknowledgement that I may not fully understand the intricacies of serving as an officer; thus, I positioned myself not as an expert but as a listener seeking to learn from their stories. There were also advantages to occupying the role of an outsider, such as participants sharing information that they might otherwise be reluctant to share with an insider colleague due to concerns about their reputation. For instance, one participant shared discussions she had with another female colleague about the toxic nature of their workplace. On another occasion, a participant reconfirmed the anonymous nature of the research before sharing with me an experience of having had an unfair manager in the past. As an outsider removed from their workplace politics and hierarchies, I presented a space where their narratives could be voiced without objections or consequences.

Given my outsider lens, there was a risk that participants' accounts could be interpreted through my own academic and personal frameworks rather than their lived meanings. To alleviate this risk, I practised reflexivity at each stage of the research. For instance, during interviews, I used prompts such as "*Could you explain how that made you feel?"* to ensure I understood their intended meaning. During the analysis process, I preserved the trail linking raw data extracts to codes and to themes, revisiting the transcripts several times to ensure that my interpretations were grounded in the participants' own words and expressions. To help distinguish between participants' intended meanings and my own positional interpretation, I made reflexive notes after each interview, recording my own reactions, assumptions, and the dynamics of the encounter.

Gendered Positionality

In addition to my 'otherness' as outside the police service, I was aware that participants were being asked to share sensitive experiences of sexism, marginalisation, and exclusion with a male researcher. Not only did my gender threaten a misunderstanding of their lived experiences, but it also placed me in a position similar to those who often occupied positions of authority or power over them in their professional lives. I recognised that some of the participants might therefore feel hesitant to disclose fully to me.

To mitigate this effect, I discussed my positionality with the participants at the start of the interview, and I explained the research methodology and how it emphasises listening to and creating a platform for their narratives to be heard. My questions were framed to encourage storytelling, using prompts such as 'Can you tell me more about that experience?' Consequently, my role in the interview was to facilitate a medium for their narratives to be told, rather than navigating the conversation through pre-planned, closed-ended questions.

Interestingly, some participants remarked on my role as a man researching a topic on women's experiences, and expressed their satisfaction with my interest in the issues. Recognising my 'otherness', participants appeared to use the interview as an opportunity to explain or educate me about the realities of being a woman in the police force. This dynamic enriched the data, making being male and an outsider to policing beneficial as it provided a unique vantage point.

Again, I made sure to take notes after my interviews, recording how participants interacted with the topic and with me, as well as my reactions to the things they said, including anything that surprised me. This formed part of my method in ensuring that I remained reflexive throughout the research, maintaining the awareness of the potential imbalance of a man writing about women's experiences of inequality.

3.5 Narrative Inquiry

This section explores the use of narrative inquiry as a tool to collect and analyse qualitative data which reveal the unique experiences of women police in England and Wales. The use of in-depth interviews is employed as the method of collecting these stories, presenting their narrative trends, and identifying themes of sexism and misogyny within those narratives. The use of unstructured interviews aids the researcher in investigating the lived experiences of policewomen in leadership positions to highlight the practices and attitudes that encourage or hinder equality in their workplace, as experienced by the studied participants themselves. It also establishes what these lived experiences reveal about the motivations and challenges

currently facing women aspiring for those leadership positions. Drawing from the experiences of the participants, the research additionally details strategies that these women police leaders have used to navigate their path through the challenges of work progression as a woman.

3.5.1 Analysing Experiences Through Narratives

Qualitative methods are more suited to explore and interpret experiences than quantitative methods. Thus the adoption of narrative inquiry in this study is employed as a way of understanding the participants' experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) resting on the epistemological assumption that humans make sense of random experiences by the imposition of story structures (Bell, 2002). Story, as used here, is the means through which a person interprets their experiences of the world and makes them personally meaningful (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). In its fullest sense, narrative inquiry requires going beyond simply telling stories to an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates (Bell, 2002).

In the context of this research, this method explores the lived experiences of women in leadership positions in the England and Wales police force, focusing on their stories. Narrative inquiry is premised on the ability of people as storytellers to communicate their experiences; thus the researcher asks questions during the interview that encourage the respondents to narrate stories of their experience with the researched topic. Unlike qualitative interviews—structured and semi-structured interviews usually delivered in question-and-answer formats—narrative inquiry is normally an open-ended conversation. This way, participants can tell their stories with little to no imposition from the researcher. As experiences and stories are told, the researcher takes notes as appropriate, documenting observations of the participants' expression, tone, reaction to recalling the memory, and the researcher's own thought process during the interview.

This process implements seven key characteristics of a narrative inquiry to facilitate the extraction and analysis of relevant and informative stories

(Creswell, 2012, p. 507). These characteristics are: collecting life experiences from the participants, arranging these experiences chronologically to get an insight into the participants' past as well as present and future, collecting life stories from the participants with regards to their experience with gender inequality in the police force, retelling the participants stories by inserting a logical sequence to the events that unfold, coding the texts for themes, incorporating context into the stories, and collaboration between the researcher and participants to "lessen the potential gap between the narrative told and the narrative reported" (Creswell, 2012).

The stories gathered from participants are structured into narratives using Creswell's (2012) Problem Solution Narrative Structure (p. 511), visualised below (Table 1).

Once the narratives are established, the researcher analyses them using the narrative analytic process proposed by Lindsay and Schwind (2016). This analytical process follows three stages: personal justification, practical justification, and social justification. During the stage of personal justification, the researcher is prompted by reading and re-reading of the participants' accounts to reflect on their own thoughts, life experiences, feelings, and observations. In the second stage of analysis, the researcher starts identifying narrative patterns across participants' stories. Analysing these emerging patterns through the lens of radical feminism, the researcher considers what further reflection and inquiry they are drawn into in the context of the UK police force. In the third stage of analysis, social justification, the researcher delves deeper into literature that expands outside of the police force to deliberate on the significance of the participants' narratives to inter-disciplinary knowledge and to a wider social context.

Table 5: Constructing a narrative structure (Creswell, 2012)

Settings	Characters	Actions	Problems	Resolutions
Context, environment,	Individuals in the story	Movements of	Questions to be answered	Answers to questions and

conditions, place, time, locale , year, and era.	described as archetypes, personalities, their behaviours, style, and patterns.	individuals through the story illustrating the character's thinking or behaviours.	or phenomena to be described or explained.	explanations about what caused the character to change.

The use of in-depth interviews is crucial in experiential analysis, as this research undertakes. It gives access to experiences and issues that may otherwise not be apparent using an alternate research method, and illuminates our understanding of how women in the workplace interpret, interact, and attempt to traverse these obstacles (Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi, 2019). Using narrative inquiry, the researcher in collaboration with the participants construct a compelling narrative about relevant topics, discovering details that would otherwise remain hidden.

Using narrative inquiry, rooted in a radical feminist framework, as a method in this study to explore the lived experience of women leaders in the England and Wales Police Force adds to the body of knowledge in the inequality, feminist, and leadership fields. This narrative method further broadens the understanding of women in the police, complementing existing statistical data on pay and representation gaps (Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi, 2019; Chowdhury and Gibson, 2019; Salem and Yount, 2019).

3.5.2 Data Collection

Potential participants were sought through policing organisations (e.g., Police Superintendent Association, International Police Association, Police Federation, One Police UK) and via LinkedIn. Appendix B provides a sample email sent out to policing organisations to request participants, and Appendix A provides a sample direct message sent via the LinkedIn messaging app to potential participants for the research. Although the interviews were

unstructured and followed a strict narrative inquiry format (i.e., without pre-set questions), the interviewer had a list of prompts, which can be found in the interview protocol in Appendix C.

Given the nature of this research as investigating specific lived experiences of a particular group (i.e., women leaders in policing), it was most appropriate to use purposive sampling. This sampling method prioritises participants with the required knowledge and experience to fulfil the objectives of the study, rather than attaining statistical representation (Patton, 2015). The requirement for participating in this research was to be a female officer in the England and Wales police force and hold the rank of Chief Inspector or above. The researcher chose to investigate the regions of England and Wales as he currently resides there and they constitute one territorial police force. The participants in this study self-selected themselves through their willingness to discuss their experiences.

Participant recruitment was constrained owing perhaps to reluctance to discuss a sensitive topic, institutional restrictions, or gatekeeping, drawbacks which are to be expected in a qualitative research discussing a sensitive topic like gender discrimination and policing (Braun and Clarke, 2023). The police social organisations contacted were unwilling to circulate the research invite to their members and of the women invited directly, most did not respond. Three women agreed to do the research but pulled out of participation before an interview was conducted. Although no explanations were provided for the withdrawal, the researcher was aware of relevant news at the time of the Metropolitan Police suing a former senior policewoman for breaching a non-disclosure agreement by discussing instances of discrimination while she was an officer.[11] One of the four women that participated in this study insisted that I first contact her police force directly and she gets confirmation from them that it is alright for her to participate in the research. Owing to ethical considerations on coercing participants, the

[11] See Met police take ex-officer who made claims of sexism and racism to court | Metropolitan police | The Guardian

researcher could only rely on women who voluntarily agreed to share their stories.

As this study set out to explore the lived experiences of women leaders in the police force in England and Wales, the primary source of data was interviews with women in leadership positions within the police force of England and Wales. Women leaders were determined by rank in the police. Invitations to participate were sent out to police organisations like the British Association for Women in Policing, as well as identifying potential participants on LinkedIn, and interviews were held online through Microsoft Teams. Interviews were unstructured and ranged for a duration of one hour on average. As the interviews were unstructured, the researcher asked follow-ups to extract as much information as possible or follow up on interesting topics being explored by the participants. The first prompt to participants was to narrate their journey into policing as a career. This was done to elicit a storylike response at the start, with participants recollecting the motivations that led them into policing and what the early days were like. By invoking this kind of response at the start, it encouraged participants to provide descriptive answers for the rest of the interview. Though organised around particular themes, the interviews were unstructured enough that participants could share what exactly working for the police meant for them, their unique experiences as women and the barriers they faced and surmounted to get to leadership positions, and how they are navigating those positions now.

Four women in the Police Force were interviewed for this study. They had spent an average of thirty-five years in the police. Table 2 below shows the women, their ranks, and years of work in the police.

In qualitative research, the intent is not to generalise the findings, “but to elucidate the particular, the specific” (Creswell, 2012, p. 179). The general rule in qualitative research is to study a few individuals or cases, but to collect extensive details on the subject studied. Qualitative research prioritises depth and richness of data over large sample sizes (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). This is even more so in narrative inquiry because of its

nature and purpose—exploring participants' lived experiences deeply and authentically. In suggesting sample size for different qualitative approaches, Cresswell says: "In narrative research, I have found many examples with one or two individuals, unless a larger pool of participants is used to develop a collective story" (Creswell, 2012, p. 179). Studying four policewomen allows the researcher to focus on rich, detailed stories that reflect the unique perspectives and experiences of these four women, fostering a deeper understanding of their lives. Other doctoral studies have also used similar number of participants in their narrative inquiry. For instance, four participants were used in a PhD thesis that explored identity negotiation of English language teachers in Nepal (Dahal *et al.*, 2024).

Table 6: Profile of interviewed policewomen

Participant	**Rank**	**Entry**	**Parental Status**	**Children**	**Partner in Police**	**Career Break**
Lisa	Ch Insp	1997	Parent	Two	No	No
Harriet	Ch Insp	The mid-1990s	Parent	One	Yes	No
Susan	Ch Insp	1997	Parent	Two	No	No
Zoe	Ch Supt	The mid-1990s	Parent	Three	Yes	No

3.6 Thematic Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Following from structuring participants' stories into narratives, the pseudonymised interview text was coded and sorted using the NVIVO software to reveal relevant patterns.

Analysis of the interview data was executed using a combination of thematic analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Instead of reporting objective findings, IPA focuses on the exploration of the meanings

and personal perceptions of a participant's experience (Jayawardena-Willis, Pio and McGhee, 2021). In this study, IPA was used to study and understand in-depth how participants experienced and made sense of their own experiences with the phenomenon. When interpreting data, IPA employs a double hermeneutic system where the researcher firstly makes sense of the participants' meaning as they intend and secondly as an independent interpreter (Jayawardena-Willis, Pio and McGhee, 2021). This duality allows the researcher to make broader and more in-depth interpretations, consequently leading to more reliable and general claims. This double hermeneutic function, along with phenomenology and idiography, form the three theoretical cornerstones of IPA (Bentzen, Kenttä and Lemyre, 2020). Phenomenology studies events and how they are experienced subjectively, and idiography focuses on understanding each participant and their worldview.

For accurate analysis of the data collected, the six-step analysis procedure based on IPA outlined by Jayawardena-Willis, Pio and McGhee (2021) was implemented. These steps as used in this study include:

1. Reading the interviews (familiarisation): The transcripts were read and re-read to deeply understand the participants' experiences.
2. Diagnosis of the interviews: Detailed notes and comments on the data were made by the researcher, descriptives elements of the text were interpreted and analytical dialogue within the text were engaged with.
3. Developing intra-story themes: Themes within individual stories were organised and rearranged based on emerging patterns.
4. Developing inter-story themes: Themes across stories were compared to identify overarching patterns and constructs.
5. Writing up: The inter-case themes were aggregated and interpreted to present findings cohesively.
6. Enfolding the literature: Empirical findings were connected to existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of policewomen gendered inequality in the police force in England and Wales.

3.6.1 Data Coding and Theme Generation

The process of turning raw interview data into refined themes was essential to the researcher's ability to fulfil the research objectives. There were four crucial steps involved in achieving this result: (1) familiarisation of the data, (2) making annotations and generating initial codes, (3) generating themes from parent nodes (codes), and (4) reviewing and finalising themes. The researcher was guided by Bingham and Witkowsky's (2022) five-phase analysis process, which includes organising, sorting, understanding, interpreting, and explaining the data. The researcher adopted these steps because their functions aligned with the principles of inductive qualitative research.

In the first step, the researcher familiarised themselves with the interview transcripts, ensuring they had a full understanding of what the participants were trying to say at each stage. This familiarisation began at the point of transcription, rewatching each interview recording multiple times and paying close attention to both the video and audio to ensure that every word transcribed matched what the interviewee had said. Besides accurately matching the words, the researcher also had to ensure that each relevant sentence or phrase was presented in the right context, acknowledging any gestures or expressions that added to what was being said. For instance, when one participant paused the interview to ensure her office door was properly closed, the interviewer noted both the pause and what was being said at the time. Even after transcription was complete, the researcher ensured they read each transcript multiple times, immersing themselves in its content and gaining a deep familiarity with the data.

The next step involved annotating the transcribed interview data being examined. The researcher made relevant notes alongside the texts, particularly focusing on the subject matter discussed and the issues raised, which could help identify themes in the narrative. For example:

- Extract: *"I was really reluctant to go for it because I didn't feel that I've been able to demonstrate [all my potential] at this rank."*
- Annotation: *Mentality/mental barrier to progression.*

- Extract: *“Because our senior officers tend to come and go quite quickly, there’s no corporate memory.”*
- Annotation: *Short-term corporate memory and lack of reward.*

These annotations constitute the initial coding phase of the analysis, enabling the researcher to group similar codes to achieve a more coherent understanding of the data.

The third step of the process was to generate themes from the initial codes identified in the interview data. Using NVivo 14, the researcher was able to group similar codes into a new, broader category or parent code/theme. For instance:

- Initial codes: *Childbirth, Raising Young Children, Flexibility.*
- Parent theme: *Work-life Balance.*

Using available tools on the NVivo software, such as word clouds and coding matrices, the researcher was able to identify patterns across all four narratives. Relevant indices, like what areas of their experience one participant chose to focus on, and how similar or distant their area of focus was from the other narrators.

This process of comparative analysis led to the final step of the data coding process, which was the reviewing and finalising of identified themes. During this stage of coding, the identified themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they captured both semantic and underlying meanings, as intended by the participants. Through an iterative refinement process, the researcher ensured that the themes identified and highlighted were directly linked to the established research objectives and overall research aim. Below is a table illustrating the process adopted by the researcher in converting interview data into codes and unlocking relevant themes.

Table 7: Theme Generation

Transcript Extract	Code	Parent Code	Final Theme	Participant
“I went out on my own to jobs.”	Single/double crewed	Support	Physicality	Susan
“My daughter then had to go into nursery full-time.”	Flexibility	Childbirth	Work/life balance	Lisa
“The equipment you had was a little wooden stick and a pair of handcuffs.”	Old days vs new	Discrimination	Underplaying sexism	Harriet
“The ones who don’t shout the loudest are usually the best in my opinion.”	Identifying talent	Mentoring	Network/support	Zoe

Chapter Four

Narrative Inquiry

4.1 Unveiling Leadership Through Narrative: Women in the England and Wales Police Force

This chapter delves into the experiences of women leaders within the England and Wales police force, utilising a narrative inquiry approach to capture their unique stories. Through in-depth interviews with four participants, this research explores the challenges they navigate in a traditionally male-dominated profession. Narrative inquiry offers a nuanced lens through which to understand lived experiences. Unlike purely quantitative approaches and even most qualitative ones, it allows participants to weave their own narratives, capturing the complexities and emotions embedded within their journeys. By centring their voices, we gain a deeper appreciation of the triumphs and tribulations that shape women leaders in the police.

This thematic narrative structure, chosen over a strict chronological order (i.e., presenting events in a causal format, without any jumps in the timeline), allows for a more holistic understanding of common themes across the interviews. Thematic analysis in the subsequent chapter will further explore these recurring threads, drawing a richer picture of the participants' shared experiences. The research employed the use of unstructured video interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, conducted over Microsoft Teams. This platform provided a comfortable and familiar environment for the participants while ensuring a detailed record of the conversation. The interviewer, a male researcher with a background in Law, International Human Rights, and Business, approached these interviews with a genuine desire to learn and understand the experiences of these women leaders. He found the conversations to be highly informative and inspiring, offering valuable insights into the unique challenges and rewards of leading within the police force.

The issue of a male researcher collecting and retelling the stories of women leaders has been considered in the methodology chapter, under the section “radical feminist theory”. While acknowledging the potential for bias, several steps were taken to mitigate this concern. Firstly, the interviewer adopted a position of active listening, prioritising the participants’ narratives and perspectives. Secondly, the use of an interview format with limited prompting allowed the women to freely share their experiences without undue influence. In this way, the researcher did not use prepared questions to direct the kinds of information derived from the interviews. Finally, the commitment to preserving the interviewees’ language and avoiding academic jargon ensures a true reflection of their voices and perspectives. Any quote drawn directly from the participants is presented as they said it, avoiding the temptation of correcting informal language or the use of contractions. However, the quotes used have been cleaned of unnecessary words, repetitions, or corrections which do not contribute to the message being delivered. Through a dedication to narrative inquiry and a focus on participant experience, this chapter aims to unveil the realities of female leadership within the England and Wales police force. By listening attentively and amplifying their narratives, we gain valuable insights that can contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for women leaders in law enforcement. The names used are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants.

The following provides an insight into the experiences of the four participants: Susan, Harriet, Lisa, and Zoe. The objective of this chapter is to utilise IPA in attaining a deep understanding of each participant’s unique experience and how they make sense of it. Each participant is presented as a case study with focus on how they make meaning of their leadership journey, significant events that shaped their career, barriers they encountered, and their strategies for overcoming gender barriers.

4.2 Susan

4.2.1 Background

Susan cannot remember a time when she did not want to be a police officer. She wanted to join the force from about the age of five and reckons it is just something that is 'in the blood'. Although all her focus was on joining the police, her father took a more pragmatic approach, advising her to get a degree and do a Masters in a discipline outside of policing. His reasoning was that it would be advantageous to have something to fall back on if policing does not work out.

She joined the force at 24, initially as part of a Frontline Response Team, being one of only two women on the team. Progressing quickly through the ranks, she took her sergeant exam within five years and became a Sergeant within seven years. As she was about to get married and she knew she wanted to have children, she took her inspectors' exams to use later when she was ready to move up. About fourteen years after giving birth to her eldest child, she decided to go for Inspector promotion. At the time of our conversation, Susan was serving as a temporary Chief Inspector and was looking to become a permanent Chief Inspector.

4.2.2 Nothing More Important than Being a Mother

During our conversation, Susan repeatedly talked about how important it was for her to have children. Not just having children, but actively participating in their lives as a mother was the priority for her since the early days of her career. The passion with which she spoke of motherhood was palpable through the computer screen, and I got the sense that she would have been willing to sacrifice anything for it, regardless of the opportunity cost.

These opportunity costs start revealing themselves very early in the career of Chief Inspector Susan. Despite becoming Sergeant and taking her Inspectors exam within seven years of joining the force, she had to put her career progression on hold to get married and raise her two children.

> I waited until my eldest was 14 before I went for my Inspectors because I felt like, I suppose if we're looking at it from a [gender] blocker [perspective] or anything to do with being a woman, having the kids was my priority and [I had to consider] the impact on a family going for promotion. Certainly, to an Inspector rank. You really have to jump through, in my opinion, quite a lot of hoops, and I needed the children to be in a position where, as a family, we could cope with childcare commitments and things like that.

She explains how her husband, although very supportive, works a distance away and so cannot help with childcare requirements between 8am and 6pm. And although she had support from her grandparents, she did not want to burden them with those responsibilities as they were getting older. She explains, "At the end of the day, I wanted to be a mom. I didn't want to have kids, [just] to not be around, so that was my priority at that time." Seeing as her husband was unable to offer help between 8am and 6pm, responsibilities like attending the kids' sports day and other activities that demanded to be done during the day fell to her, and going for an Inspectors promotion would not have given her the flexibility to complete those tasks.

Subsequently, this need for flexibility meant that Susan had to choose roles which provided her with the opportunity to do some shift work whilst maintaining her home life. She did 'geographic sergeant roles' like neighbourhood policing and early intervention which allowed her to work and still carry out domestic responsibilities like picking the kids up from school. So, the Inspector rank had to remain on the 'back burner' until she believed that as a family, they were all 'prepared for mum to not be around as much'.

Although she hesitates to refer to her children as blockers, she recognises that they have impacted the progression of her career and suggests that the police could do more in alleviating this barrier for parents. She suggests that having a nursery in the division, as some other businesses do, would help parents balance their work with their childcare responsibilities. In the end, she summarizes her decision process thus:

> I think my mantra was always, 'What am I gonna regret more?' Am I gonna regret not being Inspector? Or am I gonna regret not being a mum? And I knew what was important for me.

4.3.3 Women Doing Women Jobs

Echoing unfortunately familiar sentiments, Susan explains how she noticed whilst working as part of the response team that certain jobs, such as sexual offences, were disproportionately allocated to the women, even though there were only two women on the team. However, although she is in no doubt that 'certain roles were seen to be more female than male', she concludes that this is 'sometimes the right thing to do'. After all, if somebody has been sexually assaulted, they may prefer to speak to a female rather than a male. So, even if she had been stereotyped into those kinds of roles, she accepted that it was done for the right reasons.

This gender-based allocation system seemed to carry over to childcare, such that if there were any children to be looked after, she was often assigned to it, even though she had no children of her own at the time.

There were occasions where I was asked, 'oh yeah there's a job and we've got these two children that need looking after'.

> I was often given the job and I was like, 'I don't have any children; I have no experience in dealing with children. Actually, you know my male colleague has two kids and he's probably better at dealing with the kids … you might be better [off] asking them.'

4.3.4 Playing Subordinate

Progressing through the ranks as a uniformed police officer necessarily means going through the stages of interacting one-on-one with members of the public, either as a constable or as a sergeant. Susan remembers what these interactions were like and how her male colleagues were often

perceived more highly, with regard to authority, than she was. When she was a PC, she noticed that she would go to attend a job, and some people would speak to the man more than they would speak to her, as though he was the one to talk to. And it was not just an occasional occurrence; it was something that she noticed repeatedly.

Even when she became a sergeant and was the higher-ranking officer present, the experience was still the same. She recalls:

> What I found quite interesting was when I became a sergeant, and I went [to a job] with a male PC, and they wanted to speak to supervision, even though I was the one with the stripes on the shoulders, they would talk to my colleague and presumed that the male was the supervision.
>
> I don't think people [now] would perhaps make that presumption, but I think then [early 2000s] they did. They definitely did. You'd go to a job, and they would speak to your male colleague, and then you'd have to say, 'Well, actually, if you're making a complaint or you want to speak to supervision, I'm the supervisor'. 'ohh right, okay' [they would say].

Given my familiarity with the literature, I was not at all surprised to learn that people more readily associated masculinity with leadership, especially in the early 2000s. So, I asked Susan how she felt about this and what her reaction would be in those instances. She did not feel slighted by it and was happy to let them speak to whichever officer they felt more comfortable speaking to. As she explained to me, "If I'm attending an incident and somebody called the police out, then they're not having a very good day, are they? … So, if it made them feel better to speak to a particular individual, I wouldn't make a fuss about that at all."

She would, however, not hesitate to speak up if she had an idea or felt that she could facilitate better results than her colleague was managing. She told me about her time assigned to a bus station and how sometimes people would attempt to jump off the station. This usually required having to talk them down, and if she felt that she had more rapport with the person,

“maybe because they felt more affinity with the female … [or] I had the right personality”, then she would take the lead on trying to talk them down.

4.3.5 The More Difference, the Better

Susan reflects on the importance of diversity in the police force as a tool to expand the talent pool within the force and facilitate a blend of different skills to achieve better results. She does not believe that domination by any single gender helps the force; instead it is important to recognise the skills that men and women provide and create a balance between the two. Again, she draws from her personal experience of interacting with the public and some people preferring to speak to her male colleague instead of her. In those scenarios having a male officer present proves beneficial for completing the assigned task.

Conversely, there are tasks that require the availability of women, and so it is necessary to have female officers on teams to perform those duties. Susan remembers a time when she was the only female officer on a team, and her teammates were very supportive and made her feel welcome. She also got the sense that they were glad to have her as she was the only one on the team who could perform certain tasks like searching a female suspect. After about six months, she was happy to be joined by another female officer on the team. Even though the men had not made her feel out of place, it was good “to have a female that you could have a chat with and have some affinity with.”

The key to diversity in the police is recruitment. Reaching as diverse a population as possible in a bid to encourage a representative split of applications to the police force. Susan believes the current recruitment strategy is working well in attracting diverse applicants across all protected groups.

> I’m in training at the minute, so I see the new recruits coming through, and we are definitely recruiting more women. I don’t know if the workforce is 50/50, but the new recruits are 50/50,

> and in some ways, we've actually recruited more females than men. And I'm not saying that's deliberate, but I think we're attracting [more diversity].

One practical step that Susan highlights as contributing to the increased number of women joining the force is the execution of bleep tests (fitness tests) in a more gender-inclusive manner.

> We have a Workforce Representation Team … that is running bleep tests in communities, for instance, because that might be a blocker for women, even getting them through the door. For the fitness test we run female-only sessions cause some women were getting quite anxious around running with, you know, big burly blokes that, you know, three strides and they've done the length of the thing. So, it's all about making people feel included and [being] inclusive.

4.3.6 Men Benefitting from Female Leadership

At some point during our dialogue, Susan talks about the importance of calling out sexism and racism when they arise in conversations, so I ask her about the published report on the issue in the London Metropolitan Police by Baroness Casey. She considers herself very lucky to not have been subjugated to such discriminations and attributes this fortune to having good managers who have treated her fairly and with respect.

> I think if I've had any issue, I can only think of one manager who's perhaps um, around um, around…

She looks up to her right, as if to remember, or perhaps calculating. And for the first time in our conversation, I sense reluctance.

> It is anonymous, this, isn't it?

She half inquires, proceeding with her story just as I was reassuring her that it is.

> … if I've had any issue, it's probably been a female manager. I can think of one female manager who I think preferred male

> colleagues, not in a sexual way, just in terms of who they preferred to give opportunities to or something like that. And that would be a female manager, not a male manager.

Knowing that this is a theme present in the literature on gender inequality in the workplace, I ask her to further reflect on the experience with this female manager and provide any specific examples.

> I'll be a bit uncomfortable, but it was more around comments made when I'm in the presence of another male [colleague] about the other person being their favourite. It was very noticeable that people were being given opportunities to act up in a certain role like I am doing now. And they very much went to male[s], and it was noticeable that more men were getting those opportunities under that particular person's regime.

In what I believe was a need to empathise and vicariously relate to Susan, I reveal that this phenomenon is present in the literature, and other women have reported having a bad experience with their female manager. She is taken by this and immediately proffers a possible explanation:

> I don't know whether the research would back up that if a woman gets very high up … in what was traditionally [a] male-dominated industry, whether they feel they have to become more aggressive, I don't know if that's the right word because they're not aggressive, but more, more male…

'Masculine,' I suggest.

> More masculine, yeah, or more dominant. But I think for some women, that's the way they cope with it. And then therefore become that, but kind of directed towards other women. But I've only experienced that in one person. The rest of my female bosses have been fantastic. I've got a female boss at the minute … and she's amazing. So yeah, it's interesting.

4.3.7 Let the Woman Make the Brew

Susan tells me she is quite firm on workplace professionalism and would not shy away from calling out anyone in the workplace who was using sexist or racist language. However, she is quite jokey and uses humour as a tool to better relate to people around her. Although one must be careful with their humour because what is banter for one person may not be for somebody else. She joined the police in the late 90s, and the kind of banter that was commonplace then would not be tolerated in the force today, as there is a better appreciation of bullying and discrimination within the force now. She makes it a point to instruct new recruits on what is expected of them, directing them on acceptable and unacceptable behaviours.

She makes sure to highlight that the culture around banter is different now to when she started in the force:

> So, things are not tolerated now as probably were in the past, but again, I've never felt singled out, and if they did start any typical "oh you make the brew, you're the woman sort of thing", then I was quite happy to joke back with them. And you know they've quite often ended up making the brew because I would then refuse to [make it], if that makes sense.
>
> But it was never targeted, you know, it would be me one day, and then it would be somebody else the next day.

In all the banter, she never felt that she was being treated differently because she was a woman; it was just something that happened, and nothing offended her particularly.

4.3.8 Whatever a Man Can Do…

It is often implied that some jobs are just more suited to a particular gender than the other. For instance, jobs which require tenderness, like nursing, are seen as more fitting for women, and jobs requiring strength, such as construction, more fitting for men. Policing falls within the latter

category, with frontline police officers often required to physically subdue aggressive transgressors.

Susan oversees her Personal Safety Training (PST) team, which is in charge of cuffs training and techniques to gain control over a resisting detainee, and disagrees with the assertion that frontline roles should be reserved for men. She tells me that there are two or three women in the team, and they can take down 'big blokes' if needed. It is more important to learn the techniques of applying sufficient pressure to the right area to subdue a person and put cuffs on than simply possessing natural strength.

> However, we do need a mix of people, I would say. Because it's more about [combining] different skills, cause actually the biggest skill you can have on the front line is verbal communication and being able to talk to people. From my experience that's the first resort when you are going to deal with an incident, even if somebody's being aggressive; it's to try and calm them down and get them to comply with you because you don't wanna get hands on them.

She asserts this is true for both men and women: first, try to de-escalate with verbal communication and reserve physical interaction as a last resort. If physical restraint is required, the officer relies on techniques learnt in training rather than brute force. Importantly, she never felt that the police regarded this as a barrier for her and that it impacted her assignments. She was single-crewed and had to go out on her own to jobs with the confidence that if it suddenly turned violent, then she could signal for help, and her colleagues would be there as quickly as possible. And if it was a job where violence was expected, then multiple crews would be sent to deal with it.

4.3.9 Help for Those Who Need It

Susan tells me there are a lot of networks for women in the police to lean on and get help if needed. Inspire is a network for women in the police; they help with Continuing Professional Development (CPD) through sessions,

webinars, conferences, etc. They also help with pregnancy and maternity issues that women in policing may face. She has been to a few Inspire sessions in the past but clarifies that she never felt like she needed it.

There is a maternity and paternity support group called Mat-Pat, which she used when she was pregnant to get advice on what options were open to her, and she has used them over the years, although she clarifies again that she has not felt like she has 'needed a lot of that sort of support'. Recently, she has been to a menopause support group, as that is something she is currently going through.

These support groups help bring women issues to the forefront, and Susan believes this can only be a positive with regard to progression and inclusivity in the workforce. However, despite this improvement, she believes there is a better solution to encouraging women's progression in the police. She opines:

> I think if they want more women in policing going up through the ranks, they need to allow people to go for a particular job, not just the rank. And I think they'll find more women would apply.

This idea was stressed by Susan as a determining factor in deciding the career progression of policewomen. It is further discussed below.

4.3.10 Going for the Role, not Just the Rank

Although the current process for promotion within the police force is a major barrier for policemen and women, it is especially challenging for women. Susan explains that the system in place only allows promotion to a higher rank, not promotion to a specific role. She provides a hypothetical of herself as a Sergeant wanting to become an Inspector:

> I wouldn't say as a Sergeant, 'right, I want to be a Geographic Inspector, or I want to be an early action inspector, cause I could have done those roles. But what I would have struggled to do is the full shifts of, they call it, a DRI (Divisional Response

> Inspector), and I would have struggled to do the full shifts because of the kids.

Applying for a rank means being prepared to do everything within that rank, and so people who have responsibilities, such as childcare, restricting them to only certain roles in a higher rank end up not applying for promotion at all.

> And I think for me that is a big blocker. Had I been able to apply for a particular role, you know, Early Action Inspector, for example, which was some shift work but not full shifts, was fairly flexible around if I needed to suddenly drop everything cause my kids wasn't well or whatever, then I would have been promoted earlier because I would have been able to say "I can cope with that job, but I can't cope with that job". But I needed to be ready to do anything.

She tells me she has spoken to senior management about the promotion process being a blocker and how its amendment would see more women in higher ranks within the force.

4.4 Harriet

4.4.1 Background

My conversation with Harriet was very informative and rewarding. After pleasantries were exchanged and I answered a couple questions she had about my research, I let her tell me about her experiences with the freedom to begin wherever she liked and progress the story at whatever pace she wanted.

Harriet grew up on a farm and so was always outdoors-oriented and very sporty, referring to her younger self as a "real tomboy". She has always been very competitive and knew even at a young age that she wanted to end up doing something hands-on. Her first experience of the police was as a

teenager in school, during her GCSEs, when she undertook a work experience opportunity with the local police in her area. But even then, she had not seriously considered the idea of working for the police because she was about to be going to university, expecting that the opportunities she would get there would dazzle and lead her down a wonderful career path.

By the time she was at the university, she could not see any career opportunities that appealed to her, and then she met her partner. Her partner was just joining the police force at the time, and so she got to experience what working for the police was like through him. This reinvigorated her desire for a hands-on career and led to her joining the Special Constables. She explained to me how the Special Constabulary is a volunteer program that runs across the country and recruits people who give up their time to do unpaid police work. You get the uniform and training, and then you are sent into the community. Even though she was already working at the time, she signed up her evenings and weekends to the Special Constabulary, as she was already considering joining the police force full time and wanted to see what it would be like for a woman. She volunteered for a couple of years, and once she was able to, she applied and joined the police full-time.

4.4.2 Woman Police Officer

Whilst talking about her time as a special constable, she narrates how because it was the early 1990s, women had to wear a skirt as part of their uniform, carry a “dinky little leather handbag” and a truncheon which was a few inches long. She exclaims that she is unsure what they were supposed to do with this tiny piece of wood which had been given to them. Just then she realises with excitement, “In fact I’ve still got it, I’ve still got it in my cupboard here.” She walks out of camera shot and returns with what I can only describe as a miniature baton prop; I immediately understood her exasperation as to what she was supposed to do with this ‘weapon’. But she goes on to reassure me and perhaps herself too that it was a different time. A time when she was still referred to as a woman police officer and expected to chase after offenders in a skirt, whilst wielding a five-inch baton.

4.4.3 Women as Childcarers

Following her time as a special constable, Harriet shared her experience of moving into full-time policing. At 23, she was really excited about this new chapter of her life, she felt like she had gathered enough experience of the world from going to university, moving away from her family and home, and her time in the Special Constabulary. She already had the experience of putting on the uniform and being amongst the public.

When she joined her first team, she was one of four or five women in a team of about 25, but she did not mind this as she had already accepted that she would be in the minority. And although there was always a sense that incidents involving children or other sensitive issues would be automatically delegated to the women, she never really felt like it "was a difference thing".

> As a female officer, I think [the challenges] never really felt like a battle. But there was probably that sense that females might move into those departments like child protection and domestic abuse. And you know those kinds of vulnerable areas of business. But I was always quite resistant to that. I think that was just part of my upbringing, I wasn't going to follow the norms and be pushed into certain kinds of areas. I wanted to do what everyone else was doing and [so] I very much went into lines of policing like surveillance and proactive policing, drugs work, and advanced driving skills. I did that kind of work and absolutely loved it. Can't really say I ever remember a time when I was made to feel like I wasn't treated as equally as my male colleagues.

About thirty minutes into the interview, I ask Harriet to revisit the issue of women in the police and attending to domestic issues. She reckons it's not as much of an issue now as it was in the past. Traditionally, it was seen as a side issue and not really part of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), but now vulnerability issues make up about 80% of the calls received from the public.

> Our CID departments now are well in this force, we've got specific public protection departments who deal with all the child protection and domestic abuse. But also, they deal with modern slavery and honour-based violence, so it's seen as a real specialism and all of those officers are accredited detectives in the same way as the traditional CID departments.

She explains that the perception of going into the areas as a police officer has changed over the years, and the stigma of working vulnerable cases no longer exists. Years ago, crimes such as robberies and burglaries were the main area of focus for the CID, and thus more officers were attracted to these; now, however, a very high proportion of the workload is in vulnerable cases such as sexual offences. When vulnerable cases were still a side issue, officers would actively avoid doing them because they couldn't cope with all the stress, especially if they had young families of their own. In the end, she reckons it was mostly women in those departments. Fortunately, with the specialisation of these departments, she perceives the participation of male and female trained officers to be about equal.

To further buttress the point, she gives examples of the gender makeup historically of departments such as the family liaison officers and firearms teams, and how they have changed over the years:

> And family liaison officers as well, the officers that go out and deal with, you know, if you've had a murder, you'd allocate a family liaison officer to work with the family, that's [now] equally male and female. Traditionally, it might have been more, it seems, been a bit more of a female role in the past. A lot of [specialist] departments now like firearms teams and advanced drivers [are] starting to see not only female officers within those teams but female supervisors as well. I think it's only recently that we've had a female Sergeant of one of our local firearms teams for the first time.

However, Harriet did work in Child Protection and Domestic Abuse for several years before moving into other departments and now being

responsible for chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear incidents, as well as issues involving firearms. As she tells me:

> It did get to a point where I'd got my own son. And I think there's a point where, as a woman with a child, you get a lot of empathy and a lot more appreciation [of people's experiences], perhaps more so than when I was a younger female officer. So, I did work in child protection for a long time.

4.4.4 Radio to Mobile

A very informative bit of the interview came when I asked Harriet to tell me about the changes she has experienced in her over thirty years' experience in the force. She inhales deeply and then exhales, visibly preparing to tell a long story.

"Crikey, I mean, everything now is digital", she says, beginning an uninterrupted fifteen-minute monologue. When Harriet started working for the police, there was so much paperwork lying around in the offices, and even when officers would go out for duty, they had to carry big folders of paper for all the different instances they might encounter. There were also no mobile phones, as having one was very rare at the time, so officers had to call in any queries via radio, which went through the control room. However, she considered herself quite fortunate at the time, having just escaped the 70s and 80s when officers still had whistles and capes. The retiring officers around her had narrated how there were no radios in their time, and so each officer had to report back annually from a certain designated point in town.

Now everything is different; it is the era of technology and social media, so the method of doing things in the force has had to change. Instead of getting loads of paperwork, most information comes through online, and this has changed the way the police communicate with the public. However, it is still vital that traditional methods of communication remain open as a significant

proportion of the ageing population still prefers to turn up to the stations and make a report at the front counter.

4.4.5 Communicating Hidden Crimes

Harriet explains that this change in communication method may create the impression that officers can simply sit in their vehicle and receive all the information they need. But this would be detrimental to the relationship that exists between the force and the public.

> We’ve still got ultimately to be visible and accessible to people, so that’s the thing that we constantly get told. It doesn’t matter what kind of crime is going on in the area; if people don’t see a police officer in their area, then it’s a real concern for them. So, it’s a balancing act between the public’s perception and what is actually going on. Because if people fully appreciated the hidden crimes going on, perhaps they wouldn’t be quite so worried about the dog poo on the pavements or litter that’s dropped in the park.

She tells me that perception of certain crimes also impacts the way that the police deal with perpetrators. She gives an example of domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation as crimes that are more frequently reported now than when she joined the police, not because they are happening more now but because they are regarded differently now from how they were in the past. So, people are now reporting crimes that happened 20-30 years ago because of this change in perception. The negative perception that the public has of the police is often due to their unawareness and subsequent trivialisation of hidden crimes.

> For example, [when] we’ve managed to take down a cannabis factory, you can guarantee that the majority of the public will be like, “oh, what have you done that for?”, “Why are you wasting your time?”. But you know what? What we should be really good at communicating is the fact that it’s not about the cannabis factory; it’s about the vulnerabilities and the issues that sit behind

> that. The organised crime that sits behind it, the vulnerable individuals that have been brought into the country to work in those factories, the little kids that are being abused and made to carry drugs around the country. It isn't about the little bit at the end that you see.

Harriet says this unawareness of hidden crimes by the public also influences the quality of officers that the force is able to attract. Afterall, the police recruit from society, which means having to sieve through people who have been influenced by media portrayal of the force, homophobic people, racists, and misogynists. And although she reckons the vetting process is getting better, some people still get through, and when they are eventually identified, it hits the press, creating a new scandal. She says the fact that more and more cases have been hitting the press recently is only evidence that the organisation is getting better at flagging offenders.

Now Harriet is responsible for a lot of the young officers coming into the police; a lot of them are only post-A levels and do not have degrees yet. So, it is important to create a "cultural kind of balance" between these very young officers and their older colleagues, some of whom have been on the force for 15-20 years.

4.4.6 She Only Got the Job Because…

In detailing her experiences to me, Harriet says she has never really felt like she was made to feel unequal to her male colleagues. In all her years of climbing through the police ranks and moving from one department to the next, she always felt like she was given the same opportunities as her male counterparts. However, she explains how certain things she has heard have frustrated her in the past.

> We've come through a time where you might hear comments like "ohh she only got the job because, you know, she wore that… yeah". There was an interview that I passed about 20-odd years ago, and apparently one of my colleagues was quite disgruntled

> at the time because he'd applied for it as well. And he'd made comments that I only got it because I'd worn a certain dress at the interview.

She was not aware at the time that such a statement had been made and only got to find out later. She is confident that the culture within the force has changed significantly since then so that if such a statement was made now it would be challenged. Allegations that a colleague had gotten a job simply because she is female would not be tolerated today.

> Undoubtedly, there are people still in the organisation who are misogynists. Whereas in the past, you can look back twenty years and think, "Oh actually perhaps those comments were made a little bit more frequently." If there's any suggestion [of that] now, colleagues will call people out. It's really clear that it isn't tolerated and we have far more cases now that are getting referred to our public professional standards department.

Interestingly, Harriet goes on to explain that she believes she has been "brought into certain posts" because she is a woman, with the intention of balancing out teams with little to no female representation. This is something she has also implemented in teams she oversees, ensuring there is a mix of gender and ethnicity to "bring variance of opinion and skills to the team. [So], if I've got supervisors who are all white males, then you know it needs shaking up, it needs improving."

She recalls the only instance in her career when someone has deliberately tried to sabotage her:

> When I was going for my Inspectors promotion process, I was up against two male colleagues, and it was looking unlikely that we'd all be successful, that we'd all be supported. And I was in a situation where somebody then made an anonymous complaint about me to our professional standards department, which, if that had obviously progressed anywhere, or even the fact that I was under investigation, that would have hampered my ability to go for the process. And it was completely malicious, but it was the

> first time I'd ever thought, "Right, there are people clearly here that, you know… is somebody out to get me? Is this an opportunity for somebody to try and remove me from a process because I'm kind of in the way?"

4.4.7 Getting on the Right Track

Harriet narrates how things have gotten better for female police officers compared to when she joined the force. There are networks, incentives, and considerations made to alleviate the inequality present, and she sees the impact of these measures around her. Specialist departments like the firearms teams now have not only female officers but female supervisors as well. She talked about the presence of female officers at senior levels of the police, not just as a statistic, but as a source of pride for her working in the same force as some of these women. Reaching firearms Sergent level, Chief Officer, Chief Constable, Superintendent, and Chief Superintendent level.

> And so, it's the first time in my career I think it feels like women are being really well represented at the higher levels of the organisation, as well as within all different departments. And so, it doesn't really feel like there's any bars on any area of policing based on gender. The opportunities are there; you just got to be. Are you the best candidate on the day at the interview?

She explains that the workplace is more open to facilitating diversity now than in the past, and so many adjustments have been made to accommodate a variety of people, for instance, people with disabilities. With regard to women, she tells me that many difficult conversations which were not being had in the past are taking place now. So, subjects like menopause, which affect exclusively women, are taken seriously now, and there are networks set up around women. She gives an example of the He for She network which encourages male police officers to advocate for the equal treatment of their female colleagues and challenge their male colleagues on their misogynistic views.

4.4.8 No Off-duty in Policing

For Harriet, working for the police is unlike working anywhere else. It is unique in its expectations and demands, which is portrayed in the fact that being off duty in the police does not mean the same thing that it does in other professions. Being off duty simply means that the officer no longer has their uniform and radio on, but they are still a police officer, so they still carry all the responsibility and powers that come with the job. She explains that even on her day off, if she goes somewhere and sees something which requires law enforcement then she needs to act in her capacity as an officer. In that sense, she is never off duty.

> So, you come through your career with that, [so] I think when you get a family, and you have other commitments outside of work, you are loading constantly onto that kind of basis. I've gone through phases where I've gone home, and I've just carried on working … you get the computer out and you carry on. But you have to put a stop to that at some point and recognize that your family needs you. Undoubtedly, I've missed so much over the years with my son because I've been working. I've missed important weekends, and birthdays, and Christmases, same as everybody else.

She explains that having a husband who has also worked in the police has had its benefits. He understands the intricacies of the job and so there are no issues, "but for people who are in relationships [with partners not in the police], it might be quite a difficult place to be". It also helps that her drive back home from work is about half an hour, so she has enough time to get rid of "work feelings", and given the horrible things she sees as an officer, it is comforting to know she has her husband at home for support.

4.5 Lisa

Lisa joined the police in 1997, a long time ago she assures me as she jokes, “it’s probably before you were even born”, and I resist the urge to clarify that I was born just a bit earlier. She went straight to patrol as was the norm then, with herself and Lilian being the only two women on the team, so before them, there were no women on that team.

Within her first six years in the force, she studied and passed her Sergeants exam as well as got married. Consequently, she was invited to join the Women’s Network, which had being set up by a female Superintendent and female Chief Inspector. At this point, she was starting to notice that more women were being recruited as PCs, although promotion to senior ranks was still lagging. She goes on to describe her own journey and the barriers she has faced on her way to becoming Chief Inspector.

4.5.1 Waiting for the Perfect Moment

> I had to put in a lot of effort with a one-year-old child to study for my Inspectors exams, and the effort… you cannot underestimate the effort that goes into the study for passing the Sergeants and the Inspectors exams.

Lisa was pregnant with her first child by the time she was interviewed for promotion to Sergeant. She went through the process with the sense that her pregnancy was going to work against her. Afterall, why would the force promote her just one month before she was scheduled for maternity leave and have to pay her at a higher rate? To her surprise she got the promotion, and this helped with managing the financial difficulties that come with childbirth.

However, giving birth meant that her ability to give time to her job had been significantly diminished, with appealing roles demanding great sacrifice on her part. She narrates one such circumstance to me:

> When I came back, there was a job that was advertised in an area that I really wanted to go in, and when I spoke to the male

> Chief Inspector at the time and said I really want to go into the child protection job, he said, “Well, you’ll have to come back full time.” Because it’s a full-time job, and that was it. There was no ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’, there was no ‘I know you’ve got a baby’, there was none of that. There was nothing. It was just “it’s full-time. That’s what I expect from you.” And of course, I did it because I wanted the job, and I love the job, and I did it for six years.

In those six years, Lisa started acting as temporary Inspector and gave birth to her second child. By the time she went on maternity leave and returned, she was back to being a Sergeant as they had got someone else to do the job, which she understands as she was only acting in a temporary capacity. Regardless, she bemoans the added difficulty of preparing for progression exams as a woman with childcaring responsibilities.

> Women who don’t have children will find it equal as they will be on an equal footing to most men. But I do find that women with children really struggled to find the time to study for their exams, and that is really daunting. You know, when you’ve got a family, you have two full-time jobs because any mother will tell you having children is like having another full-time job. And it’s always a case that you end up being the flexible one that has to change to fit in the doctor’s appointments and the school runs and everything like that … so mums try to be mums as well as try to be police officers as well, or managers, or supervisors.

These added responsibilities meant that Lisa spent longer as an Inspector than she wanted. She became a single parent in that time and says she knew she did not have what it took to go through the promotion process again, whilst bringing up her children and focusing on making sure they were handling the split well. The pressure that comes with being Chief Inspector is enormous, especially for officers who have a young family and are trying to balance that with their work life. Lisa recognises this as a reason why there are not many women going for it.

> I think it's probably something they really have to think about carefully, to balance whether they can do it and if you've got a supportive partner to help them care for the children. I think that's probably what would help them, but if you don't, if you're a single parent like I was, you really have to know what you're putting yourself in for. And when I look at what the senior officers do, the Chief Constables and Assistant Chief Constables, there's no way I would put myself through that pressure… They are so busy, the demands on them are immense. So, I'm kind of fairly happy sticking around at Chief Inspector for this year, maybe go for Superintendent next year when I feel like I can prove myself.

Interestingly, Lisa acknowledges that this kind of thinking (i.e., waiting for the perfect moment to apply for a promotion) is more common with female than with male officers. She attributes this behaviour to imposter syndrome.

4.5.2 Imposter Syndrome

> Getting promoted was kind of way far, far down my list, whereas I think for men, getting promoted is usually higher up their list of priorities. A lot of my colleagues who have been promoted along the way have said "I thought I'd give it a go. I'd just went, you know, just go in and see if I could wing it". And that seems to be the attitude, whereas I want to be in a position where I know that I'm ready. I know that I can do it. I know that I'm going to be respected. And I know that what I've done in the role that I'm currently in has been noted and noticed by people.

Lisa purports that most men in her position would have applied for a promotion just to try their luck, whilst women like herself, are more likely to wait until all the conditions are perfect and there is no doubt in their mind of their readiness. Even though at the time of our conversation she was eligible to apply for a promotion to Superintendent, she did not think she was ready for it and was resigned to reevaluate that position the following year.

> I was really reluctant to go for it because I didn't feel that I've been able to demonstrate at this rank that [I have maximised] all of my skills to make others kind of respect me at this rank. So, I think that's potentially a personal thing that I carry. But having spoken to a lot of women in our network, it is that imposter syndrome feeling that a lot of us women get in the roles that we're in, that we only start to realise that we are good at what we do years, years down the line.

She reckons that sometimes women get 'caught up in our feelings' that they are not as good as they really are, and this affects their self-confidence and makes them anxious about others not appreciating their work. Lisa says she herself has done loads of work where people in various ranks have said, "Wow! That's a brilliant piece of work. That's amazing. Well-done. Thanks for doing that." But in the end, it does not really matter because the police force operates with "short-term memory", and only the works of the last six months are remembered.

> There's no corporate memory that ten years ago I got a Chief Constable's commendation for saving a baby's life. That's forgotten.

Lisa explains that because senior officers tend to come and go quite quickly, there is no memory of the achievements of officers. A few years ago, she worked on important research informing the police on how to encourage victim support in domestic abuse cases and received praise for it.

> It's forgotten. So, the work that you do, it's very quickly forgotten about because none of those senior officers who were present when I did the domestic abuse reality testing stuff are here now, they're all new. It's a completely new team, so the corporate memory about your abilities to do things over time fades very quickly.

She says the force is not very good at looking after its senior officers, and some of this can be attributed to "in-house" bickering. She recalls a

conversation she had with Becky, a friend of hers who works in the Warwickshire Constabulary and narrated how they had split from West Mercia because the Chief Constables could not get along and agree on ways forward. Becky explained that the separation was the best thing for Warwickshire because there were so many toxic people within the West Mercia constabulary. Lisa says she was shocked by this, and it prompted her to question if she herself was constantly battling against toxic people and that is why she feels the need to prove herself all the time. She says it is a possibility that she has had this battle for years without consciously thinking about it.

4.5.3 Knowing Better Equates to Acting Better

> I think the force had instigated a lot of diversity training, so I think that because they've done that, they could not, therefore, justify saying no to someone who's pregnant, because that would be a protected characteristic and it was all new at the time. This whole kind of protected characteristics thing was a new concept.

Lisa reflects on getting promoted to Sergeant just before going on maternity leave. She was surprised with the outcome at the time, not just because she was pregnant but also because there were not many female sergeants around. She reckons she was lucky with the timing as the McPherson report[12] had just come out and this prompted quite a lot of diversity training within the police force. She recalls 'discrimination' being the key word at the time, with panicked concerns of: "oh are we discriminating?", "we can't discriminate", "we have to make sure we don't discriminate". Everyone was so conscious of the possibility that they may unknowingly discriminate against someone with a protected characteristic, it was a period where decisions were being made very carefully.

[12] The McPherson report was an inquiry into the racially motivated killing of Stephen Lawrence. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c2af540f0b645ba3c7202/4262.pdf.

It was not a case of positive discrimination; she passed the interview board and demonstrated she was ready for the promotion, and it did not matter that she was pregnant; they could not discriminate against her on those grounds. Interestingly, she was confident that had this not been the case, she would have been discriminated out of the position. The force would not normally want to promote a woman in her position as it meant increasing her salary just before she went on maternity leave, seeing the police pay her a higher wage during that period of inactivity as an officer.

However, this awareness of considering diversity requirements and not discriminating did not seem to last long as on her return from maternity leave, Harriet was faced with the unpleasant ultimatum of having to return full-time or miss out on a job opportunity she really wanted. She reckons the diversity training must have skipped the mind of her supervisor, who told her the child protection job was only open to her if she returned full-time. She puts this down to him being “an old-school dinosaur”. He should not have been able to that, but he did not know any better, and at the time, neither did she.

4.5.4 Age of Social media

> The kids that we’re recruiting these days, you know, don’t just have Instagram or Snapchat or Facebook; they have all of it. They have WhatsApp groups, and they have access to all sorts of horrendous material on their phone.

Lisa bemoans the impact social media has on the attitude and formation of police officers today. She says it is different to when she joined the force in the 90s. These days, no matter the amount of training and internal influence the force looks to adopt, it seems to be less impactful than the external pressures of social media. And these apps hardly compare to the horrors of the internet, which is just “the touch of a button on their phone” away, so that “they could be sitting at work with their headphones in and watching graphic material”.

She reckons battling the influence of social media and the internet on individuals within the force is an uphill battle. She proposes that just as officers are subjected to a urine test to test for drugs, they should also be subjected to having their phone tested regularly to make sure they are not participating in discriminatory behaviour in online chat groups or accessing material of a criminal nature.

A lot of the negative attention that the police gets in the media is as a result of officers reprehensible behaviour on social media and other online platforms. Whether it is using offensive language or sharing inappropriate messages over networks like WhatsApp. It is for this reason that Lisa advocates measures to monitor the online activities of police officers.

When people sign up to join the police, they should be agreeing to having their phones and social media accounts subject to scrutiny by the force. Lisa's apprehension of the influence that modern day social media has on young people is not unfounded, with social media influencers like Andrew Tate playing a significant role in shaping the values of young men, in this case, towards patriarchy.

4.5.5 Dead Man's Shoes

> I wanted the job; I'd wanted to be in that department for a long time. It was like dead man's shoes[13] back then. I had an opportunity, and I wasn't going to waste that opportunity by saying, "No, I must, you know, stick with my flexible hours". I didn't have the knowledge or the understanding of flexible working, the policies, what I'm entitled to.

Lisa explains how her understanding of flexible working has developed over the years, and the mistakes she made in the early years of her career.

[13] The phrase 'dead man's shoes' refers to "a situation in which people cannot make progress in their careers until someone senior to them retires or dies". See DEAD MEN'S SHOES definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary (collinsdictionary.com)

Again, she recalls getting the role she wanted only on the condition that she returns full time. She puts this down do naivety on her part, eagerness to do her job, and ignorance of what she was entitled to; she expected the force to just take care of her. Consequently, her daughter had to go into nursery full time.

As she narrates the ordeal of having to return full-time, I do not sense that she is sad or even regretful, rather, it is more the case that she is disappointed and perhaps even feels betrayed that the organisation did not fulfil its duty is ensuring that her best interest was prioritised. She accepts personal responsibility for not being well versed on her rights regarding flexible work, but communicates that she had simply expected the force to protect those rights for her.

Now that she is a senior officer, she has a better understanding of the flexible working process and has had to deal with lots of requests from her staff who want to transition to more flexible working conditions. She tells me about Mariam, a female staff member who joined the force as a call taker, told the force she had a disability, and was contracted to work certain hours. However, it quickly became clear that the early starts were affecting her diabetes, and she could not regulate her blood sugar properly. And even after getting a doctor's note saying she needed to push back her early starts, she was refused. Now Lisa is looking into a fairness at work situation to help resolve the issue for her.

Lisa points to the Mariam problem as one example of how the force neglects to handle little things along the way that affect the staff, because junior managers who lack the required knowledge and experience are making decisions that affect people's health and wellbeing. They have not read the policies, and no one has trained them on how to manage and support individuals with disabilities or other protected characteristics, because "everyone's so busy". They just rely on HR, but sometimes, by the time it gets to HR, it is a bit late because decisions have already been made. When it comes to supporting the staff, Lisa does not believe the police force

has made much improvement from when she started: “I think it’s slightly better than what we were, but I think there’s still a long way to go.”

4.6 Zoe

Zoe is a Chief Superintendent and the most senior in rank of all the participants I interviewed. She tells me she knows it sounds cheesy, but she joined the police to make a difference, and recognises that it is a very tough job.

4.6.1 Having the Right Mindset is Key

> Everything that happens in this division is my responsibility. We’ve probably got just under a thousand staff, every day, significant risk and threat that we deal with. So, it is an extraordinarily operational job, and that’s where my heart is, I suppose. I’ve never shied away from that, the thought of being locked in an office all the time; oh, it just won’t do for me.

One of the first things Zoe tells me is that she has not found the job to be particularly difficult for her. She has worked in many roles across the force, usually swapping roles at an average of about two years. She has been promoted many times in her career, she thinks because she is the best at what she does and works “bloody hard”. She continues, “I’ve got promoted through my own merit, so I’ve never really struggled with it, if I was to be honest with you. Don’t know what else to tell you.” We both laugh.

She tells me about the importance of being operationally credible in the job to bolster one’s chance of promotion and how officers must take themselves out of their comfort zone. She would never go for a promotion unless she knew she was credible and felt confident in the role she was doing. She does recognise that this may justify the claims that “women don’t necessarily put their hand above the parapet until they know that they’ve done everything”. She reckons people who make this claim are probably right, it may just be natural.

4.6.2 Is Physicality Really that Important?

> Everybody has to do the fitness test, which I think is really simple. I think that you'd have to be really particularly unfit not to be able to pass it. So, I don't think it's particularly challenging, so that it's certainly never held me back and I'm five foot five.

Zoe does not believe physicality has a role to play in the progression or development of female officers in the police today. For instance, she says the fitness test was a lot harder when she joined, with officers required to do sit-ups, press-ups, and so much more than is required now. Currently, officers need only run up and down the track for about five minutes. She jokes that any officer who cannot pass the test needs to start "running a bit and get fitter". The exercise does get more challenging for officers going into firearm operation and public order, but she says this is to be expected as part of the course.

Even in more challenging scenarios, such as facing off with a physically imposing member of the public, she does not think women are at a disadvantage. Male or female officer, the first resort is always to try and use your communication skills to sort out the problem, and it usually works, she tells me. And in the cases where force is needed, officers can apply reasonable force, with a taser readily available if needed.

She recalls when she was a young Constable, there were no tasers then, and she had to rely on a "tiny tiny baton", she says as she uses her hands to illustrate how little the baton was. Eventually, they got pepper spray, but the tasers officers have today are more useful, although they are only used when necessary. For these reasons, when officers are sent out to attend to an incident, no regard is paid to the gender of the officers being sent. She points across the road from her office window at a pub outside of my view, "If there's a pub fight now at the pub just across the road from me, the nearest patrol would be the first attending officer, so they don't look at the gender, they just send them." They are swiftly joined by backup, so in the end, there could be

two, three female or male police officers, simply determined by whoever is closest.

4.6.3 Old Days Versus New

> So, when I joined, we had to wear a skirt … and then six months later we got the monadnock side-handle baton. We were the first group of people that were issued with the side-handle baton, I really liked that. The training was really quite, … we thought it was something quite special and then maybe a year later we were all issued with trousers and very quickly you can see the change.

Zoe tells me that even though it was only for a short period of time, she was recruited as part of the “old regime” when female police officers were required to wear skirts. She recalls how, because it was difficult to climb over fences with skirts, they were issued with culottes, “which were like skirts that you could climb over fences in; ridiculous!” she remarks as we both laugh. She assures me that a lot has changed since then.

She recounts other changes from the old days, such as the distinction of women in the police from policemen. Women used to have certain collar numbers that began with a six and had to do women (she says with air quotes) type jobs.

> So, you know the rapes, looking after kids, that kind of job rather than the more mundane kind of everyday policing. But now we’re not distinguished with any collar number; we are all one. We are all police officers. We all wear the same outfit. We all wear the same kit. We all have the same training. We’re all deployed equally to all the different jobs, which is right.

In the current system everyone when they join as a PC is equal and afforded equal opportunities. Although officers who are particularly good in a certain field may be selected to specialise in that area of work. Another difference she highlights to me is that there are more female recruits now

than in the past. When she first joined her team, there was only one other female, but now recruiting is split roughly 50/50 between male and female officers.

4.6.4 Between a Police Force and Three Kids

> Me and my other half, we worked opposite shifts for five years when we had young kids, we didn't have a day off together for five years. But that is the personal commitment I'd give to this organisation.

Zoe recognises that work-life balance is difficult to achieve in the police because of the nature of the job. There is no 9 to 5 for officers; it is a 24/7 job that is split into shifts. So, regardless of how flexible the police force tries to be, it must weigh up the operational demands of the job, public need, and cost against the needs of the individual. And this is a tricky equation to solve. It is particularly tricky now that the force is recruiting men and women at a 50/50 rate because women "will get maternity leave, etcetera". These complications make it difficult to get the number of officers needed out on the street at a time when demand is increasing.

Having three kids herself, Zoe tells me she has always worked full-time and only taken short periods of leave. This is the kind of personal commitment you make when you join the organization, she says. Also, she says one must accept a bit of personal responsibility in sorting out the complexities that come with the job. For instance, paying for childcare, which she herself has had to do. It is a "24/7 emergency service, and we need to have cops out there. So, we can't have everybody on the team only working days or only working nights, taking every weekend off." In the end, it is a dual balancing act, with both the organization and the individual considering how best to balance their needs with some flexibility.

4.6.5 No Tolerance for Idiocy

> You'll always have idiots in every job that you have. And there are idiots in the police, in every police force, unfortunately. But we are a cross-section of the public, and the culture now is that they (misogynists) are not tolerated.

Zoe says she has no personal experience of misogyny as a female police officer; however, there will always be debates about it because there are unfortunately some officers who exhibit misogynistic behaviour. This is a problem that has diminished significantly from years past and continuing to shrink. She tells me, "Many years ago they used to say, 'jobs for the boys', you know, if you were mates, if you were in certain groups, sporting groups or other groups, that you'd be picked." But in the constabulary where she works now, the recruitment and selection process is far more transparent and open. The deciding panel is very different from what it used to be; it is now more diverse, and everybody's voice counts, not just the chair. This makes the selection process better, less subjective, and based on the merits of the individual. This emphasis on merit, she reckons, is the reason why there is more diversity in the applicants going up for promotions now.

4.6.6 Snitches Make the Police Force a More Inclusive Place

> If there are issues, if somebody says, "Well, do you know what? I'm not happy with the way that this person might be speaking." Maybe a Sergeant or something, but whatever it might be, they can contact on this confidential line.

The police are very keen on not having anyone in the organisation who does not represent their values, so each division has a Professional Standards Department (PSD) responsible for monitoring people's complaints. Once a complaint is made through the confidential line, steps are taken to ascertain the facts of the matter, and this may sometimes involve covert work to build up an intelligence picture. Zoe is glad a lot of people use the confidential line and hopes more officers call out their erring colleagues so that it is clear discriminatory behaviour cannot be tolerated.

There are provisions in place for officers who require support. Zoe herself runs support groups for officers who are about to go in for exams or going through the different processes of promotion. She says every time an officer passes, it is a success for her and a success for the division too. In this pursuit, it is important to spot and mentor talent, guiding them through the ranks of the police force. Zoe tells me she tends to pick "the ones who don't shout the loudest, [they are] usually the best in my opinion… But I do try and pick up good women PCs, I spot them and do my best for them."

At the end of her career, she hopes to have encouraged and mentored many men and women. She tells me she has already lost count of how many she has mentored, but it does not matter to her who they are. What is important is that officers have thirty years to serve, and then they are done, so they must ensure to leave people behind who are capable because, ultimately, they will be policed by them.

4.6.7 Metropolitan Police

> I think that the culture there perhaps isn't as advanced as the culture here, where you know we'd shout up and actually call them out. We won't tolerate it. So, they've definitely got an issue.

Reflecting on the impact of the Casey report on the Metropolitan police, Zoe agrees the Met are in a tough spot. She believes they have officers urgently needing dismissal and applauds Commissioner Rowley for his firm stance on weeding them out. However, she feels her own constabulary has a more advanced culture. They actively call out and dismiss officers for misconduct – a zero-tolerance policy she strongly supports. While isolated incidents are inevitable, she emphasises that her department identifies and fires officers who violate protocols. An effective disciplinary system which provides comfort, thus ensuring accountability.

Expanding the conversation to national policing, she acknowledges that high-profile scandals cast a negative light on the entire profession. She clarifies that these incidents don't represent most officers and are simply a

result of the media's tendency to focus on bad news, which creates a distorted public image. She explains that officers who engage in misconduct are a small, unwelcome minority who get amplified by the news media.

Zoe concludes by reiterating her desire for a police force free of racism, sexism, and victim mistreatment. Contrary to media portrayal, she believes the majority of officers share this sentiment and wouldn't want such people as colleagues.

4.6.8 Relationship with the Public

> We have a really good relationship with our communities. We have a very good neighbourhood policing team, and, on the whole, they will give us intelligence. They'll work with us, and I say we work really hard to engage with them all the time. We are very lucky to have such a good community.

Zoe tells me about the relationship her police force has developed with the public, leading to efficiency in operations and greater public satisfaction. A big part of this is in treating everyone with dignity, even criminals. Her constabulary has a zero-tolerance policy for misconduct, with clear consequences for unacceptable behaviour. They prioritise a culture of professionalism and respect. She contrasts this approach with the outdated image of police culture where the "blokes [sit] around a table drinking beer and saying what they want". She highlights the busy schedules of today's police officers, "They've got no time to go to the pub anymore. These days, there's no time," she says and laughs. Zoe emphasizes commitment to continuous engagement with the community. She acknowledges that mistakes happen, but highlights the importance of admitting them, learning from them, and taking steps to improve. This focus on transparency and accountability is key to maintaining good relations with the public.

However, her greatest satisfaction comes from witnessing the success of her team and the positive impact they have on the community. Zoe beams when she talks about departmental awards and recognition ceremonies, but

her most cherished moments are the smaller victories. Recently, she visited a 98-year-old burglary victim who wrote a heartfelt letter expressing her gratitude for the officers' care and professionalism. This small act of kindness, the way the officers "made a huge difference" to this vulnerable woman, resonates deeply with her. She tells me that it is these moments, these connections with the community, that truly define her passion for the job. Every promotion, culminating in her current role as divisional commander, has been a humbling honour. For Zoe, serving her community is a privilege, and she wouldn't trade it for anything.

4.6.9 The Weight of the Badge

> There's certain jobs that'll stick in my head, and it will usually involve a death of a child and just the impact on them really. But we keep dealing with them. Yeah, couple of those that would stick in my mind probably.

Zoe acknowledges that most police officers would likely share the sentiment that sudden deaths, particularly those involving children, leave a lasting impact. She describes how these experiences "stick in my head," highlighting the emotional toll such events take on officers. In the face of such challenges, she emphasises resilience and the importance of "keeping on going" and highlights the value of research in understanding how officers cope with these difficult situations.

She is open to the possibility that her perspective, shaped by her experiences and the culture within her police force, might differ from officers in other areas. She tells me that the culture within her constabulary is positive but acknowledges areas for improvement. She is curious to learn how their approach compares to other forces. One of the challenges Zoe's constabulary faces is the fluctuating demands on the force as tourist seasons approach. Plans must be made well in advance of the high tourism months.

4.6.10 Progress in the Force

Zoe takes me through her perception of women in leadership positions within the police force over the years that she has been there. She notes a positive shift, with more women assuming command roles like firearms and public order commander positions. Zoe herself takes on both responsibilities, showcasing her competence and versatility. While the number of female leaders remains modest, the rotation system, which sees each person take one day every eight, ensures broader coverage across the constabulary.

Zoe reflects on the groundbreaking appointment of the first female Chief Constable in her force only a few decades ago. This milestone paved the way for more women in leadership. Today, their department boasts a female Deputy Chief Constable and a newly appointed female Assistant Chief Constable (ACC). Within her own commander ranks, four out of the positions are held by women – a stark contrast to the past.

For Zoe, this progress is undeniable. She believes diversity in leadership brings valuable perspectives to the table. However, she acknowledges there's still work to be done in some lower ranks, particularly among sergeants and inspectors. Her department implements initiatives to actively encourage and support more women in pursuing these roles.

4.7 Closing Reflection

This chapter has delved into the narratives of four remarkable women leaders within the England and Wales police forces. Through their stories, we have gained a deeper understanding of the triumphs and tribulations they navigate in a traditionally male-dominated profession. The narrative inquiry approach allowed them to share their experiences in their own voices, enriching our appreciation of the complexities of leadership in law enforcement. Each story is unique to the individual, and together, they form a compelling narrative, revealing similarities whilst maintaining the original experiences of their teller.

Thematic analysis, explored in the following chapter, further illuminates common threads across these narratives. However, some key insights emerge from this initial exploration. The participants' stories showcase their unwavering commitment to public service and their dedication to upholding the law. They demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity and a passion for making a positive impact on their communities.

As each participant told their story, the researcher could see how their personality and current position shapes their perceptions. For instance, Zoe tackled the opening inquiry of "Tell me about your career as a police officer so far" from a different perspective to the other participants. Upon reflection, the researcher suspects this may be a consequence of her position as Chief Superintendent, in that she feels a stronger responsibility to defend the image of the force. But like the other participants, she cared about the subject being discussed, was open to sharing her story, and was very receptive towards the researcher. At some point in the interview, she left to find any officers around to tell the researcher what they thought of her as a leader; unfortunately, there was no officer available.

Primarily, the interviews highlight the persistent challenges faced by women leaders within the police force. These range from subtle biases to overt discrimination, with extensive discussions on the need to navigate a work-life balance that can be particularly demanding in this profession. The experiences of these women underscore the continued need for initiatives that promote inclusivity and support women in achieving their full potential within the police force.

Finally, these narratives offer valuable insights for future generations of women aspiring to leadership roles in law enforcement. They exemplify the importance of perseverance, courage, and a commitment to excellence. By learning from their experiences, future leaders can be better equipped to navigate challenges and contribute to a more diverse and inclusive police force.

Chapter Five

Thematic Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the analysis of participants' narratives started in the previous chapter. Following analysing each individual's personal understanding of their experiences as part of the police using IPA, this chapter broadens that exploration by conducting inter-participant analysis. Using thematic analysis, the researcher identifies similar threads in the narratives of the participants and presents them as themes which point to a larger truth within the organisation. Throughout this chapter, there are instances where quotes from the previous chapter are repeated. This is due to the nature of the dual-analysis approach being adopted, with certain quotes needing to be presented again to provide context for a fresh analysis.

5.2 The Difficulty in Diagnosing Discrimination

The notion of discrimination is often colloquially understood to mean a deliberate action or inaction that prejudices another based on the social category e.g., class, race, gender, etc, with which they are identified. This understanding is usually in reference to overt discriminatory acts such as using slurs or providing access to services based on a person's established category However, such colloquial discussions about discrimination are prone to not recognise more subtle manifestations of discrimination, which on the surface may appear, for instance, gender-neutral or even in service of the disadvantaged gender. For example, three of the four women interviewed for this research spoke about their early days in the force and being assigned skirts, a handbag, and a tiny truncheon, smaller than their male colleagues. On the surface, especially at the time, hese could simply be justified as a uniform requirement. An even more discreet and current example would be the 24/7 shift pattern and operational demands of the police. Although requiring the same level of commitment from all officers, male and female, given societal bias, it is often policewomen (especially

ones with caregiving responsibilities) who bear the brunt of reconciling this commitment with their family life. It is important to note that offenders of discrimination do not usually think that they are being discriminatory; quite the opposite, Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) explain that participants in their study seemed to be under an illusion of objectivity. They found that the more convinced a participant was about being objective in their judgment, the greater the gender bias that was found. This finding is pertinent to the current research because it highlights the difficulty in first diagnosing the problem of misogyny, proposing solutions, and then enacting significant changes.

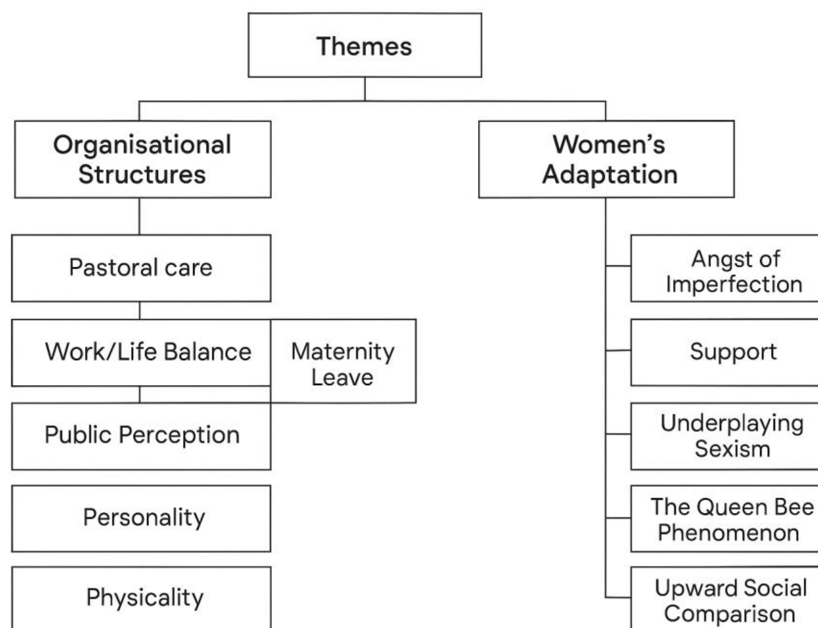
Interestingly, the participants in that study (who were tasked with hiring an employee for a traditionally gendered position) did not discriminate by stereotyping the applicants. Instead, they defined “their notion of ‘what it takes’ to do the job well in a manner tailored to the idiosyncratic credentials of the person they wanted to hire” (p. 478). Consequently, for the position of police chief, when participants were presented with a male applicant who was media savvy, educated, and a family man, they prioritised those qualities. Still, when presented with a male participant who did not have those qualities, they devalued them. The same grace was not afforded to female applicants going for the position. The conjecture proposed is that this kind of bias allows offenders the room to simultaneously discriminate and soothe their conscience that the right candidate has been selected. As Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) eloquently said, “Participants who exhibited the most pro-male bias in their hiring criteria also proved the most confident in the objectivity of their decision. They perhaps felt that they had chosen the right man for the job, when in fact they had chosen the right job criteria for the man” (p. 479). This further highlights the pervasive covert nature of discrimination, integrating itself into normal social practice, unknown even to the offender. Landqvist (2015), in explaining the normalisation of discrimination as a benefit of privilege, suggests there is good reason to associate sexist expressions with a person’s community, cultural background, ‘and even membership of a police organisation’ (p. 315).

5.3 Themes of Discrimination

Following analysis of the participants' narratives, the following eleven themes were identified as relevant to the discussion of gendered barriers to women's progression: (1) Pastoral care, (2) Work/life balance, (3) Public perception, (4) Physicality, (5) Personality, (6) Angst of imperfection, (7) Support, (8) Underplaying sexism, (9) The queen bee phenomenon, (10) Banter, and (11) Upward Social Comparison.

These themes are grouped under two meta-themes, namely, organisational structures and policies and women's adaptation. The former refers to themes which tie directly to organisational structures or policies, while the latter (i.e., women's adaptation) refers to themes which have developed as a result of women interacting with discrimination in the police force. The themes categorised under organisational structures and policies are pastoral care, work/life balance, public perception, personality, and physicality. The themes listed under women's adaptation are angst of imperfection, support, underplaying sexism, the queen bee phenomenon, banter, and upward social comparison. Below is an illustration of the categorisation of the themes in this chapter.

Table 8: Distribution of themes between organisational structures and women's adaptations.



5.3.1 Organisational Structures and Policies

Institutions are responsible for formulating and challenging attitudes and norms which promote equality and suppress misogyny (Ferrant and Nowacka, 2015). This responsibility is vital for the growth of society as it leads not only to the empowerment of women but to societal development as a whole. In this respect, the emergence of individual and collective agency as a consequence of 'culture' or social relations should not be understated (p. 321). The police force as a social institution may serve to influence the attitudes of groups and individuals to determine acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, potentially leading to a correction of gender roles and female empowerment. In an institution where women are exposed to higher levels of harassment, PTSD, discrimination, poorer work/life balance, and lack of support (Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024), it is imperative that active steps are taken to address the attitudes that lead to such misogyny. These attitudes are born out of a permissive cultural structure within the institution, legitimising gender discrimination and stereotyping, thereby normalising these behaviours (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011).

The stereotyping of workers by their gender manifests in two ways: Descriptive and prescriptive stereotyping. The former assigns traits that each gender possesses, whilst the latter (usually presenting as more aggressive) assigns traits that the genders should have (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). For example, the descriptive stereotype purports that women have the innate characteristics to be good caregivers, and so directs women towards performing pastoral duties. However, the prescriptive stereotype recognises caregiving as a characteristic that women should possess, such that when a woman does not fulfil such a role, this is recognised as a failure. Consequently, women in the workplace 'who fail to do gender properly … may be subject to discriminatory sanctions' (BOBBITT-ZEHER, 2011; p. 782).

5.3.1.1 Pastoral care

One of the key considerations in examining gender inequalities in the labour market is the existence of unpaid care work (Ferrant and Nowacka, 2015). Following social expectations that women are more suited to unpaid care work than men, they spend a significant part of their day fulfilling these expectations in addition to their paid responsibilities, creating an unfair double burden (Lo and Lim, 2023). This burden directly impacts women's empowerment in the labour force, as the extra time spent on unpaid care work could be invested in other ventures such as education, acquiring skills, or even leisure. Ferrant and Nowacka (2015) illustrate this correlation thus:

> In countries where women spend almost eight times the amount of time on unpaid care activities than men, they represent only just over one-third (35 per cent) of the active working population. However, when the difference drops to less than twice the amount, women's labour-force participation increases to 50 per cent for a given level of GDP per capita, fertility rate, urbanisation rate, maternity leave, gender inequality in unemployment and education, and regional characteristics.

This delegation of women to pastoral care was evident when speaking to the participants in this study. Susan, in narrating the experience of joining her team, tells me:

> I was treated as just one of the team, and the only observation I have was, like I said at the beginning, that perhaps I was, you know, I became an expert on dealing with sexual offences almost because I was for a period of time actually the only female on the team. So if a lady came in and said she'd been raped or whatever, then actually she probably would want to speak to a female. So you get more of those sorts of jobs, but actually in many ways that's the right thing to do. And because you don't want to force somebody who's traumatised to speak to somebody or report it to somebody that they don't feel comfortable with. So I probably got more of those sorts of jobs,

> but probably for the right reasons. And I think that still exists now in a way.

This statement illustrates the existence of a gendered double burden, where Susan, as the only member of her team at the time, was automatically the designated handler of cases involving sexual offence. This 'specialism' is not rewarded with a bonus or promotion prospect; it is simply an extra bit of unpaid work that Susan has had to accommodate for the sole reason of being a woman. Another interesting facet of this statement is that Susan believes it is not only appropriate for this to be the case, "it is the right thing to do". This, at least on the surface, points to a propagation of the misogynistic stereotyping of women as nurturers and caregivers. The phenomenon of women appearing to endorse misogynistic practices is explored further in the sub-section titled 'Women leaders' below.

Similarly, Harriet recounts her experience with doing pastoral work as a female police officer:

> You got sent to the same kind of range of jobs as everybody else did, but [there] would perhaps be the sense that, you know, if there was an incident involving children or there was an incident involving something quite sensitive, chances are you might get asked to go to it rather than one of your male colleagues.

Although she recalled being treated fairly and equally as a member of the team, the pervasiveness of gendered stereotyping persisted. These kinds of roles were not traditionally considered a part of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), rather "a little bit of a side issue", she explains. This is in keeping with the literature on the relegation of these roles to the status of less important, ensuring there is little to no benefit to the women who are saddled with performing them (Ferrant and Nowacka, 2015). This was the case about 20-30 years ago when Harriet joined the force; now, she says about 80% of the calls taken have to do with vulnerable or sensitive subjects like domestic abuse, child protection, and modern slavery. Difficult assignments, challenging physically, emotionally, and psychologically, in the

past left almost wholly to be handled by female officers and without appropriate recompense. She narrates:

> It used to be that officers perhaps didn’t want to go into those departments, especially if you’ve got young children and [then] you have [to be] exposed every day to the horrors of what actually happens. Some people do actively avoid it because they just couldn’t cope with that kind of work because they’ve got young families. But I say a lot of women did use to kind of be in those departments.

Outside of the hardship that comes with the job, she explains that there was a stigma attached to such roles as they were not seen as real CID roles, so male officers generally steered away from them. But things are different now. With the emergence of instruments like CCTV, traditional areas of crime, such as robberies and burglaries, have seen a steep decline, but “vulnerable crimes” are on the rise (Piza *et al.*, 2019; Davies, 2024; Scottish Government, 2024). Such roles are now firmly recognised as on par with CID roles; there are officers, male and female, trained to specialise in those fields, and they go on to gain accreditation as detectives in the same way as traditional CID officers. Now there are a lot of men in those fields who contribute with their own unique skills. Whilst this is a welcomed progression towards a balance of the sexes, it does raise a salient question: what interpretation should be drawn from the fact that there was a scarcity of male officers in those departments when it was undesirable, and now an increase in male officers coinciding with its assent? Is there a causal link between the two? A case of reaping benefits? Simply the reality of a changing culture? Or something else? It is probably the case that a combination of general cultural progress and male officers looking to reap the new found benefits of these departments have led to more men specialising in vulnerable crimes. Answering these questions require investigation by future research.

Another participant, Zoe, narrated a similar experience with the assignment of women police officers to pastoral roles:

> Women used to have certain collar number that began with a six, and they were given women-type jobs. So you know the rapes, looking after kids, that kind of job rather than the more mundane kind of everyday policing. But now we're not distinguished with any collar number. We are all one. We are all police officers. We all wear the same outfit. We all wear the same kit. We all have the same training. We're all deployed equally to all the different jobs, which is right.
>
> There isn't a man job and a woman job anymore. Basically, the job's open for everybody and it's almost become normal to us now I think. We certainly wouldn't think any door is shut. I think the difference is massive from the 28 years I've been in and I think it is all really positive.

Of the participants interviewed, Zoe displayed the sternest opposition to the prevalence of discrimination in the police force. As will be shown throughout this analysis, she attributes inequalities more willingly to personal behaviours and personality than to a structural deficiency within the organisation. However, she acquiesces to the existence of gender roles (at least in the past).

Two major things stand out from these narrations: firstly, although Harriet, Susan, and Zoe all agree with the prominence of gender roles in the police when they started, they disagree on how much this has changed in the following years. On one side, there is Zoe, who affirms that "there isn't a man job and a woman job anymore", insisting that both men and women in the force now have equal opportunity to every type of position. At the other end of this discussion is Susan, who is not as confident that gender stereotyping has changed that much in the span of her career. In addition to believing that this type of stereotyping is the right thing to do as women are more suited than men to those roles, she says, "I think that (assigning women to pastoral roles) still exists in a way". Existing somewhere in between those two positions, Harriet does concur that there is now a balancing of the sexes in those departments, but she does not attribute this progress to a shift in

gender culture but rather to a recognition and assigning of those roles as vital and prestigious.

Although it is impossible to say with certainty the degree to which an institution's culture has shifted over a period of time, a presentation of linear progression from gender discrimination and exclusion to openness and gender equality should be met with healthy scepticism (Lo and Lim, 2023). With the culture of the police intrinsically tied to the general customs and ideals of the populace (Ferrant and Nowacka, 2015; Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024), a culture shift in the police should correlate with a culture shift in the general public, and there is no evidence of such a linear progression from inequality to equality. This necessitates research works like this one which go beyond the organisation's announcements of progress and gender equality, to investigate the reality of women in the police. In their study of the experiences of female police officers in Singapore, Lo and Lim (2023) found that although there was a narrative propounded by the Singapore Police Force and some female police leaders of 'initial exclusion to eventual acceptance' (p. 1900), policewomen interviewed had been subject to sexism often in subtle forms of gender discrimination. This leaves the authors to reconcile a situation where sexist behaviour is declared non-existent, but the effects of sexism can be felt. Eventually, they settle on "an organization characterised by 'sexism without sexists'" where gender inequality persists in opposition to gender-neutral rhetoric (p. 1900).

The second thing that stands out from the narrations of Susan, Harriet, and Zoe on their experiences of being gender stereotyped to pastoral roles is the nature in which each participant decides to tell their story; with Harriet and Susan's personal narrative style contrasting with Zoe's more general approach. This duality of response style is similar to that found in Landqvist's survey of police officers in Germany and Sweden. He found that the Swedish female police officers offered personal short stories of their experiences, including details like the specific setting, characters present, chronology of events, and an evaluation of the situation. In contrast, the German officers rarely provided any personal stories, offering "instead descriptions of what is typical of discrimination" (p. 320). Susan and Harriet both adopt the Swedish

style in their narrative, providing stories from their personal experiences. Susan narrates “I became an expert on dealing with sexual offences almost because I was for a period of time actually the only female on the team”, and Harriet, in recalling her experience, says, “You got sent to the same kind of range of jobs as everybody else did, but [there] would perhaps be the sense that ….” Zoe’s account mirrors the German approach when she recounts “Women used to have certain collar number that began with a six, and they were given women type jobs.” Whilst a description of what the reality was at the time, there is no personal story invoked, and the account is recalled from a third person (outsider) point of view. In their paper, Landqvist suggests multiple reasons why participants may select one method over the other. Reasons such as culture (differences between German and Swedish upbringing) and method of communication (i.e., participants had to respond in writing to the survey questions) do not apply to this research. A more relevant rationale proposed by Landqvist is that respondents may adopt this outsider perspective when describing discrimination to avoid providing specific details which portray their colleagues in a harsh light for their poor intervention.

The motivation to protect their colleagues and, by extension, the organisation is evident across all three narratives, albeit less obvious in Zoe’s. Susan begins her recollection by reassuring, “I was treated as just one of the team …” In a similar way, Harriet says, “You got sent to the same kind of range of jobs as everybody else did …” In both cases, the respondents made sure to exonerate their colleagues before then describing their experiences with discrimination, perhaps mirroring Lo and Lim’s (2023) assertion of an organisation with sexism but without sexists. As already alluded to, Zoe’s adoption of the outsider narrative suggests a similar motivation. But instead of explicitly absolving her colleagues of any wrongdoing, she presents the case merely as a series of facts, a process Landqvist (2015) postulates result in providing fewer clues of exactly what the respondent finds discriminatory or unjust. The method of response that a respondent employs can signify their attitude towards the discrimination they are addressing (Landqvist, 2015): personal short stories signify the perspective of a discriminated party,

whilst more abstract responses signify a respondent who values 'mentalist explanations' for discrimination above the impact of social structures (p. 321).

In summary, this section has revealed the impact of gender stereotyping in the police, with policewomen being assigned to pastoral roles. This stereotyping leads to a double burden for the women as they have to balance their police work with the added pressures of performing pastoral tasks. The participants revealed personal experiences of gender stereotyping and generally agreed that progress has been made in the time that they have been in the police. These changes have seen vulnerable crimes now considered prestigious, and more men are joining those departments. However, this raises the deliberation surrounding male officers benefitting from this change after previously avoiding such roles. The narrative styles of the participants were also highlighted, with Zoe opting for a more generalised and impersonal narrative style, leading to inferences about the assignment of criticism relating to gender discrimination.

5.3.1.2 Work/life Balance

Similar to the impact of pastoral care due to organisational structures and policies, the participants also had to deal with policies relating to work/life balance, particularly in cases involving raising a young family. This theme repeated itself across the narratives of the women interviewed.

Participants revealed the impact of family life on their careers, i.e., being pregnant, having children, taking maternity leave, arranging daycare, etc. For instance, when Lisa studied for her Inspector's exams, she had a one-year-old to care for, and this made it more difficult for her. She explains:

> You cannot underestimate the effort that goes into the study for passing the sergeants and the inspectors' exams. Now women who don't have children will find it equally as they will be on an equal footing to most men. But I do find that women with children really struggled to find the time to study for their exams.

In Lisa's experience, having a family presents an extra hurdle in the career progression of a policewoman. She says it is like having two full-time jobs "because any mother will tell you having children is like having another full-time job". Although it could be argued that having children is not something that happens exclusively to policewomen but to policemen too, Lisa explains that the impact is different on the genders. When domestic responsibilities arise, "it is always the case that [the woman] ends up being the flexible one that has to change to fit in the doctor's appointments, and the school runs, and everything like that". This illustrates once more the existence of a double burden on women like Lisa, who not only have to worry about being police officers but also being mothers. The consequence of this double burden is not to be ignored; it influences the decisions that affected policewomen make with regards to their career progression. For instance, Lisa explains that she spent an extended period of time as an inspector because she became a single parent and the responsibility of raising her children was at the time incompatible with going through the process of career progression.

The obvious point to highlight in this narrative is that the burden of life on the work/life calculation is greater for women than for men. Because there is both a descriptive and prescriptive expectation for women to shoulder domestic responsibilities, there is less flexibility and assertiveness in the manner that they pursue their work life. Lisa is clear that this is a problem faced exclusively by women who have children, pronouncing that policewomen without children would find themselves on an equal footing to most policemen when preparing for progression exams. The less obvious point to highlight is that the presentation of having children as a hurdle that women have to overcome is just as powerful a perception as it is a reality. For instance, whilst Lisa's decision not to progress from Inspector was hinged on the reality that raising children as a single parent would make the progress a lot more difficult, it was also connected to the perception that a single mother (Lisa) carries more responsibilities than a single father (her ex-husband). This is an important calculation that women often have to make when planning out their careers. The childless policewomen that Lisa identifies as being on an equal footing to their male colleagues may have had to factor in the impact of

raising children on their careers, deciding, unlike Lisa, to sacrifice life for work instead of the other way around. This is the dichotomy that policewomen often find themselves in, what part of their work/life relationship suffers, and what part thrives? One or the other. For Lisa, her family life was more important, so it was prioritised to the detriment of her career. She says at the top of her to-do list was making sure her children were okay and trying to find some time for herself. Career progression was “far, far down that list, whereas … for men getting promoted is usually higher up their list of priorities”, probably owing to the diminished expectation that they perform domestic responsibilities.

However, this is not to say that men do not experience conflict in their work/life balancing arrangement, only that the consequences of the burden are more severe and predictable for women. Lisa herself confirms that balancing work, personal life, “and being a decent human being” is a challenge for both male and female police officers. Since becoming Chief Inspector, the requirements on her have multiplied, and she finds herself having to put “ridiculous” hours of work into her job. This is the reason she refrained from advancing to this rank as soon as she could, and she reckons there are not a lot of policewomen with young families willing to go through the pressures and expectations of the rank. This burden, she says, may be eased for women with young families if they have a supportive partner. The implication of this statement is not as trivial as it first appears, presenting the mother as a primary caregiver, with the father playing a secondary role as a supporter. Whilst the ease of work/life balance for a woman with a young family is dependent on whether she has a ‘supportive’ partner (i.e., performing a secondary role of care), the same benefit for a man is dependent on whether he has a partner (i.e., performing the primary role of care). The reason Lisa can reconcile the requirements of her current rank with the requirements of her family life is because her children are now teenagers. She explains that the burden is a bit lessened, knowing that her children can make “beans on toast” on days when she does not make it home on time. But even with this reprieve, she struggles with the notion of progressing past this rank to more senior roles. The amount of

responsibilities and workload that the Acting Chief Constables and Chief constables have to perform is a significant increase from what she is doing now. She cites the immense demands on them and how it is “pretty impossible” sometimes to arrange a fifteen-minute meeting: “There’s no way I would want to put myself through that pressure.” A statement that encapsulates the effect that balancing a demanding work with a demanding family life can have on the career progression of policewomen.

In accordance with Lisa’s pronouncement that policewomen with young families require the assistance of a supportive partner, Zoe discloses that she and her partner worked together to ease the double burden by taking alternating shifts for five years without taking a day off together. Although not prescribing this as a standard, she believes being in the police requires making a personal commitment to make sacrifices and recognising that sorting out your family life is a personal responsibility. Zoe has three children and has worked full-time for the duration of her policing career, only taking short periods of leave. She credits this accomplishment to her taking personal responsibility for her family life by paying for childcare, in addition to creating a workable shift arrangement with her partner, who also works for the police. Relaying the practical hindrances of the police executing a balanced work and life relationship, she says, “Ultimately it has to be a balancing act of the organisation being as flexible as we can, but on the other hand, we’re [a] 24/7 emergency service, and we need to have cops out there.” So, it is not just the officers who are trying to balance their work with their personal lives; the organisation also has to juggle the work flexibility of its officers with the 24/7 requirements of the job. It cannot, for instance, have every officer only working nights or taking the weekend off. According to Zoe:

> It will always be an issue because we are shift workers. It’s a 24/7 service, so it is difficult, particularly now when we’re recruiting 50/50 women because they will take the maternity leave, you know, so they’ll get the maternity leave, etcetera and we try and be as flexible as we can with staff.

As flexible as the organisation strives to be, ultimately, it must meet operational demands in satisfying the needs of the public. This differentiates the police force from most other organisations with regards to the strain it places on work/life balance. The above quote from Zoe is particularly interesting because it presents the problem of work/life balance not simply as something that happens to policewomen but as a problem for the police force that is exacerbated by the increased recruitment of women. This new framing serves two important purposes: Firstly, it presents the problem as an institutional one, instead of the personal problem of each policewoman. Zoe appears to be suggesting a collaboration of efforts between the organisation (i.e., being flexible) and the individual (i.e., accepting personal responsibility) to improve work/life balance. However, where imbalances persist, the individual should accept them as sacrifices that come with the job. Secondly, this framing highlights more clearly that work/life balance is more precarious for policewomen than it is for policemen. Due to women-specific occurrences like maternity leave, Zoe says the increased recruitment of women poses more difficulties for the police with regard to work/life balance than if it was recruiting more men and fewer women.

Harriet also bemoans the difficulty of achieving work/life balance in policing, although she approaches it from an angle unexplored by both Zoe and Lisa. She speaks about the fact that being a police officer means you are never really off duty, even when you are off duty. Again, this speaks to the uniqueness of the police, as it exerts a level of commitment on the individual that is unlike any other job. Once you are a police officer, you carry the responsibilities of a police officer even when you are at home, off duty, and without your radio. Harriet says she has been in the force so long that she has gotten used to this encroachment on her personal life, and suspects it would be a shock when she retires, to walk around without bearing the burden of that responsibility. This pressure can become particularly disruptive when it collides with family responsibilities, upsetting the scale of work/life balance. Harriet recalls some collisions between those two responsibilities:

> I’ve gone through phases where I’ve gone home, and I’ve just carried on working; you get the computer out, and you carry on.

> But you have to put a stop to that at some point and recognise [that] your family needs you.

This is the constant battle that occurs in the striving to balance work with personal life, with women in the police having to sacrifice one for the other. Harriet has had to sacrifice her personal life for her professional career in many instances, missing important weekends with her son, birthdays, Christmases, etc. Echoing Zoe's call to collaboration between the organisation and the individual to maximise work/life balance, Harriet presents generous annual leave and rest days or extra pay (for working overtime or on bank holidays) as efforts by the force to enhance the relationship between work and family life. On the part of the individual, she insists that officers must be selfish about how they maximise the utility of these opportunities. Harriet presents an example from personal experience:

> If I know that I'm on weekend working in two months' time, at the same time that I get told that I'm gonna be working that weekend, I book two other days off at that point where I make it work for me. I'll pick a day where I know my son might be doing something sports-wise, and I'll book that day off. So it works for me because you think, "Yeah I'm losing the weekend," but actually, it means I can do that in the middle of the week.

She also references the officers who work shift patterns that give them good days off, so that if they work six days, then they get four days off. This kind of flexible working arrangement helps to support a push towards work/life balance for officers; however, it is not a complete solution. Harriet works Monday to Friday, thus enjoying the benefit of spending the weekends with her family and getting extra rest days when she has to work on the weekends. However, she also works late shifts and does on-call overnight, which means she could be called out in the early hours of the morning, which she calls a big commitment. Fortunately, like Zoe, Harriet has a partner who has worked for the police, so he understands the requirements of the job in a way that a non-police-affiliated partner could. She says it would be more

difficult for an officer whose partner has never been a part of the police to keep up with the level of constant commitment required.

The result of having to weigh work life against personal life is often that a woman has to prioritise one and relegate the other. This is particularly true for Susan, who says although being a woman has not held her back, trying to balance her work and personal life has impacted the progression of her career. She narrates that the prospect of seeking promotion to Inspector whilst raising young children seemed unattainable to her, prompting the decision to wait until her eldest was 14 before going for it. Lisa also waited until her children were teenagers before progressing to Chief Inspector. As a Sergeant, Susan had to decide between becoming a mother and progressing her career. She explains:

> I suppose if we are looking at it from a [perspective of], are there any blockers or anything to do with being a woman? I think, for me, having the kids was my priority, and the impact on a family of going [through] a promotion, certainly to an inspector rank, you really do have to jump through, in my opinion, quite a lot of hoops. And I needed the children to be in a position where, as a family, we could cope with childcare commitments and things like that.

Susan's categorisation of children and family life as blockers to career progression is an indictment of the police structure and the level of work/life balance it permits. It facilitates the fundamental problem with work/life balance for women in the workforce, which is that they are penalised, and their careers suffer for giving birth and starting a family. This suffering may take different forms: accepting severe sacrifices and financial costs like Zoe, letting work intrude on your family time like Harriet, or sacrificing career progression like Lisa and Susan. Interestingly, Susan explains that the reason she was able to take a long break between becoming a Sergeant and becoming an Inspector was her foresight in taking the Inspector's exam almost immediately after becoming a Sergeant. Because she knew she was about to get married and have children, foreseeing these as a potential

hurdle to progression, she decided to take the exams and "keep them in my top drawer" for when she was ready. However, taking 14 years between doing the Inspector's exams and going for promotion is no longer a viable option as she clarifies new regulations mean they must be used within 5 years.

Similar to Lisa, Susan's husband could not "help" to alleviate this childcaring responsibility. Although he is a "brilliant dad", the nature of his work meant that he struggled to assume any child-caring duties between 08:00 and 18:00 hours. As a result, if there were any activities to be performed during the day, like a sports day or a visit to the GP, then it would have to be Susan attending to it, necessitating the need for flexibility at work. This need for flexibility meant that Susan would choose roles not because they enhanced her career, but because they provided flexibility benefits (e.g., neighbourhood policing for its geographic benefit), in turn serving as a barrier to her progression. Although she recognises that there were practical ways to alleviate this problem, such as requesting that their grandparents perform more child-care duties, she did not consider this an appropriate solution. It was really important to her that she "was a mum, and was around, and was present" for the children. Again, this highlights the disparity of family life as a burden for women than as a burden for men. Although Susan and her husband were both faced with the same issue, it was Susan who had to suspend her career progression and focus on raising the children. Admittedly, there are multiple factors that led to that outcome: societal perception of the woman as primary carer, inability to find a viable path towards progression within the organisation whilst raising young children, and Susan's personal decision to be present in the upbringing of her children. Ultimately, like many women before her, Susan was faced with the unenviable task of deciding between her career and her family life. She explains her rationale for deciding between the two:

> I think my mantra was always, "What am I gonna regret more? Am I gonna regret not being Inspector? Or am I gonna regret not being a mum?" And for me, I knew. I knew what was important

> for me. So the inspector work is on the back burner until as a family we were all prepared for Mum to not be around as much.

After her children got older and she became an inspector, like Harriet, she began to experience the other facet of the work/life balance challenge in policing: the pseudo-nature of off-duty. She recalls going back home and continuing working on her phone and computer because “the work is never done in that role”. Whilst she mostly attributes her inability to balance her work and family life to personal decisions surrounding raising her children by herself, her narration also points to a workload that made it impractical to combine the two. She recognises that officers with more supportive partners or less insistence on actively participating in the upbringing of their children may find the process easier, but for her, the situation was different and she wanted to play an active role in raising her children.

The problem of work/life balance extends beyond just raising young children at home; it extends to the process of pregnancy, giving birth, and taking maternity leave; experiences which influence the balancing dynamic and are unique to women. Lisa shares her experience going for a promotion to sergeant whilst pregnant:

> I was convinced because there weren’t many sergeants, we weren’t many female sergeants around. I was convinced they are not gonna want me because I’m pregnant. I’m gonna go off on maternity leave. They won’t want me. They’ll say, “no, come back next year.”

To her surprise, she got the promotion which meant the force had to pay her a higher rate on her maternity leave. A decision she attributes to a combination of the McPherson report, which had just come out, and the resulting diversity training which was sweeping through the force at the time. The awareness surrounding diversity in the force meant that she could not be easily discriminated against on account of her pregnancy, as it was considered a protected characteristic. She explains how she was lucky to have done her application at a time when there was heightened sensitivity

around discrimination. She follows this by clarifying that her appointment was not on the basis of positive discrimination but rather on merit.

> I wasn’t promoted because I was a woman. I think I was promoted because I passed the interview board. And it didn’t matter that I was pregnant or not because they knew that they couldn’t discriminate against me.

The implication of Lisa’s quote above is quite clear: without the frenzy of avoiding discrimination and the diversity training that the McPherson report caused, she expected to be discriminated against because of her pregnancy. Again, this raises the question of perceived discrimination versus actual discrimination. Of course, it would be impossible to say with any reasonable degree of certainty that the board would have discriminated against her, but the mere expectation of being discriminated against may have as much impact as actually being discriminated against. After all, a pregnant policewoman who expects to be discriminated against may prepare less vigorously than if she expected to be competing fairly. Worse, she may decide not to apply at all, thus rendering the question of actual discrimination irrelevant.

Although getting paid extra during her maternity leave proved helpful, she did not think that support towards flexible work was at an appropriate level. Once she returned from her leave, there was an opening in child protection, which she really wanted to do, but she was told by the Detective Chief Inspector (DCI) that she would have to come back full-time for the job. There was no attempt to consider the context of her situation and try to work out a pattern that would accommodate her situation within the job. She recalls:

> I wanted the job. I'd wanted to be in that department for a long time. It was like dead man's shoes back then. And I had an opportunity, and I wasn't going to waste that opportunity by saying no; I must, you know, stick with my flexible hours. I didn't have the knowledge or the understanding of flexible working. The policies, what I'm entitled to.

Because she really wanted the role and there was no discussion of flexibility, she was forced to accept it on a full-time basis. The impact of flexible working on work/life balance is well established, and for Lisa, working full-time immediately after returning from maternity leave meant tilting the scale of that balance away from life and towards work. She insists that the DCI should not have been able to tell her she had to do it full-time, crediting his error to being "an old-school dinosaur". As discussed in the section on "propagation of misogyny" below, this categorization of old school dinosaur could be rationalised as Lisa preferring to assign discrimination to the individual (the DCI) rather than the organisational structure that perpetuates it (Landqvist, 2015). Although Landqvist does not explore an explanation as to why some of the participants more readily assigned blame to individual co-workers than to a systemic deficit, there are logical conjectures that can be inferred. One explanation is that people who experience discrimination may view it simply as the consequence of an interaction between them and the discriminator, instead of the structure that permits such behaviour. In this instance, blaming a DCI for not allowing flexible work, as opposed to blaming the systemic structure that does not promote adequate flexible working patterns. Another explanation, albeit more speculative, is that discriminatory co-workers present a more surmountable opponent than the entire system. When Lisa speaks of the failures of the DCI in insisting that she works full-time, there is the implication that it is a manageable problem because it is contained in the failings of an individual from a bygone generation.

However, signs of systemic rather than individual failings can be evidenced more clearly following the birth of Lisa's second child. Before going on maternity leave, Lisa was serving as a temporary inspector, but by the time she returned, there was someone else performing the role, and she returned to being a Sergeant. Although she understands the necessity of filling up the role, especially as she was only temping, she bemoans that taking a maternity leave led to a downgrade. She expresses the difficulty of preparing for the inspector's exams whilst caring for a one-year-old child, suggesting that her efforts had not been appropriately rewarded. This is a problem that women in the workplace face in relation to childcare, the risk of career

stagnation and decline; leading either to accepting this reprisal or avoiding childcare altogether.

The narratives so far illuminate not only the difficulties that these policewomen have faced in trying to navigate the work/life balance conundrum but also strategies that they have adopted in scaling this barrier. Strategies like Zoe coordinating alternating shifts with her partner, Susan taking up roles like neighbourhood policing due to its flexibility, Lisa waiting until her children became teenagers before progressing to Chief Inspector, and Harriet taking advantage of the shift patterns to schedule free days during the week that her son had school activities. However, these strategies are more akin to coping mechanisms than solutions to the problem. It points perhaps to the realisation that policewomen as individuals faced with discrimination, may only be capable of creating personal coping strategies to compensate for the lack of the needed institutional changes. Susan agrees that these techniques are not suitable solutions; instead, offering what she proposes will be particularly beneficial to officers like Zoe, who also have a partner working for the police. She suggests working opposite shifts with your partner is less of a strategy and more of a situation that many officers are forced into. She says:

> So I think something forces could do is maybe look at that and see, “What childcare provision can forces offer that might allow people to work the same shifts?”. So your work-life balance is better because, as a family, your days off, you're all off together.

She suggests that divisions be equipped with nurseries so that coupled officers with young children can work the same shifts and, at the end of it, go home with their child to enjoy some family time. This would be difficult to achieve, she concedes, given the cost and logistics involved, but it would vastly increase the work/life balance of police officers with young children. Seeing as every participant identified having young children as a hurdle to work/life balance for policewomen, the viability of this proposal and its effectiveness could help relieve this barrier for women.

Drawing from personal experience, Susan offers up another suggestion to help with the work/life crisis, suggesting that this could be the most pertinent "blocker" for women in the police force. She says the reason job flexibility and smooth career progression within the police seem irreconcilable is due to the system in place for job applications. An officer cannot simply apply for a role that they want; instead, they apply for the rank that the role is occupying. So whilst she was a Sergeant and prioritising taking care of her young child, she could not apply to be, for example, an early action inspector, a flexible role that would not have interfered with her childcare responsibilities. But to get that role, she would have had to apply for the rank of Inspector which could see her assigned to a full-time role like Divisional Response Inspector. For as long as she was unable to fulfil those full-time duties, she could not commit herself to applying for the rank. She explains:

> [If the police] want more women in higher ranks, they need to allow people to apply for a particular job because everybody's circumstances are different…. And I think that, for me, is a big blocker. Had I been able to apply for a particular role … then I would have been promoted earlier because I would have been able to say, "I can cope with that job, but I can't cope with that job." But [instead] I needed to be ready to do anything.

This system of promotion, although gender-neutral at face value, is another example of policies which serve to affect women than men disproportionately.

In this section, we have looked at how the participants often face a difficult choice between career advancement and family responsibilities. Susan and Lisa delayed promotions until their children were older, prioritising motherhood over career growth. Women are disproportionately affected by work/life balance struggles as they are expected to manage domestic and childcare duties, limiting their career flexibility. Susan's husband's demanding work schedule left her solely responsible for daytime caregiving, forcing her to choose roles based on flexibility rather than progression. To cope with the perils of work/life

balance, women in this study adopted personal strategies such as choosing flexible roles or alternating shifts with their partners. However, these are coping mechanisms rather than solutions to the structural issues within the police force. There were also issues surrounding career stagnation after maternity leave (i.e., Lisa's experience) and concerns about discrimination during pregnancy. Another institutional challenge that was highlighted is the rigid rank-based promotion system employed by the police, which makes it difficult for women with family responsibilities to progress. To alleviate these barriers, Susan suggests two practical solutions that the police could implement: firstly, the provision of childcare facilities, and secondly, allowing officers to apply for specific roles rather than just ranks. These changes would enable female officers to balance their careers with family commitments better.

5.3.1.3 Public Perception

This subsection discusses the participants' narratives with regard to their experiences with the public and how they interpret the public perception of them as policewomen. It covers the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the public, and how public perception of the police influences recruitment.

Most PCs starting out in their role typically work as frontline officers, engaging in direct interactions with the public through patrolling, responding to incidents, and community engagement. Following promotion to the rank of Sergeant, many of these officers remain operational and continue to interact with the public, albeit with more supervisory responsibilities, such as managing constables and ensuring their teams handle incidents appropriately. Given the nature of these interactions, an insight may be gained not just into how the general public perceives police officers but, more particularly, how they perceive policewomen.

Harriet stresses the benefits of maintaining good interactions with the public, giving them enough confidence in the police to report crimes of a sensitive nature and understand the reasoning behind the police investigating the

crimes that it does. This kind of relationship makes policing easier as it means there is more cooperation and less resistance in the execution of their duties. Harriet laments the challenges of attaining this standard, explaining:

> I think we've got so much to contend with in terms of the media, and our public perception, and our legitimacy with the public.

She says the negative reports in the media about the police are mainly a reflection of how difficult it is to recruit good officers because, ultimately, recruitment is made from the public members of society, which includes misogynists, racists, homophobes, etc. If anything, she argues, the reports of misconduct trials and inappropriateness within the police are a reflection of how much better the force is now at recognising, reporting, and getting offenders flagged. Zoe agrees with Harriet on both counts: firstly, that the recruitment of misogynistic officers is the reality of the police existing as a "cross-section of the public", thus reflecting societal standards. On the second count, she echoes Harriet's assertion that the embarrassing news of misconduct trials is evidence of the police's disciplinary machinery working effectively to rid the force of miscreants that slip through the cracks of the vetting process.

Reflecting on the interaction between police officers and members of the public, there exist elements of misogyny and gendered perceptions. Susan reveals that as a young officer on frontline duty, people would often treat her differently than they treated her male colleagues. She tells the interviewer:

> What I found quite interesting was when I became a Sergeant, and I went out with a male PC. If we went to a job and they wanted to speak to supervision, even though I was the one with the stripes on the shoulders, they would talk to my colleague and presume that the male was the supervision.

This encapsulates the idea that societal cultural acceptance of misogyny feeds into women's experiences of a discriminatory workplace. Here, Susan highlights a dissonance between institutional authority (rank), as evidenced by the stripes on her shoulders, and societal perceptions of authority (gender norms). In this narration, Susan shows that members of the public would

usually prioritise their gender bias over signs of formal authority when interacting with the police. This illustrates the hurdle that women have to surmount when trying to attain leadership positions, the hurdle of battling against the association of authority with men. This experience suggests that policewomen in leadership positions may have to work harder to assert their authority compared to their male counterparts. Such experiences could contribute to feelings of being undervalued or having to prove their worth repeatedly, culminating in a sense of imposter syndrome, which is discussed later in this chapter.

The researcher interprets Susan's decision to begin with the phrase, "What I found interesting", as Susan framing her experience with curiosity rather than overt frustration, perhaps as a way of softening the critical nature of her observation. Although an indictment of the public, her story does beg the question of to what extent this culture of gendered association of authority is present within the police. After all, according to Harriet and Zoe, the police is a "cross-section of the public", with their officers reflecting the diverse cultural standards present in society. Following this logic, the same gendered sentiments that exist amongst the general populace can be inferred to exist within the police as well, perceiving male police officers as more representative of authority than policewomen.

Susan recalls having to tell people making a complaint to her male subordinate, "Well, actually, if you're making a complaint or you want to speak to supervision, I'm the supervisor." She says this kind of occurrence predated her promotion to Sergeant, as even when she was a Constable on a job, people would speak more to the male officer present than to her. Again, this shows how women often have to do more than their male colleagues to receive the same amount of benefit. Her male colleagues in these scenarios, sometimes lower than her in rank, are afforded the respect of a supervisor simply for being male. She says this used to happen in the early 2000s when she was on the frontlines, but she does not believe such presumptions are still made in today's frontline policing.

To deal with this misogynistic perception, Susan takes a practical approach to offenders, reasoning that her purpose for being there is to help them. Seeing as she was never really offended by it, it was best to let them speak to whichever officer they felt more affinity with. She preferred to handle such issues collaboratively, letting her male colleague be the reference point if he was the desired conduit and only interfering if she had a better idea of how to solve the problem or if her partner was not having much success. She narrates how portions of her PC and Sergeant tenure were spent overseeing the bus station, and sometimes, she had to talk people down from jumping off it. She says in those situations, gender stereotyping becomes a trivial discussion, so if it was her who had a better rapport with the person, “maybe because they felt more affinity with the female, … or it might just be [she] had the right personality”, then she would take charge of the situation.

In summary, this subsection highlights several important facets of the relationship between public perception, the police, and gender discrimination. One such facet is the public’s perception of frontline police officers, especially women. Susan, a Sergeant, while holding supervisory responsibilities, continued to face public interactions that reflect societal biases. Harriet emphasises the importance of positive interactions with the public, which fosters trust, encourages crime reporting, and facilitates police work. However, she acknowledges that negative media portrayals challenge public confidence in policing. Public confidence is important because it impacts the quality of recruitment that the police attracts. Harriet and Zoe argue that reports of police misconduct highlight the force’s improved ability to detect and discipline problematic officers. They assert that the police is a cross-section of society, so inevitably, it recruits individuals with prejudices, such as misogyny, but that misconduct trials reflect efforts to address these issues.

Susan describes her personal experiences with the public, and being overlooked as a supervisor in favour of her male colleagues. This illustrates societal biases and how they influence perceptions of authority, overriding institutional rank and highlighting the additional hurdles that women have to overcome to establish their authority. As a coping mechanism, Susan elects to focus on addressing the problem she has been called to, rather than

challenge public perception, except in cases where it is necessary. Overall, the complex relationship that exists between the police and the public reinforces societal gender norms and makes it even more difficult for women to assert their authority.

5.3.1.4 Personality

The issue of personality is relevant when discussing the acceptance of women as an intrinsic part of policing. This section delves into the lived realities of the participants regarding the impact of an ascribed "ideal officer" on their careers.

Through interviewing the participants, the effects that certain valued personality traits have in predicting the success of a police officer became apparent. With the exception of Lisa, every participant made references in their narrative to certain personality traits that made them join and/or excel in the police force. Harriet narrates how, due to her upbringing, she has always been very sporty and hands-on, preferring more outdoor activities to indoor ones. Growing up on a farm with only sisters, she developed a "super competitive" character by competing with the boys at school. She describes herself growing up as a "tomboy", and once she was at university, having a regular career simply did not appeal to her. Similarly, Zoe prefers being hands-on and outdoors, explaining that she appreciates the significant risks and threats that accompany her "extraordinarily operational job". This drive towards hands-on activity has seen her get operational licenses in specialist fields such as firearms commander. Those are the kinds of roles Zoe has actively pursued in her career, insisting, "I've never shied away from that. The thought of being locked in an office all the time, oh, it just won't do for me".

Both Harriet and Zoe link their presence in the police to the kind of personalities that they possess: Competitive, hands-on, outdoors, sporty, etc., characteristics that have traditionally been recognised as masculine. Harriet even specifies that these characteristics made her a "tomboy" growing up. It is interesting that these characteristics have been highlighted as defining traits in signifying compatibility with policing because they are

traits typically associated with men. In discussing gender stereotyping, the emphasis is usually on one gender within an organisation, stereotyping qualities onto the other. However, it can also be the case, as evidenced here, that the discriminated gender starts to adopt this stereotype, incorporating beneficial traits that serve their career prospects. In this instance, Harriet has identified the police force as an organisation where certain personality traits serve as an indication of future success. Zoe does not specify if she always possessed these qualities or has developed them over her time with the police, so a premeditated identification of policing as a good personality match cannot be ascertained. Regardless, research shows that women subjected to gender stereotyping will often try to overcome this barrier by adopting masculine traits, a phenomenon found more commonly among women leaders (Rudman *et al.*, 2010; Goff *et al.*, 2024). Women leaders like Zoe and Harriet, who have been in the force for decades, have had to rely on their possession of these masculine traits, enhancing their association to success in the field.

Coming up through a system trying to designate her to pastoral roles like child protection and domestic abuse, Harriet says the reason she was able to resist that is because of her upbringing. She says:

> I wasn't gonna follow the norms and be pushed into certain kinds of areas. I wanted to do what everybody else was doing. And, you know, I very much went into lines of policing like surveillance and proactive policing, drugs work, and advanced driving skills.

Of course, when Harriet said she wanted to do what everyone else was doing, the inference is that she wanted to do what the men were doing. Unlike the women, they were not being made to attend pastoral duties; albeit a form of stereotyping in itself, it is less damaging for men than it is for women. It does beg the question, to what extent did this resistance to performing gendered roles shape the career decisions made by Harriet? To what extent her motivation to pursue more "proactive" roles would be impacted by a police force without gender stereotyping cannot be ascertained by this research. In a similar vein, when Susan narrates her

experience of being assigned to pastoral roles, she establishes a correlation between the discrimination and her personality. Unlike Harriet, she does not actively seek out contrasting roles to avoid the stereotyped ones; instead, she rationalises the benefits of being assigned to those roles. She explains that "sometimes it depends on you and your personality as to whether you allow things to become a blocker". After all, she says, if there is a victim of sexual abuse, they may prefer to speak to a policewoman. Thus, she was happy to perform those sorts of roles.

In conclusion, an analysis of the participants' narratives shows a focus on personality as a key aspect of attaining success in the police force. Both Harriet and Zoe emphasise how their strong personalities have seen them traverse hurdles that they otherwise may not have been able to overcome.

5.3.1.5 Physicality

The essence of perceived masculinity is intrinsically tied to strength and the ability to perform physical tasks. All the participants in this research recall starting off as young police constables and having physical restrictions placed on them, from having to wear skirts and carry purses to being equipped with tiny, ineffective truncheons. Due to a combination of men being perceived as more physically capable and policing being seen as an inherently physical job, policemen were equipped with better tools and appropriate attire. Fortunately, the police have since evolved past these restrictions, now equipping female officers with the same tools as their male colleagues and appropriate attires.

Although the perception of policing as a physical and thus masculine job persists, participants in this research were firm that physicality has little role to play in the execution of the job. According to Zoe, the physical test required to join the police is "really simple", and a person would have to be "particularly unfit" to fail it. She says although it was harder when she first joined, requiring running, sit-ups, push-ups, etc., now entrants are simply required to run down the track for about five minutes. The difficulty of the test is increased for officers looking to work in physically demanding roles like

firearms and public order, but she says this is to be expected, given the nature of those roles. She presents herself as a case study: “It’s certainly never held me back, and I’m five foot five, so I’m particularly short.” Susan does not dispute the difficulty level of these tests and says the police force takes extra care to ensure they do not become a barrier for women by conducting female-only sessions. She says:

> Some women were getting quite anxious around running with, you know, big burly blokes that, you know, three strides and they’ve done the length of the thing whereas as a woman, you perhaps didn’t.

This highlights the psychological challenge that women face when physicality or masculinity is presented as a barrier to success. As Susan goes on to say, it may prove counterproductive to have a 50-year-old woman who is going through menopause running next to a 20-year-old man. This kind of initiative, i.e., running only women sessions, is important in ensuring that women feel included and valued throughout the process.

Of course, there is always the question of performance on the frontline of policing, the comparative effectiveness of policewomen versus policemen in dealing with physical conflicts during the course of the job. Susan and Zoe downplay the extent to which an officer's sex determines their effectiveness in the field. They both highlight verbal communication as the most valuable skill in dealing with conflict, regardless of whether the attending officer is a man or a woman. If done properly, then a physical altercation can be avoided altogether, and this should always be the objective. Susan says:

> From my experience, that’s the first resort when you are going to deal with an incident, even if somebody’s being aggressive. It’s to try and calm them down and get them to comply with you because you don’t wanna get hands-on on them. That’s the last resort.

Zoe concurs, pointing out that using verbal communication usually works in resolving conflict, hence downplaying the importance of physical strength. However, she does acquiesce to the fact that verbal de-escalation does not

always work, and in some instances, physical interaction becomes necessary. Again, Zoe and Susan are in tandem in such situations, prioritizing skill, training, technique, and equipment over the employment of pure physical strength. Zoe highlights the use of tools such as cuffs, batons, and pepper spray, which she used as a young PC to handle situations when physical altercation was mandated. She says PCs today have it even better with the introduction of Tasers, which are more effective than previous tools. Susan reiterates the use of equipment to attend to unavoidable physical conflict but emphasises training techniques that officers learn to handle such situations. She explains:

> I think it's about teaching women the right techniques or anybody the right technique to apply pressure or whatever, the right place to get control of somebody and then be able to put handcuffs on, etcetera. So actually, I don't agree that you have to be sort of male and, you know, big muscles and things like that to be able to deal with people on the frontline that are violent.

So when trying to apprehend a resisting aggressor, officers should employ their training by using the right techniques and applying cuffs properly; a strategy that works effectively for both male and female officers. Susan is responsible for a Personal Safety Training team which practices these techniques, and she says the women on the team, although "quite small in stature", can take down and control men bigger than themselves.

To emphasize the peripheral nature of physicality as a facet of policing, Susan recalls her experience on patrol, given the freedom to attend to all kinds of incidents as a single-crewed officer. In the event of a violent incident, then more officers would be sent to the site for support. As Zoe points out:

> If there is a pub fight now at the pub just across the road from me, the nearest patrol would be the first attending officer. They don't look at the gender; they just send them. Now obviously [if] one person go[es] into that, whether it's a man or a woman, we would also make sure that there was backup en route. So, it could be two women going to it, three women.

The nature of the force is such that any geographically available officer taking a statement, for instance, would immediately leave to respond to a distress call from another officer. The participants point to all of these factors as evidence that women are not restricted by physicality in executing their frontline police duties.

In conclusion, the participants did not describe physicality as being a barrier for women in the police. Even in instances where some older women may feel uncomfortable taking the bleep test with younger men, there are provisions made for women-only sessions. Even on the front lines, the most valuable skill required when encountering a potentially violent scenario is communication rather than physical strength. If physical force becomes necessary, officers are equipped with proper training and tools to handle the situation, even against bigger adversaries.

5.3.2 Women's Adaptation

Women have become increasingly influential in shaping the culture and practices of the police service, both through their individual actions and their collective presence. Participants' narratives reveal that policewomen often adapt to the institution in complex ways, sometimes reinforcing existing gender norms by underplaying sexism, while at other times actively challenging and reshaping organisational culture to foster inclusion and equality.

A notable aspect of this adaptation is the gradual rise of women into leadership positions. Participants such as Harriet and Zoe highlighted tangible changes that signal progress, including improved recognition of pastoral roles, the establishment of women's support networks, and increased visibility of women across specialist and command ranks. For many, this visibility represents the dismantling of earlier structural barriers and the normalisation of women's leadership within the police.

However, participants also acknowledged that gender imbalances persist, particularly at certain ranks, illustrating that progress is uneven and ongoing.

Some divisions now adopt proactive strategies to encourage women's participation in underrepresented areas, which may at times take the form of positive discrimination or targeted support. While such measures remain controversial, participants like Harriet view them as necessary steps toward greater diversity and fairness. Her own leadership approach, intentionally building teams with a mix of genders and ethnicities, illustrates a conscious effort to cultivate inclusive perspectives and empathetic decision-making.

Overall, women's adaptation within policing reflects a spectrum of responses to gender inequality, ranging from resistance to complicity. Female officers navigate existing power structures in ways that both challenge and, at times, reproduce aspects of the gendered culture. Their increasing presence in leadership roles demonstrates resilience and institutional transformation. Yet, other patterns of adaptation, such as the tendency to downplay sexism or the emergence of the 'queen bee' phenomenon, reveal the complexities of negotiating authority and belonging in a male-dominated environment. As the following themes will show, women's adaptation to policing's gendered landscape encompasses both positive and negative influences, each contributing to how gender relations are maintained and reshaped within the force.

5.3.2.1 Angst of Imperfection

So far, we have discussed the perception of the participants towards personality traits and physicality as markers for a successful career in policing. When discussing career progression and applying for promotion, another interesting theme that became evident is what Lisa refers to as imposter syndrome. Lisa and Zoe professed to have experienced this syndrome, feeling pressure to impress at their current rank and unpreparedness to progress to the next, even when the feeling may not have any rational grounding. Lisa explains that policewomen sometimes "get caught up in [their] feelings", downplaying their own ability and getting anxious about how others perceive their achievements. This mindset may be a result of being more reserved than their male colleagues or not having

“something to shout about from the rooftops”. Lisa revealed that she was eligible to go for her Superintendent promotion, with the process going on in the week of this interview, but after lengthy consideration, she decided not to go for it, reasoning that she had yet to earn respect in her current rank by demonstrating all her skills.

Lisa believes this hesitance to seek promotion is a personal characteristic that she possesses, although, through conversations with other policewomen, she realises that this may be a gendered pattern. In her experience, many policewomen only realise their career stagnation when they see some of their colleagues progressing at a much quicker pace. Corroborating the imposter syndrome, Zoe says:

> I think that you’ve got to be operationally credible in this job, so I suppose we all put ourselves out of our comfort zone, but that’s what I do. I think that I would never try and go for promotion unless I felt and knew I was credible and I was confident in the role that I was doing. I’d never stepped up further if I didn’t think that I was very good at what I was currently doing. So, people would probably say that lots of women don’t necessarily put their hand above the parapet until they know that they’ve done everything. And potentially, I think that probably is right, that is the nature.

Although making identical statements, it is important to understand the diverging contexts in which Lisa and Zoe have arrived at this point. Lisa arrives at the imposter syndrome by narrating her experience with it and presenting it as a barrier that seems to disproportionately affect women. She says men have it easier, either due to ego or a lack of imposter syndrome:

> A lot of my colleagues who have been promoted along the way have said, “I thought I'd give it a go. I'd just went, you know, just go in and see if I could wing it.” And that seems to be the attitude, whereas I want to be in a position where I know that I'm ready.

In contrast, Zoe was explaining the benefits of being operationally active, not staying in one role for too long, and acquiring as many skills as possible. She

presents this as a strength that she has, which has propelled her career to Chief Superintendent. It is during this explanation that she recognises the pattern of women not putting their hands “above the parapet”. So, the phenomenon of women being less likely to seek promotion than men seems to depend less on their preparedness and more on their desire to attain a level akin to perfection first. Lisa says a lot of the policewomen she has spoken with do not even realise it is happening until they see their colleagues progressing faster, and even though she is aware of it, the syndrome persists still.

Harriet does not directly speak about this syndrome, but when discussing the prospect of going for promotions, she says:

> The opportunities are there and you just gotta be, yeah, are you the best candidate on the day at the interview?

Preparing to be the best candidate at an interview is commendable and practically may suggest the best path towards success. However, it may also prove to be detrimental when that angst of imperfection persuades women not to put themselves up for promotion. As Lisa said, the men do not seem at all to carry this burden, admitting to going for promotion just to “wing it” and see what happens. Unfortunately for policewomen, whilst preparing for excellence should be an encouraged trait, it means that a lot of women who are ready for promotion do not put themselves forward, leaving the application pool populated by men. Trying to understand why she suffers from imposter syndrome, Lisa speculates:

> Am I constantly battling against toxic people and that’s why I kind of feel I have to prove myself all the time? And I think that’s possibly the case and has been historically, but without me consciously thinking about it.

This realisation came as a result of a conversation Lisa had with a friend of hers who is a policewoman in another constabulary. Once the previously aligned constabularies separated, her friend told her it was probably for the best because there were so many toxic people within Lisa’s organisation. Lisa says this sparked an inquisition in her mind about the people that she

was working with, perhaps not recognising the toxicity because she is in it. Consequently, this toxic environment may have led to the imposter syndrome that she experiences and her lack of assuredness in being ready for a promotion.

This theme has covered how women may often feel that they need to check off all the criteria, almost attaining perfection before applying for promotion opportunities, while men, on the other hand, are willing to apply even when they know they may not meet the requirements. This imbalance in the number of men and women going for those promotion spots gives men the statistical advantage.

5.3.2.2 Support

One solution for overcoming the angst of imperfection for women is getting support and reassurance from other colleagues. Lisa says in her network of women this is something that has been discussed a lot: women coming together to "build each other's confidence" and be reassured that they do not need to prove their worthiness in the role that they occupy every day. Lisa and the women in her network recognise the existence of a mental barrier which serves to compound the already arduous task of progressing through the ranks of the police. Not only do they have to be good enough, but they must also shoulder the anxiety of not being confident in their abilities, an anxiety which Lisa says does not seem apparent in men. The existence of this type of network is important for women to discuss gender-peculiar occurrences with each other, discuss solutions, and forge a way forward. If successful, it could help alleviate the barrier of self-restriction among policewomen. The impact of giving support through reassurance stretches beyond just career progression, extending to diversity in recruitment. Zoe said when she joined her first team, she was one of only two women, as was common at the time, but now new recruits are split evenly between men and women. She attributes this progress to a campaign targeting women, telling them, "We are all one. You can do it". Following this illustration of the impact of positive reaffirmation on growing diversity within an organization, the

inference can be made that similar messaging within could provide an identical outcome for career progression.

Harriet spoke about the HeforShe network, which sees policemen advocating the rights of their female colleagues. Susan and Zoe spoke about a women's support group in the police called Inspire, which helps policewomen with continuing professional development and any other issues they may have. Interestingly, both Susan and Zoe, who highlight the group, say they have never really felt like they needed to get help from a support group. This is significant because both participants described in their narratives instances that accrue to hardship, misogyny, and, most evidently, a struggle with work-life balance. The implication of this is unclear, perhaps a testament to the issue of personality discussed earlier, where Susan says, "I think sometimes it depends on you and your personality … as to whether you allow things become a blocker." If a person's mindset is not to designate seemingly discriminatory circumstances as blockers, then it stands to reason that they would be hesitant to seek help tackling it. This interpretation is consistent with Zoe's narrative, which advocates for the acceptance of these hardships as sacrifices that come with the job. However, even though Susan says she has never felt the need to attend support groups, she reveals employing the use of a maternity and paternity group called Mat-Pat during her pregnancy for advice on what options were available to her. She is currently going through menopause and has been to a support group which helps policewomen in that stage of their life. Evidently, for Susan, her use of support groups is very strategic and sparse, having indulged at only two pivotal points in her career, namely, during pregnancy and menopause. So, her declaration of not needing to use support groups is not as absolute as it first appears; instead, she intended to relay that outside of these pivotal moments, she prefers not to perceive hardship as a blocker.

Support for officers is taken more seriously now than it was in the past, with various networks set up around issues such as disability and diversity. Harriet says female officers are getting more support now than in the past when she was rising through the ranks; for instance, with networks supporting women going through menopause. Inspire is one of the groups that help with issues

surrounding menopause, maternity, and pregnancy. Additionally, Susan says she is aware of a menopause support group in her organisation and that the police now have a policy on menopause, which was not the case in the past, showing a dedication to progress towards inclusivity.

Support for policewomen goes beyond support groups looking to help them through pivotal stages in their work and personal life, to experienced officers looking to guide younger officers through the challenges of progressing through the ranks. In this regard, Zoe says she tries to spot officers who have great potential, and mentor them towards achieving that potential. She says, “The ones who don’t shout the loudest usually are the best, in my opinion.” This statement will be welcomed by policewomen like Lisa, who believe that not “shouting” about their achievements like some of their male colleagues is hindering their progression. Although Zoe mentors both men and women, she says she does try to identify “good women Police Constables” who would benefit from her mentoring. Lisa herself says that her years of experience in the police mean she is now in a position to support any policewoman who may need assistance in navigating the organisation, for instance, by arranging flexible working. At the time of this interview, Lisa was overseeing a fairness-at-work investigation concerning a female worker who was denied an amended working schedule to accommodate a medical need. She uses this anecdote to illustrate how her own experiences with achieving flexible working hours have equipped her with the knowledge to tackle similar issues. Joining Lisa and Zoe in citing support, Susan says the diversity of officers progressing through the ranks is influenced by talent management, which identifies officers with the right characteristics and manages them to become future leaders. Although this program is not aimed specifically at women, it helps in negating the impact of one gender being more vocal about their achievements than the other.

In summary, the participants revealed that the rise of support groups is beneficial for encouraging policewomen through their difficulties and helping them navigate barriers such as pregnancy, childcare, menopause, etc. Being leaders themselves, they are now in a position to apply all of their experiential knowledge in advising younger policewomen on how best to

manage those barriers. Although Susan recognises the occurring positive change, she questions the limit of its impact, reaffirming that the way to solve the problem for policewomen climbing up the career ladder is to make it possible to apply for a specific role, instead of having to apply for a rank.

5.3.2.3 Underplaying Sexism

The role that organisations play in propagating misogyny (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Branisa *et al.*, 2014; Ferrant and Nowacka, 2015; Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024) has already been explored, however, they are not the only indulgers of misogyny; another contributing offender is women themselves (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005; Rudman *et al.*, 2010; Lo and Lim, 2023; Goff *et al.*, 2024). Although counterintuitive, women in the workplace also play a role in advancing gender discrimination against women, primarily by underplaying sexism.

One strong motivation for this is that the women appear reluctant to assign blame to their colleagues and particularly to the organisation, often resulting in rationalising discrimination and sexism. For instance, Harriet rationalises the stereotyping of gender roles as a reality of the 1980s, and Susan justifies the prevalence of assigning pastoral roles to women as "the right thing to do", given women's attunement with dealing with vulnerable victims. Throughout the interview process, the participants repeatedly used affirmations such as "But I have never felt like I was treated differently" or "I cannot recall an instance when I have been discriminated against"; and these would usually follow or precede an instance of misogyny that they narrate. One such example arises in Harriet's interview when she narrates:

> We've come through a time where you might hear comments like, "Oh, she only got that job because, you know, she wore that". There was an interview that I passed about, it must have been 20-odd years ago. Apparently, one of my colleagues was quite disgruntled at the time because he'd applied for it as well. And he'd made comments that I only got it because I wore a certain dress. … That [kind of statement] now is absolutely

> challenged, but in years gone by, I have heard people kind of make comments like that.

Interestingly, the set-up to this story was Harriet explaining how she has never really felt discriminated against or made to feel different from her male colleagues. So, although retelling it as a negative experience, she did not classify it as a problem with misogyny within the force, instead relegating it to an incident not particularly considered problematic in the 1980s. Harriet says the only time she has felt like someone was actively “out to get” her and “remove [her] from a process” was when she was up against two of her male colleagues for a promotion. Once it started to look like they would not all be successful, a malicious anonymous complaint was made about her to the professional standards department. Fortunately, the complaint did not progress; otherwise, her ability to go for the promotion would have been compromised. Contrasting this with the earlier example of a colleague saying she only got a job because she wore a certain dress, Harriet considers this with more seriousness because it was a positive attempt to stop her from progressing. Whilst it was unpleasant to hear the comments from a colleague, it was only intended to shame rather than stop the promotion, and in Harriet's mind, this made it less of an offence than the report.

Of course, those kinds of comments cannot be dissociated from discrimination as they serve as both an indicator of a misogynistic workplace and a tool for propagating misogyny. Such statements may encourage other colleagues and the women being addressed to question the achievements of policewomen. This kind of perception, if unchecked, can lead to the kind of imposter syndrome experienced by Lisa and Zoe, where they feel the added pressure to prove their worth within a rank beyond question before considering going for a promotion. Although recalling these negative experiences, Harriet maintains throughout the interview that she has not been discriminated against in her climb up the police ranks, further illustrating a level of willingness to downplay sexism within the organisation.

5.3.2.4. The Queen Bee Phenomenon

Given that the eradication of gender barriers leads to more female leaders, it is reasonable to assume that the reverse is also the case; that more female leaders cause the eradication of gender barriers, thus leading to even more female leaders. Following this logic, a simple solution to workplace gender inequality may be to appoint more and more female leaders. While it is the case that a more gender-diverse leadership may evidence a workplace upholding equality values, a causal link between women leaders and the eradication of misogyny has not been established. Instead, there is evidence that in certain situations, the presence of women in leadership positions may serve to reinforce the discrimination of subordinate women in the organisation (Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005; Rudman *et al.*, 2010; Goff *et al.*, 2024).

One such example of women leaders propagating misogyny can be found in Susan's narrative. She says she has mostly had good managers, and if anyone has been bad, then it was simply the case that they were a bad manager, instead of actively trying to target her because she is a woman. However, there was one exception:

> If I've had any issue, I can only think of one manager. It's probably been a female manager. I can think of one female manager who I think preferred male colleagues, not in a sexual way, just in terms of who they preferred to give opportunities to or something like that. And that would be a female manager, not a male manager.

The discrimination of women by female leaders is not a novel finding in this research; it is well-established in the gender studies literature, commonly known as the Queen Bee Phenomenon (QBP). This phenomenon occurs when women attain positions of power in a male-dominated organisation and consequently treat other women in the organisation more critically than men (Goff *et al.*, 2024). Subsequently, the QBP describes such women as being harsher to other women, distancing themselves from female subordinates, and providing fewer opportunities and support to them (p. 7).

Susan's narrative about her experiences with a previous female manager exhibits the characteristics of the QBP at play. She recalls comments about one of her male colleagues being the manager's favourite, and how opportunities to act in favourable roles noticeably went disproportionately to men. Studies on the QBP have shown that women leaders may be more lenient on their male subordinates than females, because they perceive their female subordinates as not having made the same levels of sacrifice or commitment as they have. Perhaps a good example of this can be found in Zoe's narrative when she says:

> What I'd say is when you join the police, you do make a personal commitment to the organisation that it might be a bit tricky to have everything that you want, and I do also think it's a bit of personal responsibility to sort out yourself. So, pay for childcare because I have.

This statement follows from Zoe narrating her struggles with work/life balance and the sacrifices that her family had to make to navigate that barrier. Even though she says later that this is a personal sacrifice she chose to make, there is an expectation that other policewomen make the same sacrifices that she did, embodied in the last sentence, "So, pay for childcare because I have". The literature on QBP purports that a female leader like Zoe, in recognising that her sacrifices have led to occupying the position that she does, simultaneously infers that other women who are not at that level have not made the same degree of sacrifice. This inference means that they expect more commitment from female subordinates than males, thus making it likely that men under their leadership get more opportunities than women.

Interestingly, although Susan confirms that she has only experienced this with one female manager, she provides an explanation for why female leaders may display the QBP. Susan proposes:

> I don't know whether the research would back up that if a woman gets very high up in what was traditionally [a] male-dominated industry, whether they feel they have to become more aggressive, … more male, more masculine, or more dominant.

Although unfamiliar with the literature surrounding the QBP, Susan correctly identifies one of its main effects—women leaders feeling the need to develop masculine traits to survive in a masculine field. Given the stereotyping of women as carers, homemakers, and less committed to work, women in power may adopt more masculine traits in order to overcome this stereotype (Goff *et al.*, 2024). Examples of this have already been discussed in the sections on personality and mentality above. Consequently, Goff et al. (2024) purport that these women leaders unknowingly perpetuate the QBP by criticising women who are unwilling to undergo the same evolution (p. 7). Susan sympathises with these women, saying it is simply their way of dealing with the misogyny that they face being in a male-dominated industry, although she regrets that the effects of this change are directed towards other women. Her sentiment aligns with the academic consensus on the QBP (Derks *et al.*, 2011; Goff *et al.*, 2024) as a consequence of women leaders attempting to counter gender bias and not a result of innate feminine traits.

The effects of the QBP go beyond just women leaders discriminating against their female subordinates; it also creates a cycle of perpetual discrimination through the creation of the Princess Bee Phenomenon (PBP). The PBP describes how women leaders exhibiting QBP may promote those characteristics to their female subordinates, who then adopt them when they become leaders, thus facilitating the cycle (Goff *et al.*, 2024). The consequence for female subordinates who recognise the QBP as adverse is even more detrimental because they end up distancing themselves from female leaders and are less inclined to take up leadership roles (p. 7).

Although most evident in Susan's narrative about a female manager, the QBP was evidenced across participants' narratives. Some of these examples are similar to Derks et al.'s (2011) observation of participants distancing themselves from their group by claiming, "I am different from many other policewomen", and their denial of discrimination, with the prompts "during my career in the force, women and men received equal career support" and "women are sometimes passed for promotion because of gender discrimination in the police" (i.e., coded in reverse) (p. 1245). Additionally,

they measured whether participants identified themselves with masculine or feminine traits.

Instances where these opinions presented in the participants' narratives are numerous; for instance, when narrating how quickly she has risen through the ranks, especially at the start of her career, Susan says, "I think sometimes it depends on you and your personality … and whether you allow things to become a blocker." Susan's statement could be interpreted to infer that some women are more suited to climb the ranks in the police than other women. Policewomen such as herself who are able to disregard discriminatory actions have an advantage over those who perceive them as barriers. In essence, following Derks et al.'s (2011) measurement of in-group distancing, Susan claims, "I am different from many other policewomen". She, however, also exhibits non-QBP traits. One indicator of a female leader not exhibiting QBP traits is conforming to gender stereotypes, such as prioritising their family life over their career (da Rocha Grangeiro *et al.*, 2024). Susan's narrative shows that a defining moment in her career was deciding to suspend going up for promotion because she wanted to start a family and thought doing both things simultaneously would hamper the quality of her family life.

Zoe's declarations such as, "I always think because I'm the best at what I do and I work bloody hard, I've got promoted through my own merit" and "Me and my other half, we worked opposite shifts for five years … we didn't have a day off together for five years. But that is the personal commitment I'd give to this organisation" may indicate QBP tendencies. After all, this could lead to Zoe perceiving subordinate policewomen struggling to climb the promotion ladder as unwilling to make the same sacrifices that she did. This characteristic in itself is not enough to ascertain the presence of QBP, as Zoe also displayed non-QBP characteristics. One of the traits of women leaders who display this phenomenon is a lack of willingness to mentor or guide subordinate women in climbing through the ranks of the organisation. However, in contrast to this, Zoe narrates how she has mentored a lot of officers in her time, men and women, specifying, "I do try and pick up … good women PCs, I spot them and bring them, do my best for them." Harriet,

too, displays signs of QBP, specifying that her upbringing and personality made her resistant to accepting “vulnerable jobs” and instead pursuing roles that other officers were pursuing. Again, similar to Susan and Zoe, she also displays anti-QBP characteristics. For instance, she explains how giving birth to her son made her more empathetic, providing her with more appreciation for working in child protection and domestic abuse roles. This highlighting of a trait considered feminine (i.e., empathy) (Derks *et al.*, 2011) suggests that Harriet has not adopted the QBP in this instance.

The sidelining of feminine traits and subsequent adoption of masculine ones may not always present as keyword identifiers (i.e., sympathetic for feminine and aggressive for masculine). A more nuanced portrayal of its manifestation can be found in the narratives of Susan and Zoe surrounding support groups within the police, established to help policewomen. They both discuss the existence of the Inspire group, a women’s support group that helps with promotion issues, maternity leave, and any other issues that policewomen may be facing. However, although pointing out the benefit of such a group and presenting it as a positive for progress towards diversity and gender equality, they both made sure to express that they did not have a need to utilise the group. Zoe says, “I don’t really go to many of the things there”, and Susan, although revealing that she has been to some of the sessions, says, “I wouldn’t say that I felt like I needed to go to a particular women’s group or something to get support because I’ve never felt that strongly that I needed it.” This distancing from support groups is particularly interesting with regard to Susan because she recalls multiple occasions when she has used support groups for professional development, going through menopause, and advice surrounding maternity. But after every recollection, she made sure to clarify that support is not something that she has generally needed throughout her career. The dissociation of gendered hardship as a consequence of misogyny is a trait often associated with the QBP (Derks *et al.*, 2011), with affected women leaders often looking transcend the existence of gender barriers, leading to the downplaying and subsequent unintentional propagation of gender discrimination.

It is important to note that the QBP is not intended to suggest that female leaders are the cause of misogyny. Rather, it is the response of women who have been subjected to misogyny trying to survive in an environment that rewards masculinity. The phrase Queen Bee Phenomenon has been criticised as misleading, often misinterpreted to present women as the cause of their own discrimination. A more accurate term which has been proposed in recent years is 'self-group distancing' (Faniko, Ellemers and Derks, 2021), describing how members of a minority group (not just women) may seek to accentuate characteristics that distinguish them from their group, thus maximising the potential for progression. Additionally, the literature on self-group distancing does not propose that every female leader adopts those traits but that it is a possible outcome for women progressing through the ranks of a masculine-dominated organisation. In this narrative inquiry, the participants did not present data to show a binary split between self-group distancing and no distancing; instead, they were more nuanced, existing on a spectrum of the phenomenon. The researcher was unable to find any literature focusing on the study of the QBP as existing on a spectrum and would recommend that future research focus on the implications of this.

This section discussed the existence of the QBP as women's response to a discriminatory masculine environment in which they have to compete. Through the process of battling inequalities, they may themselves adopt masculine characteristics to cope with discrimination. The adoption of these masculine traits mean that masculinity continues to persist in the organisation, thus inadvertently furthering the cycle of gender discrimination.

5.3.2.5 Banter

This section analyses the nature of banter as a pervasive expression of sexism intended to disparage the women it is directed towards but presented as a non-offensive interaction.

Sexism presented as banter can be difficult to identify as it presents a false appearance of friendliness or at least denies resentment. For instance, Susan insists that in her career, she has never felt like she was being treated

differently because she is a woman. Like Harriet, she believes that unscrupulous behaviours are less tolerated now than they were in the past, and even when they were tolerated, it was not done to single her out as a woman. She says:

> If they did start any of the typical "Oh, you make the brew, you're the woman" sort of thing, then I was quite happy to joke back with them, and they quite often ended up making the brew because I would then refuse to.

Here, Susan recalls a typical case of misogyny disguised as banter where her male colleagues would jokingly assign her sexist tasks, such as making the brew because she is a woman. She insists that she did not perceive this as discriminatory because it would be her one day, and then another colleague the next day. This reframing of sexism as tolerable or not as serious is a result of normalising structural discrimination, making it harder to identify and tackle those discriminations (Landqvist, 2015). Sexist banter in the police has been established in previous research, such as in Cunningham and Ramshaw (2020), where two policewomen were nicknamed 'split arse' and 'dull tart' by their male colleagues, and one of them said she had decided to go along with it to show she had a sense of humour. On 16 May 2022, Inspector James Humphries of the Thames Valley Police, during a disagreement with a female colleague, said, "You could be menstruating right now, and I wouldn't know, would I?" On another occasion, he made a joke about male puberty and how "boys get hairy, and things get bigger", to which his female colleague laughed nervously, and he accused her of having a "dirty mind".[14] In another case of sexist banter, Sergeant Simon Smith is alleged to have asked a female PC, "When are we going on a date?" He asked her to identify her address on Google Maps and said he would visit her now that he knows where she lives.[15] And in one prolific example of sexist banter, unnamed Officer A, between September and October 2020, made a comment about Officer X suggesting that she was

[14] See Oxford inspector issued with warning after sexist comments | Oxford Mail
[15] See Sgt Simon Smith | Misconduct999

going to use a 'vibrator' when she got home; told Officer X that she liked being woken up in the morning with a 'blow job'; suggested Officer X had a 'sexy nurse outfit' at home; Having completed a 'bleep test' Officer X told Officer A that he was fit because he had 'gone on for ages', to which he replied "I can do that in bed too" or similar words; sent text messages to Officer Y suggesting she was going to use her handcuffs on her 'fella', making her feel uncomfortable; made a sexual comment to Officer Z stating "I don't like banging three birds at once, I only do twosomes" or similar words, making her feel uncomfortable; When paired with Officer Z in a domestic abuse exercise Officer A commented upon her appearance by looking her up and down and saying "Well I'm fucking punching there aren't I?", or similar words, and laughed, making her feel uncomfortable; and made a comment to Officer Z about her having "sticky fingers" and laughed, making Officer Z feel as though his comment was sexual.[16]

As seen in Susan's narrative and corroborated by Cunningham and Ramshaw (2020), one of the ways women faced with sexist banter react to it is to participate in the banter in an attempt to fit in and become 'one of the boys'. This highlights the psychological impact that sexist remarks can have on women trying to succeed in a historically male-dominated organisation.

5.3.2.6 Upward Social Comparison

Upward Social Comparison is the last theme analysed in this chapter. Here, we analyse the effect that senior women can have on other subordinate women in the organisation. The analysis reveals that when these subordinate women compare themselves to the women they see occupying leadership positions in the organisation, they may become deflated in their ambitions rather than inspired.

The problem of having fewer women climb up the ranks to organisational leadership is often believed to be solvable or at least mitigated by having women leaders who serve as role models for success. If women lower down

[16] See Officer A Misconduct Hearing | Misconduct999

the organisational ranks, have examples of more senior women to look up to, then they may be more inclined to pursue such goals for themselves. The Upward Social Comparison (USC) concept predicts that having women in leadership positions can lead to the opposite result, with subordinate female workers less likely to aspire to leadership positions when they compare themselves to senior women (Rudman *et al.*, 2010). A manifestation of this in the present research is found in Lisa's narrative when she says:

> When I look at what the senior officers do, the Chief Constables and the ACC, the depth, there's no way I would want to put myself through that pressure. I just look at the workload that they've got, I look at their diary sometimes to see if I can get like a 15-minute meeting with them. It's like pretty impossible. They are so busy; the demands on them are immense.

A part of this statement was presented earlier to show the significance of work/life balance for women, and how the potential to skew that balance may prevent career progression for them. Presented here in fuller context, it points to the existence of USC in Lisa's narrative and how it has restricted rather than enhanced her motivation to keep progressing up the leadership ladder. Although she does not specify the gender distribution of these leaders to whom she is comparing herself, it follows the same principle of diminishing one's own capabilities in comparison to a superior officer considered to have better attributes. In this instance, Lisa, without the impression of her superior officers, who appear to be working all the time and cannot even spare 15 minutes for a chat, would be more likely to go for promotion. This effect, according to Rudman et al. (2010), is further exacerbated for women when the leaders they are looking up to are also women because they are more likely to draw comparisons with them than with male superior officers.

Perhaps the prevalence of USC may provide an explanation for why Lisa and Zoe attest to experiencing a reluctance to seek promotion, a trait they both confirm is unique to and naturally occurring among women. They feel a pressure to first thoroughly impress at their current rank before attempting to progress to the next. Following the impact of USC on women, a conjecture

could be proposed that women, on perceiving the dedication of their superiors, may internalise those standards, creating a self-expectation that delays or even dissuades their ambition for promotion. Supporting this conjecture on the relationship between USC and imposter syndrome is the finding in Rudman et al. (2010) research that men do not show the same level of vulnerability to the USC as women, aligning with Lisa and Zoe's account of recognising the imposter syndrome among themselves and other policewomen, but not their male colleagues.

The consequences of USC are relevant to the current research because the rate of progression of women in male-dominated industries is often tied to the presence of women in leadership positions. The rationale for this correlation is that junior women in these organisations have an example of success that they can look up to, evidence of another woman overcoming gender barriers. This sentiment is found in Lisa's narrative when she recollects her first few years in the police. She recalls being a young police constable and seeing very little evidence of successful policewomen around her. She was the sole woman on the team and can recall only one female Sergeant who worked in custody and had only been there for a couple of years. She recounts that "representation of women in more senior ranks was quite rare" about six years into her career. This lack of representation can leave new female officers despondent to the prospect of career progression, seeing no identifiable path to success. If this mentality sets in on new recruits, then they may decide to slow or even stall their career progression. It is for this reason that feminist and equality groups advocate strongly for the representation of women and other minority groups across the leadership structure of organisations.

However, the theory of USC contradicts the assertion that having more women leaders in a historically male-dominated organisation necessitates an increase in subordinate women striving to climb the career ladder. Instead of being motivated and inspired by seeing other colleagues attain leadership positions, some women may become less inclined to follow in the path of those leaders, citing them as possessing superior qualities. This contrast in the effects of looking up to leaders as either a motivator or a demotivator is

present in the narratives of the participants in this research. The latter has already been analysed in Lisa's narrative when she discusses not wanting to progress beyond her current rank because the dedication required is simply too much. On the other hand, participants like Harriet, Zoe, and even Lisa herself, referred to the positive impact of increasing women leaders in the police. Zoe references the presence of women in command roles and the growing number of female recruits who join because the force encourages their participation, telling them, "You can do it." Similarly, Harriet narrates how it is the first time in her career that she feels women are being represented appropriately at the high levels of the organisation across different specialist departments like advanced drivers and firearms. She credits the presence of female Sergeants, Chief officers, Chief Constables, Superintendents and Chief Superintendents for her perception that there are no gender-motivated barriers against policewomen.

The juxtaposition of female leaders being motivators against female leaders causing a decline in the number of women seeking promotion as a result of Upward Social Comparison presents another dichotomy in the issue of facilitating gender equality in the workplace. This poses the pertinent question of how best to mitigate the effects of USC, whilst maximising the positive impact of female leaders as role models. In their research, Rudman et al. (2010) conclude that seeing female leaders in male-dominated organisations reduced rather than increased the self-leader associations of young adult women. Whilst optimistic that this pattern will change in future as women get more accustomed to thriving in historically male-dominated fields, they say, "At present, mere exposure to female vanguards may threaten young adult women's implicit leadership self-concept" (p. 199), thus necessitating the discovery of ways to ameliorate its influence in deciding the career trajectory of young women.

This section has analysed the theme of Upward Social Comparison and how it plays a role in directing the career path of women. Women in leadership positions are often considered to offer motivation for junior female colleagues looking to advance their own careers. However, USC suggests that women in leadership positions may sometimes serve to discourage rather than inspire

the career progression of junior women. Like Lisa, these junior women may be reluctant to pursue leadership positions if they perceive the workload of those positions to be overwhelming. In conclusion, female leaders can either motivate or discourage the career progression of subordinate women. Therefore, to promote gender equality in male-dominated environments, it is crucial to minimise the negative effects of USC while maximising the benefits of female leadership.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the organisational and women adaptational factors that contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in policing. The themes explored in this chapter are pastoral care, work/life balance, public perception, personality, physicality, the angst of imperfection, support, underplaying sexism, the queen bee phenomenon, banter, and upward social comparison.

The participants' narratives point to a double burden that exists for policewomen who often have to balance their traditional policing duties with essentialist expectations that they also perform pastoral tasks. Although the progress made in shifting the perception of vulnerable crime roles is commendable, questions arose regarding male officers now benefitting from a sector they previously avoided. The issue of banter as a pervasive and covert form of sexism was also analysed, with participants retelling stories of their experience with sexist banter, although downplaying its seriousness. Work/life balance was highlighted as a significant barrier for women, with the application of a rigid rank-based promotion system which impacts the ability of women with family responsibilities and seeking more flexible work options. Beyond the internal barriers that exist, the issue of public perception was also prevalent, with the authority of policewomen being called into question owing to public biases.

The theme of personality was also identified as playing a crucial role in how the women navigated the challenges of working in the police, with affirmations that attributes such as resilience and assertiveness are

necessary traits for success. However, the angst of imperfection creates psychological barriers that women have to overcome in order to put themselves up for leadership roles.

This chapter has discussed the Queen Bee Phenomenon and how women in senior positions may inadvertently perpetuate masculine norms, reinforcing the gender barriers that they themselves have had to overcome. Another issue highlighted is the presence of Upward Social Comparison, which creates a paradoxical situation where women police leaders may simultaneously inspire and deter junior policewomen from pursuing leadership positions. The participants highlighted the rise of support networks within the police force as a promising step in addressing the challenges that women face in their career advancement.

In summary, this chapter highlights the importance of facilitating an inclusive police force that acknowledges the unique challenges faced by policewomen as well as implements practical reforms to ensure that they are treated equitably in their journey to police leadership.

Chapter Six

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings of this study within the wider scholarship on gendered organisational cultures and women's leadership in policing. Drawing on the narratives presented in Chapter 5, it examines how women make sense of leadership within a persistently masculine institution, and how their experiences both mirror and extend patterns observed in previous research.

The discussion is organised around three inter-related overarching themes: (1) Gendered Organisational Culture and the Normalisation of Inequality; (2) Navigating the Institutional Constraints of Care and Work; (3) Intra-gender Dynamics and Identity Negotiation in Leadership. Each theme discusses the key findings, compares them with relevant literature, and identifies what the present study adds to existing knowledge.

Chapter five identified eleven interconnected themes: pastoral care, work/life balance, public perception, physicality, personality, angst of imperfection, support, underplaying sexism, the queen bee phenomenon, banter, and upward social comparison. While all of these provide insight into women's experiences of leadership and gender dynamics in policing, this discussion chapter focuses in depth on seven themes: underplaying sexism, work/life balance, pastoral care, the queen bee phenomenon, upward social comparison, physicality, and personality. This selective emphasis is both methodologically and conceptually justified, as it follows best practice in qualitative inquiry, which prioritises interpretive depth and theoretical contribution over exhaustive coverage (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2010; Riessman, 2008). The rationales that led to the selection of the seven themes draw from theoretical and analytical relevance, original contribution, avoiding redundancy and enhancing depth, and methodological precedent.

The discussion chapter is structured around the central research questions concerning how gendered cultures and leadership practices in policing

shape women's career experiences and self-perceptions. The seven themes prioritised are those that most directly illuminate the study's focus, specifically, how gendered norms are internalised, resisted, and reproduced within organisational life. Themes such as underplaying sexism, the queen bee phenomenon, and upward social comparison offer rich theoretical insight into intra-gender dynamics and the subtle reproduction of inequality. Similarly, pastoral care, physicality, personality, and work/life balance speak directly to the gendered expectations surrounding care and emotional labour in policing.

By contrast, themes such as public perception, angst of imperfection, support, and banter, while important, operate more as contextual or corroborative findings. They shed light on the broader environment but do not directly advance the central research questions. As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise in reflexive thematic analysis, researchers must engage "selectively and interpretatively" with themes that most powerfully address the research aims, rather than attempting comprehensive coverage of all patterns. In adherence to that principle, only the seven themes from the analysis chapter which have been recognised as furthering the central aim of the research will be discussed in this chapter.

The decision to concentrate on the seven core themes identified above reflects their potential for theoretical innovation. These themes reveal the complexity of how women navigate gendered expectations of leadership within a male-dominated institution. For instance, the juxtaposition of underplaying sexism and the queen bee phenomenon surfaces tensions between solidarity and self-preservation, while upward social comparison exposes internalised hierarchies of legitimacy and competence. Such insights advance understandings of "gendered organisational cultures" (Savage & Witz, 1992; Metcalfe & Dick, 2002) more effectively than themes that merely reproduce well-established narratives of overt sexism or external perception.

Furthermore, qualitative discussion chapters require depth of engagement, critical interpretation, and synthesis with the literature, rather than reiteration

of descriptive results (Maxwell, 2013). Including all eleven themes risked redundancy, as several overlapped conceptually (e.g., support and pastoral care, or banter and underplaying sexism). Prioritising seven thematically distinct yet theoretically cohesive areas allows for deeper, more nuanced engagement with existing literature and enhances analytical clarity. This approach aligns with Gale et al. (2013), who note that only themes that meaningfully contribute to the analytical narrative should be discussed at length.

It must be noted that selective thematic discussion is consistent with qualitative precedents, particularly in narrative inquiry, where interpretation prioritises stories that most powerfully illustrate the research questions. For instance, Jackson (2020) employs several stages of analysis in their thesis, which explores professional and patient experiences, identifying multiple themes from the literature and interview studies. However, the discussion and synthesis chapter focuses on the core themes such as the trajectory of release, indicators of readiness, and barriers/facilitators to release, prioritising fewer overarching themes drawn from the more extensive findings detailed in the analysis chapter. Similarly, Gray (2021) identified six themes in their thesis; however, the discussion was narrowly focused in relation to the research questions, the psychological model of resilience, and implications, thereby discussing fewer thematic categories than initially identified in the analysis chapter. Both theses, like this current one, adopt similar strategies, identifying numerous emergent themes but discussing in detail only those central to the research aims. Such selectivity reflects methodological rigour rather than omission.

This research explores the narrative realities of four senior policewomen in the England and Wales police forces: Chief Inspector Lisa, Chief Inspector Susan, Chief Inspector Harriet, and Chief Superintendent Zoe, to investigate their lived experiences as women in leadership roles within the police. By analysing these narratives, themes highlighting the presence of inequalities and gendered barriers have been extracted to illustrate how they have impacted the career projections of these four women and how they have

navigated them. The themes below are discussed in furtherance of the research aim and objectives.

6.1 Gendered Organisational Culture and the Normalisation of Inequality

Three themes are discussed in this section as highlighting the persistent gendered organisational culture which exists within the police, serving to normalise Inequality between the sexes. These themes are Underplaying Sexism, Physicality, and Personality.

Participants in this study described subtle yet persistent gendered expectations shaping what it means to be credible in policing. Most downplayed sexism, portraying exclusion as individual misunderstanding rather than institutional bias, a finding consistent with Lo and Lim's (2023) concept of "gender-blind professionalism." This strategic denial functioned as a coping mechanism that allowed women to preserve legitimacy in a culture that still equates authority with masculinity.

Expectations around physicality and personality reinforced this gendered legitimacy as participants reported that assertiveness, confidence, and stoicism remained symbolic markers of professional worth. For instance, Lisa described a persistent expectation to project confidence and control, aligning credibility with masculine-coded behaviour, mirroring Eagly and Carli's (2007) "double bind." Such narratives suggest that gendered organisational logic persists, where credibility must be negotiated through masculine-coded behaviours.

6.1.1 Underplaying Sexism

Flowing from the participants' narratives is a sense of rich individualities, each woman presenting her own unique experiences in confronting a common adversary, gender inequality. Woven together, their narratives highlight similar threads of sexism, such as gender stereotyping and bias within the organisation (e.g., assigning of "female-oriented" tasks) and from

the public (e.g., assumptions of male officers being in charge during frontline service).

Following analysis of the participants' narratives, one interesting theme that emerged was that the participants seemed motivated to downplay the existence of sexism, even when their own narrated experiences contradict that assertion. Consistently through the interviews, participants insisted that they do not feel like they have been discriminated against, despite recalling issues such as gender stereotyping of pastoral roles, flexible work difficulties for women, imposter syndrome, etc. One explanation for this is that, unlike the overt nature in which discrimination used to be practised in the past, sexist practices have evolved to be covert so that policewomen now have a hard time identifying them as sexist (Lo and Lim, 2023). So now, instead of saying a woman is not fit to do the job, a male officer may instead say she only got the role because she wore a dress (e.g., Harriet's experience).

Another explanation is that some policewomen adopt gender-blind frames when interpreting sexist or discriminatory practices (Lo and Lim, 2023). In their study, Lo and Lim (2023) discovered a dissonance between the Singapore Police Force's projection of gender neutrality and the reality of gender discrimination found in officers' reports. Even though women officers in the SPF said, "We're treated as equals" (p. 1886), and the first female SPF CID chief concurred that "there is no glass ceiling in the police" (p. 1886), it was found that policewomen in the SPF are still facing sexual harassment, gendered division of labour, and trying to navigate masculine norms (Lo and Lim, 2023). These convictions were also found in this research, with participants downplaying the existence of sexism within the police. Some examples are presented below:

> Harriet: "It doesn't really feel like there's any bars on" (i.e., gender barriers).
>
> Susan: "I don't think as a woman I've … I don't feel discriminated against."
>
> Zoe: "I don't really have any negative stories to tell you."

Although not an exhaustive list of the times that participants denied the existence of sexism within the police, it points to a clear trend in their narratives. There were also times when participants minimised sexism in the force by rationalising an excuse or justification for it. Some examples include Harriet attributing sexism to the realities of the 1980s, Susan justifying the assigning of pastoral roles to women because some vulnerable victims may prefer to speak to a woman rather than a man, and Lisa saying the reason she was denied adequate flexible work options was because her Chief Inspector was "an old dinosaur". Lisa's juxtaposition of sexism as a result of interpersonal interaction rather than a systemic one points to another form of downplaying sexism. This was also found in a study looking at discrimination in German and Swedish police forces, where one female German officer attributed her experiences of bullying to individual "stupidity and egotism" rather than institutional (Landqvist, 2015, p. 324).

Though the researcher found institutional injustice in the German police, participants attributed discrimination to everyday stress and conflicts, blaming colleagues' lack of knowledge, jealousy, and individual psychological causes (p. 325). Swedish officers did not equate discrimination with conflict, likely due to greater awareness from their training. The lack of training for police officers in England and Wales in dealing with these social issues, was highlighted in the Casey Review (2023) and by Lisa when she discusses the lack of knowledge displayed by junior managers.

When discussing rationales for dismissing the existence of persisting sexism, Stoll, Lilley, and Pinter (2016) provide four frames of gender-blind sexism, namely abstract liberalism, naturalisation, cultural sexism, and minimisation of sexism (p. 30). Applying these frames to policing, we get justifications such as: (a) Women and men have the same opportunities, women just do not choose to go into male-dominated fields like policing (abstract liberalism); (b) Women simply do not possess the physical and mental requirements of policing (naturalisation); (c) Women prefer to be school teachers than police officers because they are more interested in dealing with children than tackling crime (cultural sexism); (d) If there is any gender disparity in the

police, then it may be attributed to other factors besides sexism (minimisation of sexism).

A person looking to deny or diminish the effects of gender discrimination on a policewoman's career may adopt one or more of these arguments to support their position. These gender-blind frames, if adhered to, serve to promote the subordination of women and preserve patriarchal ideals by insisting that the marginalisation that policewomen face in the workplace is a result of factors other than gender discrimination. The consequence of accepting these arguments is that discriminatory practices become normalised and pervasive, such that they become difficult to perceive and distinguish (Landqvist, 2015).

One prominent way of downplaying sexism is to attribute sexist actions to banter (Lo and Lim, 2023). When these 'jokes' are challenged, they can lead to ostracisation and segregation from officers who feel that the female officer has overreacted to a joke. For instance, one female police officer reported a male colleague for telling her his "balls were cold" and that she should "warm them up" (Casey, 2023, p. 171) whilst they were alone on a night shift. Following her refusal to play along with his "banter", he stopped speaking to her, would shout at her in the presence of other officers, and made her sit in the back of the police car. Even though she reported his behaviour, she was told by her supervisor that it was probably just "banter" and that it "wasn't the worst thing in the world" (p. 171).

In this research, sexist comments like "she only got the job because…" or "you make the brew, you're the woman" were also spotlighted, along with numerous occasions of policewomen reporting sexist behaviour and comments. This kind of sexist disposition was evidenced in recent police misconduct trials. In one case, female officers were subjected to "a repeated pattern of inappropriate behaviour … comments with a sexual undertone as well as unwanted physical closeness/contact" by a male PC between August and October 2022.[17] Similarly, another female officer, after a social event, was "sexually touched" without consent by a male colleague and was also

[17] See Misconduct hearing for PC Horatiu Cojan | Metropolitan Police

the subject of an inappropriate comment by the same colleague that evening.[18] In July 2022, a male Police Sergeant (PS Hollis), on finding out that his female colleague, a Designated Detention Officer (DDO) who was 16 weeks pregnant, had been allowed to go home early as she was suffering from back pain, said, “You getting special treatment because you laid back like a whore.” Again on the 4th of September 2022, whilst on duty as acting custody support inspector, he sent a WhatsApp message to another female DDO saying, “I can still smell your clunge (vagina) in the back office.” These comments, presented at the time as banter, draw similarities with Harriet’s own experiences of male colleagues asserting that female officers would get a job because they wore a certain dress. Although Harriet opines in her narrative that this kind of behaviour was abandoned in the early 2000s when she experienced it, recent accounts like those presented above, and the presence of similar jokes in recent studies (Cunningham and Ramshaw, 2020, p. 33), show that policewomen still experience this kind of sexism.

Interestingly, the issue of downplaying misogyny was at the forefront of the PS Hollis case,[19] with the DDOs subjected to sexist remarks, attributing them to playful banter. The matter was reported by another sergeant who became aware of it and deemed it inappropriate. In the trial, the legal counsel from the Appropriate Authority[20] acknowledged the discrepancy of the DDO affirming she was not upset at the comment and perceived it as banter, whilst the reporting Sergeant stated he could see she was visibly upset. The counsel urged the panel to prefer the Sergeant’s testimony, arguing that it was less corrupted by personal involvement and that the DDO may be unwilling to reveal the true extent of the harm caused for fear of being seen as a “grass” (i.e., a snitch).

Avoidance of being labelled a snitch may prove to be a strong motivation against calling out sexist behaviour in the police. Two instances of this can be found in Susan’s narrative. Firstly, a few minutes into the interview, she leaves to shut her door, offering apologies because “you don’t know where

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[18] See Misconduct hearing for Special Constable Carlos Costa Coelho Correia | Metropolitan Police

[19] See *PS Hollis Outcome

[20] The Appropriate Authority is responsible for assessing how to deal with a complaint.

the conversation is going to go". It is noteworthy that this instinct is triggered only when she starts discussing gender stereotypes and how policewomen are assigned to gender roles like child care. Admittedly, on its own, this is hardly a compelling narrative to conclude a desire not to be labelled a snitch. However, about half an hour later, this motivation to not be seen as complaining resurfaces when she reveals that the only misogynistic manager she has had is a woman. Before divulging that information, she hesitates and then confirms, "It is anonymous, this isn't it?" revealing an intention not to be perceived as a snitch. This creates difficulty in dealing with misogyny because the victims of sexist remarks are often willing to attribute them to playful banter. Research shows that female officers will, over time, learn to "become desensitised to psychological risks such as inappropriate jokes or sexual teasing or tolerating harassment to maintain their careers" (Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024).

In contrast to the downplaying of sexist remarks in the PS Hollis case, the victim in the PS Ian Bargus trial[21] testified that his sexist comments and actions had a negative effect on her. He was accused of poking a female PC in the buttocks with a vape pen and making sexualised comments to her. Additionally, he was accused of making several inappropriate remarks to her, as shown in a screenshot of the trial document below, labelled Figure 2. In that case, the victim did not downplay the effects of the actions of her male colleague, and so there was no contradiction between her testimony and that of the officers who experienced the events. Consequently, the Sergeant was found liable for gross misconduct and would have been dismissed if he had not already ceased to be a member of the police force.

[21] See Former PS Ian Bargus - Chair's finding and outcome

Allegation 2

Between July and September 2020, you made inappropriate and/or sexualised comments towards PC A, as follows:

(i) On or around 1 July 2020, you asked PC A for a back massage in front of colleagues.

(ii) On or around 7 July 2020, you said words to the effect of "I know what you need. A strong experienced man like me who can give you a good time" and "So what are we going to do about this sexual tension?"

(iii) On or around 9 July 2020 you asked PC A if she had overstayed in the country. PC A mentioned she had a degree obtained in Romania. You said words to the effect that a degree obtained in Romania is equivalent to toilet paper. You then mimicked PC A's accent.

(iv) On or around 5 August 2020 you told PC A "you have lost weight" and "your ass got smaller".

(v) On or around 7 August 2020, you said to PC A "all women are the same, never happy and big mouthed" and "in a different life me and you will be a thing".

(vi) On or around 8 August 2020, you asked PC A if she shaved "down below"

(vii) On or around 2 September 2020, you said to PC A "Oh [PC A] is touching my knob", referring to the gearstick in the police car you were both sitting in at the time.

(viii) On or around 7 September 2020, you said "If I found out who it is bleeding, I will rip his head off, I will get him sacked."

Figure 2: PS Ian Bargus Police Misconduct Trial

These kinds of misconduct trials show two things: firstly, the existence of sexism within the police force and amongst colleagues continues to thrive, and secondly, as the participants in this research pointed out, it is evidence

that sexist actions and comments are now being reported and investigated more than they were in the past, signalling the organisation's intolerance to such behaviours. This sentiment was echoed by Assistant Chief Constable Tom Harding, who serves as the director of operational standards at the College of Policing.[22]

The Met Police Chief, Sir Mark Rowley, is not as optimistic about the current processes that direct misconduct trials, citing lapses in their effectiveness. He has called for the process to be reformed, giving police chiefs greater powers to dismiss rogue officers who put the image of the police in jeopardy.[23] At the moment, the decision on whether to dismiss an officer following a misconduct trial rests with the Legally Qualified Chairs (LQCs), who, the police chief says, have made the process less strict, handing out fewer dismissals, and more discriminatory, with ethnic-minority officers now twice as likely to be dismissed. He laments the inability to appeal "unduly lenient decisions" and restrictions in determining which officers are fit to serve in the force, adding, "No one running a business would accept that they had to carry on employing people who had breached their standards."[24] So, whilst the increase in misconduct trials may signal a police institution more attuned to identifying inappropriate behaviour, the process of eliminating misogynistic behaviour is still hindered by an imperfect system. In his rebuke, the police chief stresses the importance of maintaining public confidence in the police and warns that lenient decisions regarding officers' misconduct can only serve to erode that confidence.

In her narrative, Harriet shares an identical concern, noting struggles with the media in relation to maintaining positive perception and legitimacy with the public. She explains that the problem with inducing a bad public perception goes beyond just reducing public confidence, but ultimately affects the kind of personalities that the force attracts. Leniency on sexism and misogyny leads

[22] See Record 600 police officers sacked for misconduct in England and Wales | Crime News | Al Jazeera
[23] See Met Police chief Sir Mark Rowley calls on Government to give police power to sack 'rogue' officers | The Standard
[24] ibid

to sexist and misogynistic people being attracted to the police as a career path, whilst simultaneously repelling people who do not condone those vices. If officers like PS Hollis, although established to have been guilty of making sexist comments to two different female DDOs between July and September 2022, with his actions adjudged to amount to gross misconduct, get punished with a warning, then other detractors may feel emboldened by such lenient consequences.

However, there appears to be a clear progression in the police's handling of misogynistic actions and comments by its officers. This problem of addressing sexism seems to present in three stages: (1) Identifying and reporting sexism; (2) taking reports seriously; (3) applying the appropriate penalty when a guilty verdict is made. In the first stage, responsibility is shared between the police as an institution providing the structures to detect misconduct and officers reporting misconduct that they witness. Harriet and Zoe point to the Professional Standards Department (PSD) as an effective body within the police tackling misconduct by monitoring complaints, providing a confidential integrity line, and investigating claims, even ones that require covert operation. Due to a combination of these provisions and a shift in police culture, sexist behaviour is now more likely to be reported than in the past. Harriet says in contrast to 20 years ago, sexist suggestions will now frequently be called out by colleagues and reported to supervisors or the PSD in a clear display of intolerance.

The PS Hollis trial makes a strong case for Harriet's assessment, as the targets of sexism in that trial did not report the misconduct; rather, another male sergeant, who became aware of the facts from one of the victims, deemed it was inappropriate for his fellow male sergeant to have behaved in such a manner. Contrasting the evidence of good police culture in the PS Hollis trial, there are also instances where the opposite is the case, and officers fail in their duty to report their colleagues. For instance, Detective

Inspector James Senior, who worked for the Thames Valley Police, was accused of attempting to thwart an investigation into another officer.[25]

Such cases show how the police, despite making progress in eliminating sexism within the force, still face administrative, personnel, and cultural challenges. In the advancement towards a misogyny-free organisation, these challenges are bound to arise, threatening a regression on the path to the desired outcome. This observation is echoed by Lo and Lim (2023) in analysing the Singaporean Police Force, concluding that its presentation of an organisation that has progressed linearly from misogynistic to gender-equal is simply an illusion. The path to gender equality in the police force may best be envisioned as a game of Snakes and Ladders, with the ladders representing progression and the snakes representing occasional disruptions to that progress.

Zoe, Susan, and Harriet are right when they point to the increase in misconduct trials as a necessary step in rooting out offenders who do not belong in the police. It is important not just because it gets rid of the bad officers but because it also sends out a message that such behaviours will not be tolerated, impacting the attitudes of current officers and benefiting the pool of potential officers looking to come into the force. The benefits of a shifting culture where police officers are now more likely to report misconduct than in the past cannot be overstated. After all, officers who commit misconduct, if unreported or unpunished, may feel emboldened to re-offend again, perhaps an even more serious offence than before. For instance, reporting on the DI James Senior trial, court correspondent Tristan Kirk references the murder of Sarah Everard by PC Wayne Couzens, who it was revealed had been a serial flasher,[26] the same offence PS Sharma was accused of. Acknowledging the correlation of one misconduct leading to another, the PC who was assigned to investigate the flashing charge against PC Wayne Couzens was adjudged to have carried out a "lamentably poor"

[25] See Top police officer 'persuaded sex assault victim not to report crime' | The Standard
[26] See Top police officer 'persuaded sex assault victim not to report crime' | The Standard

investigation, leading to a gross misconduct finding and a ban from serving with the police in future.[27]

The second step in addressing sexist behaviour within the police is taking reports seriously. It is to this end that Met Police Chief Sir Mark Rowley points to the increase in misconduct trials, signalling that the force is taking the responsibility seriously. In the first quarter of 2024, former deputy mayor Sophie Linden asserted that the police are taking this seriously. Although conceding that not enough progress had been made, she pointed to the "substantial increase" in the number of officers suspended or banned and a "tripling of misconduct cases".[28] This line of thinking aligns with Zoe's position on the matter, recognising the bad press that comes with misconduct trials as a sign of progress towards accountability for inappropriate actions. Both Harriet and Zoe recognise the negative impact of bad press on the reputation of the police, with Harriet linking it to the perception of the police's legitimacy.

The impact of unflattering news coverage following scandals in the police should not be understated in how it affects the trust that the populace has in the force and how this influences the ability of the police to function at their maximum potential. From July 2022 to September 2023, monthly surveys were taken across nine regions in England to study the levels of public trust towards the police in England (Pickering *et al.*, 2024). Surveying over 8000 respondents, the study showed that outside of London, only 44% of women trust the police, and the figure drops to 34% when London is examined. The difference in public trust between London and outside of London is not merely a case of happenstance but can be linked to the presentations of multiple Metropolitan police officers subverting the law in recent years. This degradation in trust was highlighted in the Casey report, where it was found that public trust in the police had dropped from 89% in 2016 to 66% in 2022 (Casey, 2023). With their new finding, Pickering et al. (2024) assert that although women generally trust the police more than men, the reverse was the case in London. In providing a possible explanation for this, they explain

[27] See Wayne Couzens: Ex-Met PC in flashing case guilty of gross misconduct - BBC News
[28] See Met Police: Not enough progress after Casey review - deputy mayor - BBC News

that the criticisms often levied against the police, especially the Metropolitan police, is that officers break the law by "engaging in heinous crimes which have become occurrences that too often reach the front pages of the newspapers" (p. 748).

Although attracting negative news is an issue for every police force, the scope and frequency of the problem for the metropolitan police has led to scepticism and distrust among the British public. Whilst disagreeing with the Casey report on the extent to which public trust has deteriorated, both studies agree that the police, and specifically the Metropolitan police, are struggling with how to address fundamental problems of accountability, transparency, and trust among residents, and particularly women (Casey, 2023; Pickering *et al.*, 2024).

It is important to note that the study by Pickering et al. (2024) did not set out to analyse why women in London have less trust in the police, and so the analysis of their research does not show any direct reasons for that observation. However, to make sense of the findings, they rationalise the dependent nature of trust on context and experiences (pp. 757-758). Thus, they conclude that the problems faced by the Metropolitan police in recent years "are such that there is a monumental task ahead of rebuilding trust, particularly among women" (p. 758).

Building and maintaining public trust is crucial in addressing misogyny within the police, as officers reflect the community they serve. When groups feel unwelcome or disadvantaged, police attract fewer diverse recruits. The trust deficit, with only 44% of women (34% in London) trusting the force, further deters women from joining, worsening gender disparity. Working in tandem with the idea that better police officers will create a better police force, we may infer that a better police force also attracts better police officers.

In his commentary for The Guardian,[29] Dr Richard Carter speaks on this phenomenon of like values attracting like values. Speaking on the psychology of organisations, he references how the military tended to attract

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[29] See [Met police reform needs to start at recruitment | Metropolitan police | The Guardian]

authoritarian characters because it was authoritarian by nature. He draws this comparison with the Metropolitan police, hypothesising that the "necessarily authoritarian nature of policing" serves to attract authoritarian personalities who, in their interactions with the public, cause further deterioration of trust in the force. To this end, he suggests more attention be paid to the recruitment of police officers, focusing more on desired personality traits like empathy, which is valuable for active policing.

This observation highlights the irony in policing, showcasing a dichotomy that exists between the skills required to serve appropriately as a police officer and those required to progress through the ranks to leadership positions. Across the narratives of Harriet, Lisa, Susan, and Zoe, the expectation that women are more equipped with certain characteristics that make them more suitable for certain gendered roles is evident. This kind of stereotyping, although problematic in itself, also comes with additional challenges that have stifled the career progression of women. As Harriet points out, those kinds of jobs, often involving vulnerable victims, were not seen as a real part of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), meaning that success in those fields was harder to translate to career progression. Consequently, many male officers generally preferred to steer away from those jobs, opting instead for traditional CID roles. Ultimately, if the police are seeking to rebuild the fractured trust of women in the organisation, then it must modify its activities to address them directly, recognising that "trust is very much built on personal experiences" (Pickering *et al.*, 2024).

6.1.2 Physicality

Given the nature of policing, there is a requirement for officers, particularly front-line officers, to display a level of physical fitness that allows them to accomplish physically demanding law enforcement work (Feng, Liu and Wang, 2024). This requirement may lead detractors to propose that men are more suited to police work, with the perception being that women are, in general, physically weaker than men (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). This linkage of effective policing with physicality is essentially a linkage of good policing with

masculinity. To argue this claim, an advocate for masculinity in policing may present their syllogism thus: Police work requires physical prowess; men, on average, are physically stronger than women; therefore, police work requires men.

Although the concept of having a gendered ideal worker exists within other institutions, in policing, it is presented as an expression of manliness around which the identity of the ideal police worker is constructed (Silvestri, 2017, p. 292). This association of physicality with policing, Silvestri (2017) argues, leads to the force being a “natural preserve of men” as they identify with “physicality and a capacity for force”, leading to a differentiation between masculinity and femininity (p. 294). Ultimately, the perceived lack of physicality from policewomen has been used to rationalise their exclusion from the police force, citing the dangers they may encounter and the physically demanding tasks they will have to handle (Silvestri, 2017; Lo and Lim, 2023).

To dispel the notion of policewomen being incapable of keeping up with the physical requirements of frontline policing, Susan talks about the active role women are currently playing as a part of the Personal Safety Training (PST) team. She explains that the PST team trains officers on techniques to use in a physical confrontation in order to get control of somebody. Applying techniques that involve the use of cuffs and PAVA, the women on Susan’s PST team who are “quite small in stature” are able to take down people who are much bigger than they are. Ultimately, it is not a question of being naturally superior in physique, but rather, learning the right techniques on how to apply pressure and how to get control of an unwilling suspect. Concurring with that assessment, Zoe says the introduction of Tasers makes it even easier to deal with physical conflicts, although officers have to be careful with their employment and restrict their actions to the requirement of reasonable force.

These assertions by Zoe and Susan have a sound grounding in logic; after all, following the reasoning of advocates for physicality in policing, what happens when a policeman encounters a resisting offender who is physically

superior to him? Surely, he would have to rely on his training, skillset, and tools to help him overcome the deficit. If it is the case that policemen are expected to apprehend people who may be physically stronger than they are, then the same should be expected of policewomen.

In the Casey Review (2023), it was found that the issue of physicality was especially prominent in the Specialist Firearms Command (MO19). Given that MO19 officers are trained and entrusted with carrying firearms, it is unsurprising that the physical requirements expected are higher than those of regular policing. Zoe points out this expectation when she clarifies that although the physical requirements for joining the police force have reduced in intensity over the years, areas of policing, such as firearms, still require heightened physical fitness exams.

One male firearms officer in the aforementioned review held the view that women may “struggle sometimes with handling the weapons” due to their physical size (p. 193). The author of that review notes that his statement was not intended to question the suitability of the equipment being purchased by the MO19. By inference, he seems to be suggesting that, resulting from this unsuitability of women, they would prove inadequate for the division and, hence, should not be trusted to handle firearms. Female officers communicated that the MO19 is “a men’s department” (p. 193), with reports that on one occasion, there was a poster in the MO19 common area digitally altered “to show female firearms officers carrying mops, irons and kettles instead of weapons” (p. 194).

This perception of women as inadequate to perform the job has led to the bullying of women trialists and deliberately targeting unfavourable candidates with intense physical exercises to fatigue them and increase their chances of failing the test (Casey, 2023). Given the recent permeation of women across the divisions of the police (i.e., masculine divisions like firearms), Silvestri (2017) bemoans the fact that the assumption that these developments would make arguments for physicality obsolete has not manifested; instead, the ‘cult of personality’ persists (p. 294). As Susan narrates, she went out on jobs as a single-crewed officer with full confidence that she could do the job, and

Zoe says that when there is a need for an officer to attend to an incident, it is usually the case that the closest officer attends to it, irrespective of their gender. There seems to be a tacit acknowledgement that policewomen are very much up to the requirements of performing the job; however, when convenient, such as in the MO19 division, physicality gets used as a weapon to restrict the entry and advancement of women.

Regardless of the physical disparity between men and women, the basic premise of the syllogism that physicality is of primary importance to police work is not an uncontested truth. Two out of nine of the Peelian principles, which guide the ethics of police work, advocate for the relegation of physicality as a police response, opting instead for softer approaches. Principles four and six encourage the police:

> (4) To recognise always that the extent to which the cooperation of the public can be secured diminishes proportionately the necessity of the use of physical force and compulsion for achieving police objectives (Casey, 2023, p. 55).
>
> (6) To use physical force only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient to obtain public cooperation to an extent necessary to secure observance of law or to restore order, and to use only the minimum degree of physical force which is necessary on any particular occasion for achieving a police objective (Casey, 2023, p. 55).

These are principles that Zoe and Susan identify with as they prioritise the importance of communication and other de-escalating techniques over an officer's ability to impose their physical will. Susan, after affirming that being male and having big muscles are not necessary for dealing with people on the frontline, says it is more about having a variety of skills across officers which complement each other. Susan says in her experience, the most valuable skill to have is verbal communication because it is the first resort, even when dealing with an aggressor. It is better to first try to calm them down and then get them to comply willingly without having to use any force. She concludes that having good communication skills is far more valuable

than being physically strong (for both male and female officers) and reckons that most people will agree with that position. In her narrative, Zoe concurs with Susan that an officer's communication skills are very valuable, often leading to the resolution of most conflicts.

Non-physical skills such as verbal communication, stress management, empathy, and self-control are vital in handling conflict without the need of having to escalate to physical intervention (Zedler and Goldmann, 2024). Even when testing for physical capabilities, it is unclear that a pure distinction between men and women is the solution, as Zedler and Goldmann (2024) found that in police-specific scenarios, an officer's height was a better indicator of physical performance than their gender, as taller men and women outperformed their shorter counterparts (p. 15). With these considerations in mind, the discounting of policewomen based on their perceived physical inferiority should be an outdated approach. However, as seen in Silvestri (2017) and reaffirmed by Casey (2023), this mentality continues to persist within the police force.

6.1.3 Personality

The requirement that policewomen live up to masculine standards is not limited to physicality; they are also expected to exhibit personal characteristics reflecting masculine traits. This hegemonic masculinity sets an expectation for police officers to display characteristics such as physicality, aggressiveness, and emotional suppression (Lo and Lim, 2023). Inevitably, women looking to make it through the ranks of the police are encouraged by this pervasive expectation to adopt prescribed masculine personalities.

Given societal stereotypes of women as less committed to their work due to their responsibilities as homemakers, women looking to be in positions of power overcome this stereotype by adopting masculine traits (Goff *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, the notion that anything opposite to those standards is feminine and regarded as weak or incompetent could lead to women perceiving themselves as incompetent compared to their 'ideal' male

counterparts (Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024), further encouraging their likelihood to adopt those traits.

Harriet alludes to this when she credits her upbringing for aiding her success in the police, pointing to factors like growing up on a farm, being sporty, outdoor-oriented, very competitive, and an overall “tomboy”, all characteristics pointing to the embodiment of masculinity. This preference for masculine traits was also observed by Lo and Lim (2023) in an editorial where one female officer, in response to the prompt, “What makes a policewoman?”, says it is not a job “for the faint-hearted and the girl next door type” (p.1893).

This is one example of the expectations that policewomen have about possessing the right personality for the job. Given that policing has historically been male-dominated, the prescribed personality requirements have masculine-shaped values, which policewomen now have to live up to. The girl next door archetype is a Hollywood trope of an unassuming female, usually embodying traditional gender norms like modesty and charm and high levels of femininity.[30] So when the policewoman in the above example says policing is not for the “girl next door” type, she is essentially saying that it is not for women who embody traditional feminine traits. Also, the emphasis she makes on the “willingness to go the extra mile” is akin to Zoe’s own expectations for policewomen. Throughout her narrative, Zoe stresses the importance of making sacrifices for the police, including foregoing family time and paying for daycare. When she reflects on the sacrifices she has had to make for her job, Zoe credits her personality and her wiring to just “keep on going.” Ultimately, there is the perception of a certain type of woman who is ideal to serve as a police officer, and she possesses certain desired characteristics which differentiate her from the feminine “girl next door” archetype.

The effects of this characterisation can be far-reaching, with discriminatory actions in some instances presented as being for the benefit of women who

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[30] See Girl Next Door - TV Tropes

do not yet fit the mould. Where there is an ideal standard of the personality type that a worker should have, workers who do not live up to that ideal may be targeted in an attempt to “help them” build those characteristics. Two instances of this can be found in the Casey Review (2023), where, in one case, a female officer who reported her male colleagues for bullying and treating junior officers differently was told that the offences being reported were simply “character building” and her concerns were dismissed (p. 172). Although, in that case, the actions of the superior officers were alleged to have been motivated by racism, the excuse of “building character” for women was also found in the review. Casey (2023) recalls one such report where a female officer reports that facing hardship was like a “rite of passage”, with senior women saying that new women recruits needed this hardship to “build their character” (p.179).

In such circumstances, sexist banter and other misogynistic practices are enacted under the guise of building the character of new female recruits. Acceptance of this excuse inevitably leads to women partaking in the practice, therefore endorsing it and enabling its continuance by expecting newer recruits to go through the same experiences. This vicious cycle is also found in the QBP literature discussed above, where recruits who fail to ingrain those masculine values are looked down on by female superior officers who went through the same process. Consequently, women who do not embody the prescribed masculine attributes may consider themselves inferior to others and, thereby, unwilling to progress through the ranks. Lisa alludes to this when she says that policewomen sometimes doubt their own capabilities because their more reserved personality makes them unlikely to broadcast their achievements, leading to anxiety that they will be underappreciated.

In summary, this study extends existing understandings of gendered organisational culture (Kanter, 1977; Silvestri, 2017) by showing that women’s self-regulation, through denial, self-monitoring, and embodied discipline, actively reproduces the very hierarchies they seek to transcend. The findings also demonstrate a gradual evolution: while overt exclusion has declined, legitimacy remains contingent on performing a narrow version of

leadership. This theme reveals that equality policies cannot dismantle inequality if the symbolic association between leadership and masculinity remains intact. Gender transformation in policing, therefore, requires cultural redefinition, not just procedural reform.

6.2 Navigating the Institutional Constraints of Care and Work

Two of the themes identified in chapter five, Work/Life Balance and Pastoral Care, are discussed in this section to highlight the impact that often gender based caring responsibilities have on the progression of policewomen. Participants' accounts of maternity leave, flexible working, and informal care roles expose the tension between institutional inflexibility and gendered expectations of emotional labour.

One participant (Lisa) described returning from maternity leave to diminished roles, and others narrated experiencing slower promotion, illustrating how motherhood continues to carry professional penalties. Lisa's story typified this pattern: despite exemplary performance, her acting rank was lost during maternity leave. This aligns with Silvestri (2017) and Casey (2023), who highlight how "ideal worker" norms persist in policing. Comparison with the Fire and Rescue Service and West Yorkshire Police reveals that policy inconsistency compounds these pressures; some forces guarantee rank continuity, while others (e.g., West Midlands) do not.

Alongside structural constraints, participants also faced cultural expectations of care. Every participant was informally assigned pastoral duties or described themselves as emotional anchors within teams. While some perceived this as fulfilling and congruent with their values, others recognised it as an additional, gendered burden that limited access to operational experience.

Together, these findings illustrate what Hochschild (1983) called emotional labour, recontextualised within a police environment that valorises emotional

control. Women thus navigate conflicting imperatives: to care, but not too visibly; to balance, yet remain ever available.

6.2.1 Work/Life Balance

Across the narratives of Lisa, Susan, Zoe, and Harriet, the most important aspect to their lived experience as policewomen regarding barriers, is the work/life balance strain in the force. Manifesting in a variety of ways, such as childbirth, raising young children, never truly being off duty, lack of domestic support, etc., the participants in this study highlighted practices, often gender-neutral appearing practices, that complicate their attainment of a suitable work/life balance. Although more difficult to identify, compared to some of the overtly sexist comments and actions discussed in the previous section, it is imperative that these practices and policies are examined to show how they disproportionately affect female police officers (Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024).

In the analysis chapter, we established how the participants often found themselves stuck between prioritising their family or their work, with each participant choosing one or the other. For instance, Lisa talks about the difficulties of having to prepare for promotion exams whilst simultaneously wrestling with childcare responsibilities. She implies that this is more difficult for women than for men because women play the role of primary caregiver to the children, while the fathers play a more secondary role, culminating in policemen having more time to prepare for promotion exams than their female colleagues. This association of women as primary caregivers is an example of our social institutions ascribing gender behaviours and attitudes at the household level, subsequently affecting the whole female life cycle (Ferrant and Nowacka, 2015). When compared to their male colleagues, it has been established that policewomen suffer disproportionately from work/family conflict, stress, and burnout (Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024), factors which are sure to disadvantage policewomen looking to seek promotion.

This dichotomy of choosing between family life and work progression is analysed by Lo and Lim (2023) using Susan Martin's (1990) typology of POLICEwoman versus policeWOMAN, indicating which one of their dual identities a policewoman chooses to focus on. A POLICEwoman prioritises her job, emphasising career goals and "adherence to male police subculture", while a policeWOMAN focuses on her family life, "conforming to conventional feminine norms" (p. 1888). In their assessment, Lo and Lim (2023) adopt Rabe-Hemp's (2009) conclusion that "while female officers differentiated themselves from their male counterparts, … they do not identify with POLICEwoman or policeWOMAN", instead actively integrating both considerations (p. 1888).

The findings in this study, following an analysis of the narratives of the four participants, show a stronger alignment with Susan Martin's (1990) finding than with Lo and Lim (2023). Whilst there is constant internal negotiation between both considerations, it is clear that each woman either prioritised their work or their family life. This is best exemplified in Susan's interview when she reflects on having to decide between going for a promotion to Inspector or being present in the life of her young children. She reveals how she seriously deliberated on the impact of each decision and how she would regret not being a good mother more than she would regret a lull in her career progression.

Participants demonstrated contrasting strategies for managing work and family responsibilities, reflecting the enduring tension between professional and domestic expectations. Susan described consciously choosing to be an active parent despite available childcare support, aligning with the traditional *policeWOMAN* orientation that prioritises family and conforms to feminine norms. In contrast, Zoe viewed the sacrifices required to balance policing and motherhood as necessary for career progression, embodying the *POLICEwoman* identity focused on professional commitment. Harriet adopted a similar stance, noting that being "never truly off-duty" had become an accepted feature of police life. Collectively, these narratives reveal not individual preference but the structural rigidity of policing, which compels women to navigate mutually exclusive models of success. The institution's

inflexibility around working patterns and cultural expectations of total availability position women as the ones who must adapt, thereby reproducing inequality through the very discourse of "choice."

Perhaps having a partner in the police is the key to why, unlike Lisa and Susan, Harriet and Zoe have been able to traverse the hardships of professional and domestic life without significantly sacrificing their work. This is particularly noteworthy because Lisa and Susan agree that policewomen who have more supportive partners will find it easier. Although acknowledging that policewomen who have a partner who is also a cop will find it easier to navigate, Susan recognises that there is still more to be done for those officers. She says working opposite shifts as a police couple with young children is not so much a tactic as it is a necessity. They cannot both work the same shift because someone has to be at home overnight to look after the children.

Although a viable solution in many cases, working out alternating shift patterns is not a foolproof workaround for women. In 2024, the employment tribunal heard a dispute regarding Tube worker Nicola Jones, who had requested to take alternating Saturday shifts off to look after her child.[31] Having a young child and a husband who works every weekend as a bus driver, she told her bosses that she needed to work opposite shifts to him. Although able to avoid working on Saturdays for a period of time, she was informed by her employers in November 2020 that her flexible working arrangement could no longer continue, citing detriment to the quality of service to customers. In reaching its conclusion, the employment tribunal used the "hypothetical male" test to ascertain that there was no sex discrimination because there was no evidence to show that a hypothetical male would have been treated differently. The court concluded that the reason for the company's decision was due to a practical consideration and not because of sex. This may serve as another example of a policy appearing gender-neutral but disproportionately affecting one gender. Although true that a "hypothetical man" would not have been treated

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[31] See Saturday working not sex discrimination - tribunal - BBC News

differently, rigid working patterns affect women more than they affect men due to the increased role that women adopt in the household as primary caregivers.

Participants described how organisational expectations around time, mobility, and availability make advancement incompatible with caregiving. Lisa explained that the long hours and pressure associated with higher ranks deter many women from progressing, noting that she herself had “no intention of putting [herself] through that pressure” while raising young children. Susan similarly delayed pursuing promotion until her eldest was 14, taking roles that fit around family needs but limited career growth. Such accounts expose a system that equates commitment with constant availability and geographic mobility, standards that appear gender-neutral but disproportionately disadvantage women (Illias, Riach & Demou, 2024). There is also a persistent stigma surrounding flexible work, with those taking compressed or part-time schedules viewed as less dedicated (Casey, 2023). Recent regulatory changes, such as the five-year expiry of promotion exams, further narrow women’s options to reconcile care and career. Together, these findings highlight that women’s so-called “choices” reflect structural inflexibility and cultural stigma rather than preference, reinforcing how organisational norms reproduce inequality under the guise of meritocracy.

One fascinating revelation from Lisa’s narration is the impact that education and a genuine portrayal of the police as an organisation willing to enforce change may have on the behaviour of officers and processes within the force. She revealed that she was one month away from maternity leave when she applied for her first promotion, almost certain she would be denied due to her pregnancy and the fact she was soon going away. This apprehension was not unfounded, as women in the workplace are often portrayed as women first and workers second, alluding that the roles they play in their personal lives (e.g., wife, mother, etc.) make them less committed as workers and thus less reliable (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011).

This perception is also evidenced by Silvestri (2017), who argues that although there is no official prohibition to working part-time or taking a career

break, women who take up this option are seen as not displaying the markers of the ideal police leader. For instance, in the research by Bobbitt-Zeher (2011), one of the participants recalled how the vice president of the company had warned them about promoting women. They reveal, “He expressed the concern to me that younger women are going to have their minds on their family and their children rather than the business” (p. 772). This way of thinking about female workers as a potentially higher burden than men, with lesser commitment, may not be restricted to only male leaders. In our discussion, Zoe talks about the problem of work/life balance from the perspective of the organisation and how it is a difficult issue to traverse. She says it is difficult for the police simply by the nature of the job, although that difficulty is now exacerbated with the police “recruiting 50/50 women because they will take the maternity leave, etcetera”. This kind of rationale among leaders is the reason Lisa was convinced she would not be given the promotion. In her case, she was surprised to find out that she got the promotion, attributing the decision to the release of the McPherson report, which instigated diversity training within the police.

The effects of training officers on dealing appropriately with discrimination and diversity issues leads to positive results in how officers deal with such issues owing to their improved knowledge. This effect could manifest itself in the way that police officers interact with the public, meeting them with the required appropriate level of respect, regardless of their gender or any other socio-economic class they may belong to (Landqvist, 2015). Raising officers’ awareness of how discrimination is constructed and the interaction of perceptions of self and others combine to aid that construction can only benefit the police.

The benefits of educating officers on discrimination are not restricted to their interactions with the public but form the basis with which they interact with their colleagues too. In their research focusing on Swedish and German police officers' understanding of workplace discriminatory behaviour, Landqvist (2015) discovered that the Swedish officers had a better grasp of social structures that lead to discrimination, especially sexism. They suggest that an explanation of this is that the Swedish police officers “are relatively

well educated on such issues” (p. 327) compared to their German counterparts and are generally expected to take diversity considerations into account. Whilst it could be argued that such training simply prepares the officers to provide the correct responses when prompted, Landqvistt disagrees, pointing to the richness of the details in their personal narrations when they speak on instances of discrimination. Consequently, they conclude that “the effort to educate police in diversity issues … seems to have paid off, to some degree, at least regarding sexism” (p. 327).

Lisa talks about this lack of knowledge and experience in dealing with potentially discriminatory issues and how managers are often unprepared to deal with those problems. She details a narration of a fairness-at-work claim that she was attending to at the time of the interview. A woman who joined the police as a call taker with requirements of working certain hours, but was now finding it difficult to adjust those hours, despite her doctor’s recommendation.

Lisa criticised the police for making decisions that profoundly affect staff’s wellbeing “from a place of ignorance and inexperience.” Her reflections echo the Casey Review's (2023) findings, which reported widespread deficiencies in managerial training across the Metropolitan Police. Casey noted that many sergeants received little or no preparation for supervisory duties and that line management was viewed as a “luxury rather than an essential part of leadership.” Lisa argued that such knowledge gaps leave junior managers ill-equipped to handle complex welfare or equality issues, especially those involving officers with protected characteristics. Too often, she explained, problems are escalated to HR only after poor decisions have already caused harm. While her own seniority now enables her to manage these challenges more effectively, she observed little systemic progress in how the organisation equips managers to support a diverse workforce: “It’s slightly better than what we were, but there’s still a long way to go.” Her account underscores how the absence of structured training perpetuates a reactive, rather than preventative, approach to inclusion and wellbeing.

6.2.1.1 Maternity Leave

One of the most pertinent issues regarding work/life balance highlighted by the women in this research is the difficulty of balancing career and personal life during maternity leave. Participants in this research spoke about support groups for women who want to know more about the implications of pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, etc., and best practices on how to prepare properly. Going on maternity leave may stall the career progression of a policewoman owing to factors such as disruption in work responsibilities, reduced visibility at work, and subsequently missing promotion opportunities. It is also the case that a woman going on maternity leave may be perceived as less committed to her career than her male colleagues due to family obligations, raising concerns about her dependability (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011, p. 772).

The challenges for policewomen going through maternity or caring stages are increased by the inflexibility of their work and the lack of family-friendly policies, impacting their family plans (Illias, Riach and Demou, 2024, p. 13). This was the case with Lisa, who, on returning from maternity leave, saw an advert for a job in Child Protection which she really wanted to do. But after relaying this interest to her male Chief Inspector, he said, "Well, you'll have to come back full-time." At the time, Lisa was only working part-time jobs as she felt it was the best for her and her family, but once presented with this ultimatum, she had to return full-time because it was an opportunity she could not pass up. Lisa reflects on that moment and particularly the lack of effort from the Chief Inspector to see if there was a way to accommodate her circumstances. There was no deliberation, no thought spared to the fact that she just had a baby and might be trying to ease her way back in; it was simply an option of coming back full-time or not getting the role.

The findings of this study align closely with the Casey Review (2023), which reported that while part-time and flexible working policies are formally available in policing, their implementation remains inconsistent. Women in Casey's study described flexible working as "a lottery," dependent on who reviews each request, and identified a "disconnect" between senior leaders' public commitments and local line managers' decisions. Lisa's experience

reflects this same disjunction: her request to return part-time after maternity leave was denied by what she described as an “old-school dinosaur” Chief Inspector, revealing how individual discretion can undermine organisational policy. Yet these inconsistencies are not simply the fault of individual managers; they point to a deeper structural problem in how the police operationalise equality policies. The translation of policy into practice relies on local interpretation rather than institutional accountability, creating unequal access to flexibility and perpetuating gendered disadvantage under the guise of procedural fairness. This reflects what Acker (1990) termed the “gendered substructure” of organisations, where apparently neutral policies reproduce inequality through informal practices and discretionary interpretation.

Narratives across multiple studies, this one included, show that discretion in policy enforcement may be the primary mechanism for propagating discrimination (Acker, 1990; Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Casey, 2023). In one study, it was found that individual discretion in enforcing policy regulations was the predominant cause of discrimination, accounting for 43% to 63% of all the narratives studied (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). However, while outright discriminatory policies are present to a lesser extent, when they did appear, they concerned taking leave, “especially maternity and disability leaves” (p. 776). In their research, Bobbitt-Zeher (2011) assert that individuals with policy enforcement powers will often use policies that appear gender-neutral in ways that discriminate between men and women but present them as not being discriminatory (p. 781).

In an encapsulation of the fraught and dangerous aspects of maternity leave, Lisa narrates how the role of Temporary Inspector, which she had been occupying before she went on leave, had been given to someone else by the time she returned. Although she recognised that she was only temping in the role, the harsh reality of going back down to Sergeant meant she had essentially been punished for going away on maternity leave. The issue of maternity leave and its impact on the career progression of women is well documented across public services, where organisational structures are hierarchical, operationally demanding, and dominated by masculine norms.

A useful comparison can be made with the fire and ambulance services, which face similar challenges in supporting women to balance operational roles with maternity and family responsibilities. In the fire service, for example, recent guidance from the National Fire Chiefs Council *(NFCC, 2023)* highlights the persistent barriers faced by women returning from maternity leave, including limited options for phased return, inflexible shift systems, and the stigma of being perceived as less committed. Likewise, research by NHS Employers (2022) and Unison (2023) in the ambulance service found that women frequently experience role downgrading or redeployment to non-operational posts upon return from maternity leave, with career progression often stalling as a result.

The equivalent of supportive policy for someone like Lisa would involve the police establishing a structured return-to-work plan, such as maintaining acting or temporary rank, phased operational reintegration, and clear protections against role loss during maternity leave. These provisions mirror initiatives in the fire service, where pilot schemes now allow returning firefighters to retain rank and undergo fitness reacclimatisation programmes before fully resuming duties (NFCC, 2023).

Similar to policing, the core issue is cultural as well as procedural: women often feel they have to “prove” their commitment when they return, balancing professional identity and motherhood. The words of one participant in this study, Susan, reflect a sentiment heard throughout emergency services: “What will I regret more?” A question that sums up the gendered trade-offs women still face in male-dominated, high-intensity roles. It is worth noting that although national police regulations provide baseline maternity entitlements, force-level policies vary: for instance, West Midlands Police state that ‘posting cannot be guaranteed to be to the same role or team’, whereas West Yorkshire Police explicitly state that employees ‘have the right to return to the same role unless this is not reasonably practicable’, illustrating a geographical element in protections that may help explain why Lisa’s acting Inspector post was not preserved on her return.

It was fascinating to analyse the different strategies that each woman employed in combating the barriers associated with work/life balance, such as childbirth, planning and raising a young family, and maternity leave. Zoe advocates for making personal sacrifices; Harriet says the best way to balance work and personal life is to maximise rest/leave days. Lisa and Susan both decided to prioritize their family life, taking part-time geographical jobs which did not serve to progress their careers. Going further than personal solutions, Lisa believes that better training of managers and officers who have to make decisions that affect the personal lives of the staff should be appropriately trained in dealing with those issues. Susan suggests that police divisions be equipped with daycare centres for the benefit of police couples who can then afford to take the same shifts and spend their off-time together as a family. Most importantly, she says the biggest problem currently facing the police with regard to work/life balance and promotion for women is the inability to apply for a specific role within a rank. She explains that even whilst she was working part-time, there were roles within the higher rank that she would have been able to do, but unfortunately, to go up to a rank, the applicant has to be ready to occupy whatever role can be assigned to them in that rank.

6.2.2 Pastoral Work

The association of certain “women’s jobs” with female officers was evident across participants’ narratives. Susan explained that she became an informal specialist in sexual-offence cases simply because she was often the only woman on her team: “If a lady came in and said she’d been raped, she’d probably want to speak to a female.” Her account mirrors patterns identified elsewhere, such as in the Singapore Police Force, where female officers were historically confined to dealing with women and juveniles (Lo & Lim, 2023). While such practices are justified as victim-centred or based on women’s “natural” empathy, they reproduce a gendered division of labour that limits women’s professional mobility. Like Susan, some officers accepted these assignments as “the right thing to do,” demonstrating how internalised notions of femininity sustain occupational segregation. As Lo and Lim argue,

this acceptance constitutes a form of symbolic violence, whereby women's consent to "feminine work" masks structural inequality. In the context of England and Wales, these dynamics show that pastoral or emotional roles remain feminised, constraining women's access to operational and leadership pathways under the guise of suitability and care.

Another problem with the designation of women to those sorts of roles is that they quite often have to deal with gruesome and mentally challenging crimes. Zoe says it involved crimes like rape, distinguishing it from "the more mundane" tasks of everyday policing. Harriet provides a chilling recollection, saying officers who had young children actively avoided those departments because it involved being "exposed every day to the horrors of what actually happens". She said officers with young families simply could not cope, but "a lot of women did use to … be in those departments". This burden has historically been carried by women, impeding their ability to progress because of the dual responsibility of performing pastoral roles on top of being a police officer (Rudman et al., 2010; Ferrant and Nowacka, 2015; Winnington RN PhD and Cook RN PhD, 2021; Lo and Lim, 2023). The acceptance of "women's work" as the natural consequence of female officers being inherently more empathetic than their male colleagues only leads to women doing twice the amount of work as their male colleagues (Lo and Lim, 2023).

Unlike Lo and Lim's (2023) findings in Singapore, where female officers accepted pastoral duties as part of their "feminine competence," participants in this study largely resisted such gendered assignments. Harriet described actively avoiding roles centred on welfare or victim care, preferring "operational" functions such as surveillance and advanced driving. Zoe similarly prioritised command and firearms work, framing pastoral expectations as limiting to her professional development. Only Susan expressed partial acceptance of these roles, though even she rejected the idea that men were inherently unsuited to them. Her stance was situational rather than essentialist: she believed female victims might prefer to speak to a woman, but in other contexts she delegated pastoral care to male colleagues if they were better placed to help. This contrasts with Lo and

Lim’s (2023) findings, revealing that in England and Wales, women’s participation in “feminine work” often arises not from internalised gender ideology but from institutional assignment. Yet even resistance to these roles occurs within a framework that continues to feminise care and revere masculinity in operational work.

On the question of the proliferation of gendered roles in today’s police and the continued association of policewomen with nurturing responsibilities, the participants did not provide a consensus. Zoe is adamant there is no such thing as a man’s job or a woman’s job in the police anymore; everyone gets deployed equally to all sorts of jobs. She says the difference in perception of some jobs as “feminine” is very different now than almost three decades ago when she joined the force. Susan disagrees with this assessment, saying that gender profiling still exists in the police today. She makes this point twice in her interview, reasserting it the second time almost thirty minutes after the first, going on to clarify that it is not a complaint, simply an observation. In her narrative, Harriet did not offer up an opinion on whether she sees a tolerance for gendered roles in the current policing structure.

Research on gender role expectations suggests that women’s future participation in high-status professions may not eliminate traditional caregiving norms. Rudman et al. (2010) found that participants envisioned women becoming increasingly agentic and career-focused, yet still responsible for nurturing and domestic roles, a continuation of the “double burden” that constrains women’s advancement across industries.

This tension is evident even in sectors like higher education, where flexibility is greater but women continue to shoulder disproportionate caring responsibilities (Winnington & Cook, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, this imbalance translated into reduced research output and slower promotion rates for women academics, illustrating how structural expectations of care persist despite formal equality. The policewomen in this study described similar pressures: balancing professional ambition with caregiving responsibilities often meant delaying promotion or accepting less visible roles. As Silvestri (2017) observes, even when pastoral work is reframed as

valuable, it remains positioned at the lower end of the organisational hierarchy, reinforcing the persistent undervaluation of feminised labour.

These findings suggest that without organisational redesign that values care as a leadership skill rather than a distraction from it, women's progress in policing will remain constrained by enduring cultural scripts of gendered responsibility. In summary, this study extends the understanding of work/family interaction in policing by showing that gendered expectations of care are embedded not only in domestic settings but also in organisational arrangements. Consequently, equality initiatives that focus solely on policy entitlements overlook how everyday task allocation and cultural assumptions continue to feminise responsibility and penalise motherhood.

6.3 Intragender Dynamics and Identity Negotiation in Leadership

This section focuses on the Queen Bee Phenomenon and Upward Social Comparison as crucial factors in shaping the operational dynamics among policewomen in their pursuit of leadership responsibilities and development.

Participants' accounts revealed variation in how senior women relate to other female officers. Susan, for instance, reflected that one of her previous female managers appeared to favour male colleagues when assigning acting opportunities, describing this as "noticeable" but exceptional. She speculated that such behaviour might stem from the pressure women face in "a traditionally male-dominated industry," where adopting a "more masculine or dominant" style can function as a coping mechanism. In contrast, she emphasised that most of her female supervisors were "fantastic," noting that positive, supportive relationships were more common than adversarial ones.

This contrast supports the argument by Derks et al. (2011) that the so-called Queen Bee phenomenon is contextually rather than personally driven. Rather than a fixed identity, it reflects adaptive responses to the tension between femininity and authority in masculine organisational cultures. Susan's narrative, therefore, situates the behaviour along a spectrum of adaptation: at one end, distancing strategies that align with dominant norms;

at the other, solidarity based on a shared understanding of gendered barriers. The data suggest that women's relationships with other women in policing are not uniformly competitive or supportive, but shaped by how each negotiates legitimacy within a gendered hierarchy.

Closely linked to the QBP is the concept of Upward Social Comparison, which saw participants often measure themselves against more successful officers. Such comparisons reinforced the internalisation of masculine norms as the benchmark for success (Festinger, 1954; Lopez, 2021). Together, these dynamics reveal how identity negotiation occurs within a context of gender driven hardship, few senior women, rigid ideals of success, and a culture that rewards assimilation.

6.3.1 The Queen Bee Phenomenon

The existence of the QBP was found in the analysis of the participants' narratives, in Susan's story about a previous female manager, Zoe's expectations of subordinate policewomen, and the participants' denial of needing support. Although provoking an initial adversarial reaction by suggesting that women leaders may serve to perpetuate discrimination, it is important to recognise that this is the consequence of progressing through a system of gender subjugation rather than the result of innate feminine traits (Derks *et al.*, 2011; Goff *et al.*, 2024).

In her interview, Susan recalls how the only time she has felt that a manager was not giving her adequate support and progression opportunities was when she had a female manager. On reflection, she wonders if, as a consequence of having to struggle through a male-dominated industry, some women leaders "feel they have to become more aggressive … masculine … or more dominant" to survive and redirect the effects of those characteristics towards other women. This analysis by Susan is established in the literature of the QBP, showing that women who climb the ranks of leadership in a gender-discriminative workplace tend to perpetuate that environment instead of fighting against it (Derks *et al.*, 2011; da Rocha Grangeiro *et al.*, 2024; Goff

et al., 2024). Like Susan's female manager, women leaders who exhibit characteristics of the QBP are less likely to associate with their female subordinates, judge them more critically than their male peers, and generally provide fewer opportunities and assistance to them (Goff *et al.*, 2024). One female police officer was advised by her female Inspector not to apply for promotion (Casey, 2023) because "[She] was too nice. [she] wasn't suitable for the high potential development scheme, and it wouldn't make [her] happy. It wasn't compatible with home life and having a family" (p. 265).

The Queen Bee Phenomenon (QBP) has been documented across professions where women navigate gendered hierarchies in pursuit of leadership. Da Rocha Grangeiro et al. (2024) identify three main explanations for the behaviour: (1) adaptation to masculine, competitive environments as a means of self-preservation; (2) internalisation of masculine norms that devalue femininity; and (3) defensive competition among women in contexts of scarcity. Most research suggests that the first two explanations predominate. Similar patterns have been observed in creative industries, where women in senior positions may exhibit exclusionary behaviour as a strategy to secure limited opportunities (Stoddart, 2021). This reflects the broader cultural conditioning identified by Sydney Sweeney in 2024: women are taught that "only one woman can be at the top." In this study, Susan's experience of a female manager who favoured men aligns with the first explanation. Rather than attributing the behaviour to personal rivalry, she viewed it as a coping mechanism shaped by a masculine police culture. This interpretation reframes the QBP as an organisational, not individual, phenomenon, emerging from women's efforts to survive and succeed within institutions that continue to equate authority with masculinity.

Zoe's narrative may also display some evidence of the first driving force of the QBP when she discusses being operationally credible. Although not sharing the same particularities as in Susan's case, the researcher highlighted and interpreted one instance as possible evidence of this. Zoe acknowledges that policewomen doing pastoral jobs was the norm when she first started, suggesting that this was bad for their growth potential through

the ranks. She says that now women are allowed to serve in any role, the same as men, it is important to be operationally credible, which means putting yourself out of your comfort zone. She says showing operational credibility is key for career progression in the police, which is why many different people [are] going up (i.e., women not being restricted to pastoral roles anymore). To create opportunities for herself, Zoe has maintained, like Harriet in the following paragraphs, operational credibility in traditionally masculine performative roles (i.e., firearms, public order, and major incidents). In this regard, she meets the elements of the first driving force by experiencing the discrimination of a masculine environment and consequently undertaking those traditionally perceived masculine roles to better improve her career opportunities. This supports the literature that gender discrimination in the workplace causes women to adopt Queen Bee characteristics in order to thrive.

The second driving force of the QBP arises when women try to dissociate from stigmatised feminine stereotypes and adopt more masculine ones (da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2024). Because the culture of the workplace presents stereotyped feminine traits as inferior, Queen Bee (QB) women begin to distance themselves from the group portrayed to exhibit those traits (i.e., other women). When discussing the tendency for policewomen to be assigned pastoral roles, Harriet reveals how she herself was consciously resistant to taking up such roles, instead opting for more “proactive policing” jobs.

Harriet’s experience reveals evidence of the in-group distancing phenomenon where women try to distance themselves from other women, one of the attributes of the QBP (Derks *et al.*, 2011). Owing to the traditional view of an agentic leader possessing traditionally held masculine traits (i.e., performative) instead of female leadership traits (i.e., empathy, communal, etc.), the perception of a leader with agency becomes de-feminised, causing women leaders to “perceive their own group as being low status” (da Rocha Grangeiro *et al.*, 2024). In Harriet’s case, in an attempt to not be grouped with the other policewomen doing pastoral jobs, she elected to “do what

everybody else (i.e., male police officers) was doing”, taking performative jobs like surveillance, advanced driving, and drug work.

A defining feature of the Queen Bee Phenomenon (QBP) is the tendency for women who have endured gendered barriers to expect similar sacrifices from their female subordinates (Derks et al., 2011). Zoe’s narrative reflects this dynamic. She described working alternating shifts with her partner for five years without shared days off, calling it “the personal commitment [she would] give to the organisation.” She emphasised personal responsibility, “pay for childcare because I have”, revealing an expectation that others should demonstrate the same endurance. Such views exemplify how women leaders, shaped by institutional inflexibility, can internalise the logic of sacrifice and measure commitment against their own hardships. Rather than stemming from hostility, this response represents adaptation to an organisation that equates dedication with self-denial (da Rocha Grangeiro et al., 2024).

In contrast, Lisa’s narrated experience produced solidarity rather than distancing. Having once been forced to return full-time after maternity leave, she now uses her knowledge of flexible-working policies to support junior women facing similar challenges. Her actions align with Derks et al.’s (2011) finding that women with strong gender identification are more motivated to improve opportunities for others. Together, these accounts illustrate two structural outcomes of the same inequality: one fosters reproduction of the status quo through internalised endurance, the other generates resistance through empathy and advocacy.

One of the major drawbacks of the QBP is that when women occupying leadership positions deny the existence of gender bias within the organisation, they implicitly legitimise the low-standard roles that women occupy (Derks *et al.*, 2011). For instance, in her interview, Harriet says she feels like women are well represented in the higher levels of the police, and it does not feel like there are any barriers to getting opportunities; you simply have to be the best candidate on the day of the interview.

Zoe reflected that while there "used to be a boys' club" in her constabulary, she believed this was no longer the case, though she acknowledged uncertainty about whether the same applied elsewhere. Her perception of progress contrasts with broader evidence: recent testimonies still describe policing as "a closed club" in which advancement depends on informal networks and preferential treatment (Casey, 2023, p. 266). In this study, both Lisa and Susan also expressed frustration with promotion processes shaped by inflexible working conditions and self-doubt, suggesting that structural barriers persist even as overt sexism appears to recede.

These tensions underpin the endurance of the Queen Bee Phenomenon. As long as gendered norms continue to shape perceptions of competence and commitment, women's responses will range from adaptation to resistance (Derks et al., 2011). The present study extends existing theory by showing that the QBP operates not as a binary state but along a spectrum. Participants occupied different positions depending on their experiences and coping strategies: Lisa exhibited solidarity and advocacy, Susan mixed empathy with caution, while Harriet and Zoe more closely aligned with masculine norms and in-group distancing. Supporting da Rocha Grangeiro et al.'s (2024) call for further qualitative research, these findings highlight how women's navigation of organisational masculinity produces diverse, context-dependent expressions of the QBP rather than fixed personality types. This spectrum of adaptation and resistance provides the foundation for the next discussion, where women's internalised comparisons to male and female peers further illuminate how gendered leadership identities are negotiated in policing.

6.3.2 Ameliorating the Impact of Upward Social Comparison

In the analysis chapter, the story of Lisa was presented as a manifestation of the Upward Social Comparison (USC). Upward social comparison refers to instances where an individual compares themselves against another individual perceived as superior in certain aspects (Rudman *et al.*, 2010).

USC can have both positive and negative impacts on the individual so that they are either motivated or deflated by the outcome of such comparisons (Collins, 1996; Rudman *et al.*, 2010; Wang, *et al.,* 2017). In cases where it leads to motivation, such a practice may inspire the individual to set higher goals to meet the achievements of the superior person.

However, while USC can be motivating, it may also lead to feelings of inadequacy if the observer perceives a significant gap between themselves and the person being compared (Morse, 1970; Vogel *et al.,* 2014). This latter effect was the case for Lisa, who, after considering the requirements of her superiors' rank, decided she could not offer the same level of "commitment". The impact of such an outcome can be devastating, with loss of self-esteem and deflation, which, in the case of Lisa, resulted in her deciding not to seek further promotion. The effects of USC are exacerbated by the levels of similarity between the two individuals (Festinger, 1954), which, in the case of this research, shows that women in the workplace are more impacted by the outcome of USC when the object of such comparison is another female leader (Rudman *et al.*, 2010).

The fragile dual nature of the USC as promoting both positive and negative impacts on women can be witnessed in Lisa's narrative. She says policewomen who she has spoken to often convey the same lack of confidence in their own abilities, not thinking themselves good enough to go for promotion.

On reflection, Lisa says that while delaying promotion allowed her to balance family life, it also meant watching colleagues progress more quickly, a reminder of the complex effects of upward social comparison. Observing peers succeed gave her "self-confidence" that she, too, could advance, illustrating USC's potential to motivate. Yet when she compared herself with senior leaders, Chief Constables and Assistant Chief Constables, the effect reversed, producing doubt rather than ambition. This mirrors Rudman et al.'s (2010) findings that female subordinates may experience diminished confidence when comparing themselves to women who have succeeded in masculine domains, while men remain unaffected. In policing, this

phenomenon reflects the organisation's gendered structure, where women's advancement is still perceived as exceptional rather than normative. Such hierarchies magnify the psychological distance between female leaders and junior women, turning potential role models into unintentional reminders of the risks of ambition. Lisa's experience, therefore, illustrates that USC in policing can both empower and discourage, depending on how visible and attainable women's success appears within a masculine occupational culture.

The heightened self-scrutiny experienced by women in masculine organisations reflects both the scarcity of female leaders and the double standard that governs their evaluation. Lisa and Zoe associated this with imposter syndrome, observing that women were more hesitant than men to publicise achievements or pursue promotion. Zoe acknowledged the perception that women "don't put their hand above the parapet," explaining that she would only apply for advancement if she felt completely competent, whereas male colleagues often went for promotion "to give it a go." This illustrates how upward social comparison, when directed at highly visible female leaders, can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and heighten the need for perfection. As Megan Rapinoe observed of women in elite sport, "The expectation is perfection"[32], a sentiment equally applicable to policing. For women officers, progress often depends on proving worth beyond doubt, while men's competence is presumed. Such unequal standards perpetuate hesitation and self-doubt, prompting some women to stall their advancement or redirect ambitions toward "safer," feminised roles. Rudman et al. (2010) argue that this dynamic may lessen as more women enter and normalise these spaces, but for now, the psychological cost of visibility remains a defining feature of women's leadership journeys in policing.

However, whilst USC remains a problem for women in historically male-dominated organisations, it is pertinent to identify practices which may mitigate its impact. The first factor is the availability of mentorship, with women who form these vanguards serving as genuine role models. When

[32] See 'We have a different standard for women' - Megan Rapinoe warns USWNT will be 'torn apart' if they don't achieve 'perfection' as she weighs in on Olympics gold medal bid under Emma Hayes | Goal.com

successful women serve as role models for young women, it is expected that this heightens their leadership self-concept, giving them the confidence to strive towards attaining their own success (Rudman *et al.*, 2010). For instance, in the previously cited Hollywood case,[33] a representative of the actor said what was sad about the situation was that a woman in her position had a unique opportunity to share her experience and expertise but instead chose to denigrate her. Given that women leaders in Hollywood are in the minority, it is of vital importance that the women who are successful endeavour to guide younger women through the challenges of the organisation. In their research on female writers, Stoddart (2021) found that most female writers in the industry had male role models and mentors, illustrating the lack of female representation at the top of that organisation. The impact of an abundance of successful female writers serving as role models for younger female writers would unlock the benefits of positive USC.

In finding solutions to the problem of USC backfiring when young women are presented with successful women in atypical gender roles, Rudman et al. (2010) suggest the use of deception to maintain a high level of confidence. They note that the negative effects of upward social comparison can be mitigated when women receive affirming feedback about their own competence. In experimental studies, women who were told they performed well on managerial aptitude tests maintained higher self-efficacy despite exposure to successful female role models (Parks-Stamm et al., 2008). While such artificial feedback may not be transferable to real workplaces, it highlights the value of self-affirmation in counteracting the confidence gap. Lisa's account provides a practical parallel: she described a network of women who regularly discuss imposter syndrome and reassure each other of their capabilities. These conversations foster a sense of belonging and shared confidence, reducing the isolating effects of comparison. In this context, collective affirmation operates as a natural, ethical alternative to the experimental interventions described by Rudman et al. (2010), suggesting

[33] See Sydney Sweeney: 'Women empowering other women in Hollywood is fake' - BBC News

that structured peer-support mechanisms could serve as a practical means of buffering women in policing against the demotivating effects of USC.

6.4 Summary

Across the three overarching themes discussed in this chapter, the findings reveal a policing culture where progress toward gender equality remains partial and uneven. Women's leadership experiences continue to be shaped by masculine ideals, organisational rigidity, and identity negotiation within constrained opportunity structures. Empirically, the discussion contributes to insight into how women leaders navigate the contemporary policing environment in England and Wales. Theoretically, it advances concepts such as strategic denial of discrimination, emotional labour and leadership, the Queen Bee Spectrum, and Upward Social Comparison. It also contributes to practical implications for national policy coherence, leadership training, and organisational culture change.

These insights demonstrate that gender inequality in policing is not the product of individual bias alone but of enduring cultural norms and fragmented institutional arrangements.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of four senior policewomen, Lisa, Harriet, Zoe, and Susan, to understand how gender inequality is perceived, navigated, and reproduced within policing in England and Wales. Using a narrative-inquiry approach, it examined how the participants' stories reflected the gendered structures and cultures of policing, the strategies they adopted to overcome barriers, and the implications of those strategies for women's leadership. Three objectives guided the research:

1. To analyse how participants perceive gender inequality within policing;
2. To examine how they manage gendered obstacles encountered in their careers; and
3. To assess how these strategies influence their professional progression.

This chapter synthesises the findings in relation to these objectives, presents the study's empirical, theoretical, and practical contributions, and identifies implications for policy and future research.

7.1 Key Findings

The participants' narratives reveal policing as a profession in transition: overt sexism has declined, yet deeply embedded structures and cultural norms continue to shape women's experiences. Their stories demonstrate how women leaders in policing must continually negotiate credibility, authenticity, and belonging within an organisation historically defined by masculine ideals. The findings cluster around three interrelated meta-themes.

7.1.1 Gendered Organisational Culture and the Normalisation of Inequality

All participants recalled experiences of gender stereotyping and bias in their policing careers. Women were still disproportionately directed toward what were described as "female-oriented" or pastoral tasks, while operational and

specialist roles retained masculine prestige. Susan's early experience of being the default officer to handle sexual-offence cases simply because she was female exemplifies this gendered allocation of labour. Harriet actively resisted such stereotyping by pursuing advanced-driving and surveillance roles, demonstrating agency but also revealing that the burden of resistance falls on individual women rather than on institutional reform.

The participants acknowledged progress: uniform policies have modernised, overt sexism is less tolerated, and diversity initiatives are more visible. Yet they also agreed that these advances mask persistent cultural barriers. Lisa described progress as partial, "better than before, but still a long way to go." This echoes findings across policing reviews that equality policies coexist with informal norms that reproduce gender hierarchy (HMICFRS, 2022; Lo & Lim, 2023). The result is an organisation that aspires to inclusion while sustaining practices that privilege traditionally masculine traits such as physical toughness, assertiveness, and constant availability.

7.1.2 Navigating the Institutional Constraints of Care and Work

Work/Life balance emerged as one of the most significant challenges that was identified throughout the data analysis. The participants' experiences illustrate that caring responsibilities remain primarily women's burdens and are poorly accommodated by police structures. Although national guidance promotes flexible working, implementation varies widely between forces. Lisa recounted that upon returning from maternity leave, her temporary inspector role had been reassigned, and she was required to resume full-time work to enter the role she wanted. Such experiences reveal how flexibility depends on managerial discretion rather than clear policy enforcement.

Susan similarly delayed her promotion for 14 years while raising her children, accepting roles based on geographic convenience rather than career advancement. Zoe and Harriet adopted opposite tactics, continuing to work full-time through alternating shifts with police officer partners. Their willingness to "make it work" highlights how women internalise responsibility for reconciling institutional inflexibility with family life. Across all cases, the

organisation's structural rigidity created a false binary between professional ambition and motherhood.

Participants also noted that flexible working carries stigma: officers who compress hours are perceived as less committed, fostering guilt and exclusion. This aligns with wider research showing that gender-neutral flexibility policies can reproduce inequality when career advancement remains tied to constant visibility and availability (Charman and Tyson, 2024). Collectively, these accounts expose how policing's 24/7 operational demands conflict with caring responsibilities, deterring many capable women from promotion.

7.1.3 Intragender Dynamics and Identity Negotiation in Leadership

A central contribution of this research is its illumination of the complex intragender dynamics shaping women's leadership identities. Manifestations of the Queen Bee Phenomenon (QBP) did not appear as binary categories but rather along a continuum of adaptation, a Queen Bee Spectrum. Zoe most strongly internalised masculine norms, valuing sacrifice, endurance, and individual responsibility. Lisa, by contrast, exemplified collaborative leadership grounded in empathy and mentorship. Susan and Harriet occupied intermediate positions, recognising structural inequality yet sometimes underplaying sexism or adopting masculine behaviours to fit dominant expectations. These findings refine Derks et al.'s (2011) model of the QBP by demonstrating that women's responses to gendered environments are fluid, context-dependent, and shaped by personal histories. Rather than pathology, these behaviours represent adaptive strategies for survival within male-dominated hierarchies.

Imposter syndrome and upward social comparison (USC) further shaped participants' confidence and ambition. Lisa reported that comparing herself with peers who advanced faster initially inspired her, but comparing herself with senior leaders produced self-doubt. Rudman et al. (2010) similarly found that successful women in masculine domains can unintentionally undermine other women's confidence by symbolising unattainable perfection. In policing,

where female leaders remain scarce, this effect was evident. However, Lisa's account of mutual support networks shows that self-affirmation and collective reassurance can counteract the negative effects of USC without resorting to the deceptive "feedback" methods suggested by Rudman et al. (2010). Such peer affirmation transforms comparison into collaboration and highlights women's agency in fostering inclusive cultures from below.

7.2 Contribution to Knowledge

7.2.1 Empirical Contribution

This study provides one of the few narrative examinations of senior policewomen's experiences in England and Wales conducted in the aftermath of major institutional reviews of policing culture. Capturing first-hand accounts from officers who have navigated leadership pathways exposes the persistent contradictions between policy rhetoric and lived reality. The data illuminate how individual women experience equality policies not as guarantees of fairness but as frameworks mediated by managerial discretion and informal culture. The identification of the Queen Bee Spectrum offers an original conceptual lens through which to understand women's varied adaptive strategies within male-dominated organisations.

7.2.2 Theoretical Contribution

The research advances theories of gendered organisations (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1990) by integrating sociopsychological constructs such as imposter syndrome, USC, and the QBP into an organisational cultural analysis. Using narrative inquiry enabled the study to capture how identity, emotion, and structure intersect in shaping women's careers. It demonstrates that gender inequality in policing is reproduced not only through overt discrimination but through everyday interactions that naturalise masculine norms of leadership and success.

The Queen Bee Spectrum reframes in-group distancing as a dynamic continuum influenced by institutional context and personal coping mechanisms. This conceptualisation encourages future research to move

beyond binary labels of “supportive” versus “unsupportive” female leaders, focusing instead on how organisational conditions elicit different adaptive responses.

7.3 Recommendations for Practice

This research analysed participants’ narratives alongside existing literature and proposes six targeted reforms to address gender inequality within the police service. These recommendations aim to build on current organisational practices and policies, and on the wider reform agenda highlighted by recent reviews such as the Casey Review (2023) and the HMICFRS (2022) report on police culture.

The first recommendation is that police forces invest in regular training for supervisors and line managers to recognise, prevent, and manage issues related to gender discrimination and flexible working requests. Lisa’s narrative illustrated how her supervisor’s lack of understanding created barriers when she requested flexible working, and later, when she supported women under her supervision facing similar challenges. Embedding such training into existing leadership and equality programmes would strengthen consistency and accountability, complementing the College of Policing's current guidance on inclusive leadership.

The second recommendation is for police forces to review how flexible and part-time work policies are applied in practice, ensuring they do not disadvantage women’s career progression. The narratives of Lisa, Susan, Zoe, and Harriet all revealed how flexible work often stalled advancement or demanded personal sacrifices. A structured monitoring system, supported by HR data and internal audits, could ensure fairness and transparency in promotion and deployment decisions affecting flexible workers.

The third recommendation, drawn from Susan’s experience, is to introduce greater flexibility within promotion processes, allowing officers to express interest in specific roles within a rank rather than being expected to accept any posting. This approach would better accommodate officers with caring responsibilities without compromising organisational needs. Such a system

could be trialled through pilot schemes or internal mobility frameworks, similar to those already adopted by some forces to improve workforce retention.

The fourth recommendation addresses maternity leave and return-to-work practices. Lisa's experience of returning to find her temporary position removed reflects a broader problem identified in national reviews. Forces should ensure that women returning from maternity leave are not disadvantaged in terms of role allocation or career progression. Practical measures could include structured re-induction programmes, mentoring support, and clear guidelines to protect temporary posts during maternity leave.

The fifth recommendation is to reduce reliance on individual discretion in implementing equality-related policies. Lisa's experience of being compelled to return to full-time work due to her Chief Inspector's personal discretion highlights this problem. Mechanisms such as oversight panels, HR checks, or standardised approval frameworks could safeguard against inconsistent application and ensure that equality policies are applied fairly across units and divisions.

Finally, this research recommends that police forces explore practical childcare support options for officers with young children. While in-house daycare facilities, as suggested by Susan, may be impractical given budget and operational constraints, forces could partner with local childcare providers, offer childcare vouchers or subsidies, or create shift coordination tools for police couples and single parents. Such measures would promote retention and reduce the career penalties associated with parenthood, particularly for women.

7.4 Limitations of the Study

Although the study provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of policewomen in the England and Wales police force, there are two primary

limitations. One limitation lies in its generalisability. Since the research was based on the experiences of four women, the findings cannot be assumed to represent the lived experiences of all policewomen.

Another limitation of this research is the potential for self-selection bias. Given that participants self-selected to participate by expressing their willingness to do so, there is a potential for bias in that their opinions on the subject may differ significantly from those of policewomen who do not sign up for such studies.

7.5 Future Research

This research revealed not only answers but also questions that require further investigation by future research. Firstly, the researcher encourages further exploration of the lived experiences of women in the police, as every original story is unique in its relevance and self-sufficient in its value.

Three topics have been identified as needing further interrogation beyond the scope of this study. The first revolves around the make-up of the participants involved in the current research. During analysis of the transcripts and during the interview itself, the researcher noticed that Zoe (i.e., the Chief Superintendent) situated herself differently from the others (i.e., Chief Inspectors) when discussing issues of inequality such as work/life balance. While the others spoke of a resolution in terms of what the police had to do for women like them, Zoe situated herself as part of the police mechanism that had to take on that responsibility. This may point to the fact that there is a hierarchy in regard to how women leaders interact with gender discrimination. As this research only had one Chief Superintendent to interview, no conclusive comment could be made on this issue. Future research should look into how and if women occupying different leadership ranks within the police experience gender discrimination differently as a result of their rank.

One interesting discovery was the coincidence between policemen taking up roles involving pastoral duties and vulnerable crimes and these roles being

considered prestigious. Future research may investigate the causal relationship between the presence of men in certain departments and the levels of prestige accorded to those departments.

Finally, the researcher suggests that more investigation be done to determine the effects of the QBP on a spectrum rather than a binary reality.

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APPENDIX A - LINKEDIN INVITATION

LinkedIn Invitation

Hello (Name and rank of potential participant),

My name is Young Uwazuruike, and I am a PhD student at the University of Central Lancashire. I am conducting research into the lived experiences of women leaders in the England and Wales police force for my PhD thesis. I have identified your profile as meeting the requirements for participation, and I was wondering if you would be willing to take part in the study.

The research is a narrative inquiry, which simply requires you to talk about your experiences and stories as a woman in the police force. The identity of participants is pseudonymized so that they cannot be identified from reading the results of the study.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this study by replying to this message, or alternatively by sending an email to yuwazuruike1@uclan.ac.uk.

Kind regards,

Young Uwazuruike.

APPENDIX B - EMAIL INVITATION

Dear (Name of organisation),

My name is Young Uwazuruike. I am a doctoral student at the University of Central Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise. I am kindly requesting that you share this invitation email with members of the (Organisation) to participate in a research study I am conducting titled: A Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Women in Leadership Positions in the Police Force of England and Wales. The purpose of this study is to collate stories from female police leaders (holding ranks of chief inspector and above) about their experiences working within the police.

Participation is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time. Data collected will be pseudonymised, which means that personal information will be managed to disable participant identification (e.g., information such as name or other identifying features will not be disclosed).

To participate in this study, please read the Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet attached to this email. To participate, simply reply to this email (YUwazuruike1@uclan.ac.uk) stating your interest and attach a copy of the completed consent form. To complete the consent form, simply tick all the boxes showing that you agree with the statements, and fill in your name, date, and signature at the end.

Participants in this study will be playing a vital role in assisting social change and developing our understanding of the unique challenges women face in the workplace.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Young Uwazuruike

Doctoral Student

University of Central Lancashire

APPENDIX C - INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview type: Unstructured, narrative-based

Introduction

- Thank the participant for taking part.
- Explain the purpose of the research.
- Reassure participant of confidentiality and anonymity.
- Remind participant they can take a break or withdraw at any time.
- Explain format of the interview (run time: approximately 60 minutes; nature of unstructured interview).
- Obtain permission to record the interview.

Interview

<u>Opening Prompts:</u>

- Tell me about your journey to becoming a police officer.
- Tell me about your career as a police officer.

<u>Potential Probing Prompts (Used Flexibly):</u>

- What motivated you to join the police?
- What has been your experience of career progression?
- What has been your experience with leaders in your organisation?
- Can you share any moments where you felt supported or, conversely, marginalised?
- What challenges have you faced in advancing your career?
- Are there times when you have felt that your gender was serving as a barrier?
- What changes do you think are needed to improve gender equality in policing?
- Are you familiar with the Casey Report, and what did you make of it?

Closing

- Invite the participant to add anything they feel is important but has yet to be explored.
- Thank them for their time and openness.
- Reiterate how data will be used and stored securely.