A new study published this week examines the under-representation of women in policing. It reveals that cultural and structural barriers persist and are impacting female career advancement when compared to that of male colleagues.
The research, carried out by the University of Portsmouth as part of Dr. Jackie Alexander's doctoral research, is based on unique survey and interview data with female and male senior police leaders in England and Wales. It highlights the challenges faced by women en route to a senior rank and the impact of gender differences on policing careers.

Despite increasing proportions of senior women in policing in the UK, the study shows that female officers still encounter obstacles in achieving career success compared to their male counterparts.

Key findings of the study include:

1. Fitting in: The study highlights the importance of social identity and acceptance within the organizational culture of the police service. It found that early experiences, including the need to 'fit in' and prove oneself, particularly in probationary years, contribute to a macho culture where physical fortitude and conformity to traditional norms are valued. The study also revealed that making tea and participating in a drinking culture contributed to being 'accepted', with women potentially facing a longer period of initiation before being fully accepted.

2. Hostile behaviors: The persistence of negative cultural elements and challenges within the policing environment, impacting the delivery of reforms and the ability of senior leaders to lead differently. Instances of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and hostile behaviors were frequently cited by women officers, highlighting the need for continued efforts to address these issues. Bullying and harassment were found to undermine both men and women in senior ranks, with some individuals expressing regret for engaging in a culture that perpetuated such behaviors.

3. Time served culture: The study highlights the importance of speed of progression through the early ranks and the need to address gender
differences in applying for promotions. Additionally, the research reveals the prevalence of long working hours among senior officers, with concerns raised about the negative impact on health and family life.

4. Impact of family and childcare: Balancing personal responsibilities, particularly childcare roles, remains a major barrier for women's career advancement in policing. The study highlights that women may face a 'child-tax' as they navigate work-life balance, as their access to senior rank is dependent on engaging in traditional behaviors and long hours culture.

Lead author of the report, Dr. Jackie Alexander says, "Our research emphasizes the persisting barriers that hinder the advancement of women in policing. By understanding the challenges women face, we can develop interventions and policies that promote gender equality and enable women to thrive in the police force."

Professor Sarah Charman from the University of Portsmouth adds, "Systemic change is needed to address the gender disparities and create an inclusive environment in UK policing."

The study makes a number of recommendations:

- That the under-representation of women in the rank of sergeant is addressed, and all women constables qualified for promotion to sergeant are provided with support in applying for promotion.
- That all forces monitor temporary promotions by gender, and ensure that evidence of gender bias in their processes is addressed.
- That Home Office data returns include force data by gender regarding officer applications, promotion and temporary promotions, so that national comparisons can be made, and good practice identified and shared.
• All promotion boards should be centralized or overseen independently, e.g., by the College of Policing, to ensure that gender bias is removed.
• The Home Office workforce reports separate out the three most senior ranks, ACC, DCC and chief constable, rather than pooling them together as 'chief officers'.
• That working hours and on-call requirements of senior officers are subject to review, and steps taken to ensure that forces are resourcing senior leadership posts adequately, with limitations on the hours that senior officers work.

The paper is published in the journal Police Practice and Research.


Provided by University of Portsmouth


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