

Women police officers may lose equality gains with the current police reform programme

Jennifer Brown and **Daniel Bear** argue that cuts to the police budget may have unintended consequences for women in destroying many of the gains that have been made for gender equality.

The government's 20 per cent reduction in the policing budget raises many concerns, but few people have acknowledged that women in policing will most likely suffer disproportionately due to the recommendations of the recently released Winsor Report. Combined with the probable rejection by MPs of Mr Winsor's ascension to the head of the Inspectorate of Policing, its time to thoroughly examine this overlooked impact of the proposed changes to policing.

The sex discrimination and equal pay statutes of 35 years ago provided the legal apparatus to develop a police service that properly included women, although it was still some time before flexible shift patterns and working practices were introduced. These were designed to match workload demands but had the unintended consequences of opening up the profession to women. Where previously rigid shift structures had blocked women who too often had to juggle work and domestic caring responsibilities, the new 'Ottawa Scheme' paved the way for the service to accommodate individual needs. Even then it took a further decade for the service to finally begin offering flexible working arrangements such as part time work, job shares and career breaks. Since then, there has been a steady increase in the number of women officers and for those serving to reach the highest rank, chief constable.

But just as the struggles of ensuring equality in policing are beginning to fade and young women entering the service have little knowledge of the battles their older women colleagues fought, the raft of proposals in [the Winsor II report](#) and the government's 20 per cent across-the-board cut in its police budget may create a new set of unintended consequences and destroy those gains. In 2011, for the first time the absolute numbers of women dropped by 500, and this may be just the beginning of a receding trend. Winsor II will prompt pay differentials in terms of types of duties, qualifications obtained and value of an officer's annual contribution assessable during appraisals. Will this presage an end or even reversal of the progress made by women?



One in ten serving women police officers responded to a survey conducted this month on behalf of the Police Federation and the Independent Commission into the Future of Policing. We discovered that some 20 per cent work part time, nearly identical to the 19 per cent found in the general working population. Two thirds of police women have caring responsibilities, of not only children but also for aging parents or other dependents. This is a workforce that needs flexibility in managing a work life balance to fit together the demands of a tough job, domestic responsibilities, the aspiration to advance ones career and oh, having a life as well.

While there have been significant strides made for women getting into and getting on in policing there are still several layers that inhibit many women from penetrating the organisation beyond roles as constables working in investigation or uniform patrol. There are still too few women working in areas of policing specialism such as firearms, which will attract additional payments under the Winsor proposals.

Three quarters of the survey respondents are partnered and one in five has primary care responsibilities. Most work a shift rota comprising early, late or night turns. Nearly half say that changes in shift patterns

would cause them difficulties with their domestic arrangements and one in four say that they would experience pressures on domestic life if responding to on call duties. Women in the survey explained that given the myriad of demands from work and home, their limited available time makes studying for additional qualifications outside work difficult. In fact, about 60 per cent reported that their HR departments were unsupportive of their efforts to work a flexible schedule, and 82 per cent thought that the future would bring even more inflexibility to policing.

Overall, women officers are worried about the financial implications arising from Tom Winsor's recommendations about changing pay and conditions of the police. Pregnant officers, or those recently returned from giving birth are especially at risk since often the in-force risk assessments are unsatisfactory and arrangements for breast feeding non-existent. The potential resilience of the organisation to move officers on recuperative or restricted duties will be limited with the proposals to privatise backroom functions, something women officers are especially worried about. Interestingly, the women were less concerned about the prospect of annual fitness testing, another of Tom Winsor's recommendations, so it may be the out-of-condition blokes who will need to get on their exercise bikes.

Over 2/3 of women want to pursue a higher rank, but the growing inflexibility of the organisation, and the potential pay gap that may emerge from the Winsor proposals, will undoubtedly hamper that career development. This is possibly why three quarters of the women surveyed are pessimistic about the future of the police service in England and Wales. Even under in the current regime despite these aspirations, over half the women were dissatisfied with the career mentoring they received or their promotion opportunities. About 40 per cent found it difficult to transfer into specialist departments such as dog handling or firearms, the very units that will be rewarded under Winsor's proposals.

What this survey is suggesting is that despite some 35 years since sex discrimination legislation, some women in the police service are still facing difficulties in managing the demands of the job and home life, and there still appears to be organisational resistance to embracing flexible working. Certainly for some women, they feel their career aspirations are not being supported. The numbers of women, as well as men, serving as police officers are declining and a significant proportion of women are seriously considering leaving the service. These trends may well be pushing back the equality gains and reverting the police service to a homogenous workforce, hardly constituting progress.

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About the authors

Jennifer Brown is a Professor in the Department of Social Policy at the LSE, and Co-Director of Mannheim Centre for Criminology.

Daniel Bear is a PhD candidate in the Social Policy Department at LSE. Before coming to LSE he worked at the American Civil Liberties Union's Drug Law Reform Project.

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