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Recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition of female officers: The impact on staffing and perceptions of police practice

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ABSTRACT

There is little research examining (collectively) recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition of female constables in policing, and how these issues affect organizational staffing, police practice. Presenting findings from semi-structured interviews with 46 male and female constables working in an Australian State and Territories police organization, this paper argues that exclusionary staffing practices start from the onset of recruitment because female applicants are singled-out by their sex. It argues that exclusionary staffing practices for female constables occur throughout initial recruit training, during placement within a police station or area of command, whilst being deployed or not deployed to police work, and during consideration or application of promotion related processes, which increases the probability that attrition rates of female constables will be high. Unless police organizations address these issues, it is likely that the number of female constables transitioning into senior roles will remain small; thereby reducing the likelihood that police organizations will implement or achieve equitable staffing principles. It will also diminish appropriate resources needed to run an organization and have a negative impact on staffing.

INTRODUCTION

Australian state and territories' police organizations are facing a staffing crisis. Like law-enforcement agencies in the USA, the UK, and Canada, maintaining the police workforce for Australian police organizations is challenging (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019; Brown and Silvestri, 2019; Carrier et al., 2021; McCabe and O'Connell, 2017; Wilson and Weiss, 2014). Many Australian police organizations struggle to recruit and keep officers (Goldsworthy, 2019), and police reports indicate that each year the number of recruits entering the profession is decreasing, while the number of constables leaving the profession is increasing (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019). For example, in 2022, all Australian police organizations struggled to fill recruitment quotas, and in 2017, 69% of Australian officers leaving the profession did so at the Constable (41%) and Senior Constable (28%) level (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019; TheThe Police Federation of Australia Annual Report, 2022).

Reasons for diminished recruitment include potential applicants being put off by having to pay expensive fees relating to pre-requisite courses to join the police, as well as having to pay for police training and entry requirements (such as medical health checks). Diminished recruitment includes rising complaints about mistreatment of staff, staff shortages and overworked employees, and the inability of recruits to provide excessive workplace expenses (Birch et al., 2022; Keddie, 2022; Police Association of New South Wales, 2021). Heightened media publicity regarding a lack of promotion opportunities for female officers and members of diverse communities has also diminished recruitment (Birch et al., 2022; Keddie, 2022). As has the reporting of high numbers of constables leaving the profession, workplace litigation, and discriminatory deployment of officers in different contexts (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019; Goldsworthy, 2019; Miles-Johnson, 2021). Misogynistic behaviour of male officers and high rates of sexual harassment towards female officers have also discouraged females from entering policing (Cunningham, 2023; Fleming, 2020). For example, the independent review of culture and standards of behaviour in the Metropolitan Police Service, UK (The Baroness Casey Review, 2023) and the Independent Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, 2022), Australia, both determine that female officers frequently experience sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation in the workplace, and each police organization

must address the problem of sexism and misogyny within police work.

The Police Association of New South Wales (PANSW) (n.d.), argues that policing and police work is viewed as less attractive than other professions because media reports and research articles suggest that there are increases in officers reporting dissatisfaction with police management. This includes workplace investigations regarding misconduct and ongoing problems regarding a hyper-masculine workplace culture (PANSW, n.d.). Long working hours and increased workload, officer's complaining of low wages and a lack of leave entitlements, workplace bullying, and increasingly complex demands of citizens, are also identified as having a negative impact on careers in Australian policing (see Birch et al., 2017, 2022; Herrington and Schafer, 2018; Howes and Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Keddie, 2022; Miles-Johnson and Linklater, 2022; Vickers et al., 2016; Farr-Wharton et al., 2017).

A report by Coulter and Ackew (2023) suggests that low unemployment rates in Australia and increasing employment opportunities are compounding the recruitment challenges faced by Australian police organizations who are cognizant of the need to increase recruit applications. Many utilize evolving recruitment strategies to overcome diminishing applications and high levels of officer attrition (see New South Wales Police, n.d.; Northern Territory Police, n.d.; Queensland Police Service, 2020; Victoria Police, 2020). But police organizations across Australia are struggling to cope with dwindling numbers of officers entering the profession (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2022; Goldsworthy, 2019; Herald Sun, 2023; Northern Territory Independent, 2022; Sydney Morning Herald, 2021). Despite using large-scale advertising campaigns targeting females, dwindling recruit numbers are particularly problematic for Australian police organizations in terms of recruiting female officers (Goldsworthy, 2019; Kringen and Novich, 2020). For example, in 2017, female officers made up approximately a third of all Australian police officers (33.6%) but to date, this number has not significantly increased, with the total number of female officers increasing marginally (34.5%) across the Australian police organizations (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023).

Disparity in staffing, especially in relation to the number of females entering policing, has an impact on police practice (Wilson and Grammich, 2022). Constables are highly aware of the way differential staffing of officers can shape police practice and citizen engagement and how this affects staffing and organizational efficiency (Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022). In their first year of employment Australian constables are assessed against competency measures, and subsequently, compare themselves and other constables against aptitude benchmarks, which determine their own (and others) abilities to effectively police (Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022). Constables are highly aware of the differences in ability of constables in relation to an officer's sex, and other identifiers such as age, race, and ethnicity (Miles-Johnson, 2019; Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022). Being new to policing and entering the workplace, research suggests that Australian constables are mindful of the recruitment processes that they and other recruits experienced and are conscious of the types of jobs future deployment will bring (Miles-Johnson, 2021; Miles-Johnson and Morgan, 2022). Constables are likely to be thinking about their future in policing, whilst considering factors associated with promotion and attrition, and how organizational practices may shape this process (Miles-Johnson, 2023).

There is little research, however, which examines (collectively) how recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition of female constables affects organizational staffing and police practice. While each of these components are individually complex, and separately, they may have a distinct impact on organizational staffing and police practice, together, they offer a unique insight into why workplace strategies and organizational staffing practices have a distinct impact on female constables. As such, this research sought to examine this gap in knowledge to understand how recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition conjointly affect female constables in the workplace, and the impact this has on organizational staffing and police practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the current staffing crisis experienced by Australian police organizations is likely to be underpinned by organizational challenges, particularly those that are internally and externally initiated (see Birch et al., 2022; Herrington and Schafer, 2018; Miles-Johnson and Linklater, 2022). Previous research indicates that a wide body of research has examined police staffing in relation to crime, population demographics, economics, segregation of communities, special facilities and events, minimum staffing levels, and workload (see Koper et al., 2001; McCabe and O'Connell, 2017; Wilson and Weiss, 2014). But research examining recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition in relation to police staffing is under-researched, particularly in an Australian context. This is problematic because Australian police organizations are heavily criticized for their lack of staff, the deployment of officers, lack of promotion opportunities, and dwindling numbers of employees in civilian and officer roles (Birch et al., 2022; Herrington and Schafer, 2018; Miles-Johnson and Linklater, 2022).

Police work in Australia is significantly evolving, and like in other nations, it is adapting to social change, as well as the altering composition of communities and the needs of citizens (Rogers and Wintle, 2020). But it is argued that a police organization is only as good as the staff it employs, and the workplace standards its staff members uphold (Zempi, 2020). Research suggests that the starting point for employing good staff in policing is recruitment (Miles-Johnson, 2019). Although Australian police organizations have strategically sought to increase the number of all applicants, and there have been targeted recruitment drives to increase the number of females entering policing (Fleming, 2020), the number of females entering Australian policing remains low in comparison to males.

Recruitment

Recruitment of females into policing is an ongoing endeavour for many Western police organizations (Rabe-Hemp and Garcia, 2020). Large-scale advertising campaigns involving public forums and information sessions targeting females were held by police organizations in the UK (West Midlands Police

in 2015), in the United States (Michigan State Police in 2014), in Canada (Brantford Police Service in 2018), and in Australia (Victoria Police in 2017). Each of these campaigns were successful in attracting more females into police work, but research suggests that the representation of females in police organizations in some countries has not changed significantly (Fleming, 2020; Rabe-Hemp and Garcia, 2020). In the USA, more than 120 police departments are participating in a national 30 × 30 initiative to increase the number and representation of females in police recruit programs by up to 30% by 2030 (New York University School of Law, n.d.; Wilson *et al.,* 2023). But the increase in number of females entering policing (particularly from diverse groups) is a slow growth area, and parity of representation of female officers from the communities they serve is still unequal to the number of officers who identify as white and male (Wilson *et al.,* 2023).

Studies indicate that females in policing make up between 5 and 30% of officers (see Fleming, 2020; Rabe-Hemp and Garcia, 2020; Sear Humiston and Rabe-Hemp, 2020). Yet when police organizations employ more female officers, they can diffuse the number of complaints from members of the public and reduce the number of violent outcomes when officers engage with citizens (Glasser, 2017; Miles-Johnson, 2021). In addition, it is argued that female officers often display more positive perceptions of citizen interaction than male officers (Cordner, 2019), and are more likely than male officers to focus on ethics of care and citizen engagement (Rabe-Hemp, 2008a). Female officers are more likely than male officers to apply adaptive working strategies in different contexts (Murray, 2021), and are more likely than male officers to use procedural justice techniques during police practice (Mira, 2019). In different contexts female officers are less likely than male officers to rely on use of force during police-citizen encounters (Hoffman and Hickey, 2005). This is not to suggest that recruitment of females into policing is a panacea solving all policing problems, but the strategic recruitment of females into police organizations may improve the attitudes of male colleagues (McCarty *et al.,* 2007), and may improve police–citizen relations (Prenzler and Sinclair, 2013). The targeted recruitment of females into police work may not necessarily produce better or worse police officers, or officers who will engage better with citizens (Miles-Johnson,2021), but it sends a positive message that police organizations are aware of the benefits of recruiting women (Westendorf, 2013). Targeted recruitment of female officers also sends a message that police work is an industry for women, and not just for men (Miles-Johnson, 2021).

Notwithstanding recruitment and promotion reforms, police work is still considered by many citizens and officers alike to be a male profession (Miles-Johnson, 2019, 2021; Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022). This is problematic because women's roles in policing have progressed since females first entered the profession, and female officers have had to overcome many hurdles to reach equitable deployment milestones (Rabe-Hemp and Garcia, 2020). In the last 20 years, changes to police recruitment initiatives have altered the composition of Australian police organizations, but the number of male officers outweigh the numbers of female officers in all Australian state and territories police organizations (Miles-Johnson and Death, 2020; Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022; Novich *et al.,* 2018). While this is like many police

organizations across the globe, strategic recruitment testing, and targeted selection strategies have only marginally increased the number of female officers in Australian police organizations (Miles-Johnson and Death, 2020; Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022; Novich *et al.,* 2018).

Deployment

During their first 2 years of employment, constables are required to attend different types of jobs so that their policing ability is determined against competency measures set out by the organization; thereby determining professional proficiency (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019; Brown and Silvestri, 2020; Miles-Johnson, 2021). Competency measures assess a constable's ability to respond to different policing situations experienced during general duties work (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019). These may include attendance and response during traffic accidents, assaults, domestic violence incidents, bereavement, and sudden death situations, and responding to victims of crime. Competency measures enable constables to gain experience and knowledge in police work and extend the skills acquired whilst training at a police academy (Miles-Johnson, 2023; Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022). In their first year of work, constables are considered equal in terms of their ability to police. Deployment of officers should, therefore, occur in relation to the organization following operational procedures and guidelines (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019).

In Australia, it is the Supervisor or Duty Officer who has the responsibility to make decisions regarding how constables will be deployed. Under Australian policing policy, the only formal difference between officer deployment and the sex of an officer, is in relation to conducting a pat-down search, whereby policy states pat-down searches must be carried out by an officer who is of the same sex as the civilian (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019). But research posits that male and female officers are deployed differently, with male officers frequently deployed to jobs considered men's work (Miles-Johnson and Fay, 2022), while female officers are frequently deployed to low risk, community policing jobs (Murray, 2021). This is concerning, because at the start of their policing career all constables are eager to attend as many different jobs as possible and are conscious of exclusion (Miles-Johnson, 2021). Yet research suggests that there are many discriminatory workplace practices in policing which underpin differential deployment of female officers, such as sexist language and workplace competency, bullying and task completion, and sexist task discrimination and allocation, and these are entrenched in workplace culture and employment practices within policing (Department of Justice and Attorney-General, 2022; Miles-Johnson and Linklater, 2022).

During deployment, constables are highly cognizant of their own and other constables' abilities to effectively engage in police work. Constables are conscious of initial performance indicators and how these may affect ongoing pathways to promotion and what it means for their competency if they are not able to attend a wide range of jobs (Miles-Johnson, 2019). Many constables may not be focussed on promotion and may only want to successfully navigate general duties, but some constables enter policing with

strategic long-term career goals in mind (Miles-Johnson, 2019). Research suggests that many constables do think about promotion and the pathways or barriers which may constrain or enable it (Drew and Saunders, 2020; Todak et al., 2022). Inequitable staffing practices and lack of deployment experience for female officers, however, is likely to hinder the ability of females to apply for and then gain promotion in policing (Murray, 2021; Todak et al., 2022).

Promotion

For female officers, the pathway to promotion is often constrained by structural organizational barriers (Cunningham and Ramshaw, 2022; Huff and Todak, 2023). This is heavily criticized in much of the policing literature examining the experience of female officers in policing (see Drew and Saunders, 2020; Morabito and O'Connor Shelley, 2018). Female officers are employed in senior ranks, with many females leading police organizations. Notwithstanding recent appointments of three females in commissioner roles (the highest ranked officer in Australian police organizations) such as Commissioner Katarina Carroll in the Queensland Police Service, Commissioner Karen Webb in the New South Wales Police Force, and Commissioner Donna Adams in Tasmania Police, there is a lack of representation of females in executive policing roles (Kringen and Novich, 2020; Miles-Johnson, 2021). For example, in 2018, the New South Wales Police Force employed female officers in commissioned roles across the organization, with female officers representing 17% of Inspectors, 4% of Chief Inspectors, 9% of Superintendents, and 19% of Assistant Commissioners (Drew and Archbold, 2023). Although there is no central Australian repository that captures supervisory or management positions by gender across all the Australian police organizations, female officers consistently face constraints regarding promotion (Cunningham and Ramshaw, 2022; Drew and Archbold, 2023; Huff and Todak, 2023). Many of these constraints are linked to negative aspects of police culture (such as workplace discrimination) and systemic factors relating to promotion systems (such as lack of recognition of achievement or lack of opportunity to rise to a required level of seniority) (Cunningham and Ramshaw, 2022; Drew and Saunders, 2020).

Promotional criteria for police officers are in principle based on policing experience and seniority of rank, as well as merits achieved, level of qualifications, and number of senior positions available. But these criteria are easier to achieve for male officers than female officers (Cunningham and Ramshaw, 2022; Matusiak and Matusiak, 2018). Workplace disadvantage is frequently experienced by female officers as they negotiate childcare responsibilities, family, and care-giving roles, shift work, salary increases, operational leadership roles, and perceptions of competency (Beaton et al., 2022; Huff and Todak, 2023). When considering promotion, many senior female officers are cognizant of being viewed as a symbolic representative of gender in leadership (Shjarback and Todak, 2019), and this negatively associates police leadership as a tokenistic and illegitimate gesture by the police organization (Drew and Saunders, 2020; Morabito and O'Connor Shelley, 2018). Tokenistic representation of females in senior roles may indicate that there is a level of fair representation in police leadership roles, but it is not reflective of equal opportunities in the workplace (Shjarback and Todak, 2019).

Mid-career and senior ranked female officers seeking promotion are aware of the disparity in numbers of male and female officers in senior roles and are aware of the barriers or glass ceiling that exists in relation to stifling the promotional prospects of female officers in policing (Huff and Todak, 2023; Silvestri, 2018). Mid-career and senior female officers feel less confident than their male counterparts in their policing experience and credentials, and accordingly, consciously opt out of promotion opportunities (Todak et al., 2021). This is concerning, because research from around the globe suggests that senior ranked female officers, particularly those in management roles, have the potential to make significant changes in policing, to police staffing (in terms of reducing attrition of female officers), and to broader police culture (see Brown and Silvestri, 2020; Herrington and Schafer, 2018; Miles-Johnson, 2021; Murray, 2021; Silvestri, 2018; Todak et al., 2021).

Attrition

Attrition of police officers is complex (Wilson et al., 2023). Attrition can be linked to numerous factors related to officer exclusion and lack of organizational support, particularly when officers experience poor adjustment processes as they transition to different units of command and geographical areas (Allisey et al., 2014; Charman and Bennett, 2021; Howes and Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). While stress, PTSD, health related issues and burnout contribute to attrition rates of all officers, female officers are often unfairly judged, and singled-out in terms of attrition rates being related to these factors. Female officers are also singled-out in terms of the inability of female officers to balance work-life challenges, children and family commitments, and other personal factors (Chitra and Karunanidhi, 2021). Alecu and Fekjaer (2020) argue however, that this premise is not consistent. Many women strategically choose a career in policing and display strong organizational commitment to a police organization and to their career, over and above factors assumed to cause attrition (Alecu and Fekjaer, 2020).

But police organizations are generally criticized for being less healthy and less functional than other work environments for women (Birch et al., 2022; Todak et al., 2022). For example, in Australia, police organizations are heavily criticized for workplace sexism and misogyny, which can impact female officers at all stages of their career (Miles-Johnson and Linklater, 2022), and female police officers can account for up 23% of annual attrition rates of officers in Australian police organizations (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019). Although all police organizations are aware of this and the subsequent challenge this brings, police organizations inconsistently retain female officers in policing (Todak and Brown, 2019). Like factors affecting attrition rates of female officers, retention strategies regarding female officers are linked to numerous factors and assumptions (Alecu and Fekjaer, 2020). There is, however, little consensus regarding which element of attrition (or retention) police organizations should focus on (Charman and Bennett, 2021). Much of the literature examining these problems analyses these issues at the organizational and management level with senior officers (Wilson et al., 2023). Much of this research does not examine these matters in relation to early career police officers such as constables, who, in Australia, are identified as the rank most likely to quit policing (Gladstone, 2021).

Research examining attrition alongside recruitment, deployment, and promotion, and how each of these conjointly affect female officers, creates an opportunity to contribute new knowledge into the extant literature regarding outcomes of organizational staffing and police practice; particularly from perspective of constables, who, as stated, are identified as the rank most at risk of attrition. This research presents the finding from an analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with 46 male and female constables working in one of the largest Australian state and territories' police organizations (de-identified as part of the ethics agreement). This research examines how each of these factors affect female officers in the workplace, and how this impacts organizational staffing and police practice.

METHODS
Semi-structured interviews with constables
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 male and female constables working in one Australian state police organization to understand how recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition as combined factors affect female constables in the workplace, and how this impacts organizational staffing and police practice.[1] Interviews were conducted in-person, at police stations (in private interview rooms), over 12-months, with a sample of constables working in the capital city and regional areas of the state. The interviews were conducted by one member of the research team not affiliated with the police organization. The interviews ranged between 35 and 45 min long and used open-ended questions and broad discussion prompts (see Appendix A). All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. The final sample comprised 24 male constables and 22 female constables, and all participants volunteered. Because the researchers have no professional affiliation with or are employed by the police organization, all constables were recruited via an email sent by the organization. As such it was not possible to calculate response rates.

The invitation email included an information sheet informing participants that participation would be anonymous and all responses de-identified. Information such as the constables' race, ethnicity, sex, or age was removed from each of the individual responses because the police organization was concerned this information may identify constables working in smaller areas across the state. Although this information was not included in the final study in relation to individual participant responses, it is acknowledged that these variables may have influenced participant responses. NVivo software was used to assist the analysis of the data and the identification of key themes. Because there is limited knowledge regarding how recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition as combined factors affect female constables in the workplace, and how this impacts organizational staffing and police practice, the researchers applied an inductive coding process, whereby the identification of themes was data-driven, and would not be affected by pre-existing analytical preconceptions.

By applying an inductive coding process, it allowed the data to identify the themes in relation to each of the specific policing contexts analysed in this research (recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition). Only one discussion prompt (Appendix A)—explicitly referred to gender differences, yet gender-based themes consistently emerged during each of the components discussed. For example, analysis of the data in relation to discussion prompt one (*What do you think the police organization could do to increase the diversity of the workforce?*) indicated that gender (in relation to female officers) emerged in each of the participant's responses to this prompt. It is acknowledged, however, that while other potential themes could have emerged from the data analysis, themes that were not related to female officers and recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition as combined factors, and how this impacts organizational staffing and police practice, were not included in this study. As such, four core themes relating to each of the topic areas (recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition) and female officers emerged from the analysis. This included:

- Differential hiring standards for females, organizational staffing and police practice.
- Differential deployment of female constables, organizational staffing and police practice.
- Promotion disparity and restrictions for female officers, organizational staffing and police practice.
- Workplace attrition and female constables, organizational staffing and police practice.

During data analysis, the researchers were aware of their subjectivity as citizens and how interpreter bias may influence interpretation of the data. Once it was determined that no new information would be discovered, each of the themes was assessed in relation to female officers, organizational staffing, and police practice. Although 46 constables participated in the interviews, the 16 quotes included in this paper are representative of the constable's responses to each of the broad discussion prompts, and their perceptions of female officers in relation to recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition as combined factors, and how this impacts organizational staffing and police practice.

FINDINGS
Differential hiring standards for females, organizational staffing and police practice
Male and female constables in this research expressed their frustration over recruitment techniques used by the police organization to attract females into policing and how it affects organizational staffing and police practice. They all spoke adversely about the recruitment of females into police work, and many constables spoke openly and negatively about the recruitment of females into police work. They associated this with female officers either not being competent with police work or not being able to meet the physical demands of police work that would affect staffing, as well as not being able to meet the fitness levels required to pass academy training. For example, Constable 23 said:

I can see the reasoning for trying to get females into policing, but some females that got into the academy weren't at that fitness level where they needed to be, which meant they struggled, which meant they weren't up for the job, and this means it affects us, and puts us at risk. (Constable 23).

Other constables spoke about the successful recruitment of females being solely related to their sex. They spoke about differential recruitment of people, with male applicants being overlooked in relation to female applicants due to strategic recruitment drives to increase the number of female officers into the organization. Some constables spoke about females being awarded exemptions for competency or afforded leniency in benchmark requirements, such as fitness based on their sex rather than their capacity or capability to perform police work. For example, Constable 25 said:

I was in the intake that specifically recruited females, but it felt like some people were getting through based on just being female, and not being competent. It was clear there was some females who didn't meet the criteria, of getting in, which, you know, if there was a male who got shortlisted and then kept on the bench is not fair. (Constable 25).

Many of the constables in this research spoke about this issue. Many of the participants were frustrated by the negative comments about recruitment of females because it diminished their importance, and negatively associated their place in the organization with unfair recruitment practices and inequitable staffing. It was clear that this had affected many of the constables that participated in this research. It underpinned some expressed insecurity as well as defensiveness about their own recruitment into the organization, and their ability and competency to police. For example, Constable 3 said:

A lot of the women, they're fed up with feeling like they shouldn't be here, be in the job, just because they're women, like, they've heard the banter, and people saying that so and so only got in because they're female, it makes them feel like shit, like they shouldn't be here, like they're not good enough, you know. (Constable 3).

Talking to the constables in this sample, it was clear that perceptions of differential recruitment affected perceptions of inclusion within the organization, which had ramifications during training at the academy and then on staffing as constables went into placement within police stations. When the participants were asked to speak about recruitment of females and how this may affect organizational staffing and police work, the constables spoke about recruitment affecting deployment of officers.

Differential deployment of female constables, organizational staffing and police practice

When the constables spoke about deployment it was conceded that differential deployment occurs for female officers based on specific reasons. These reasons are related to their sex, and, subsequently, their perceived competency by Supervisors or Duty Officers to complete workplace tasks. The constables spoke about differential deployment affecting organizational staffing because deployment is underpinned by the premise that policing is seen as 'men's work' and that most policing responses considered 'soft responses' or not being viewed as 'real police work' were designated to female constables. For example, Constable 12 said:

I feel like a lot of people don't take female officers as seriously as male officers when it comes to deployment of certain jobs and just in general. We're all supposed to attend the same jobs right, but I've seen it where female cops get sent to certain types of jobs consistently, and male cops to others, and it's clear to everyone why that is, female cops are not seen as real police officers. (Constable 12).

Many of the constables spoke of differential deployment of female constables. This affected police practice because it regularly occurred. Supervisors or Duty Officers specifically selected male constables to respond to jobs that came in from the front desk, or reception area of the police station. Female officers were also redeployed when jobs were sent by the organization's Communications Centre (the central response system used to communicate and distribute public calls for help) to their individual iPads, as well as diverting female constables who were out on the road completing police work, thereby purposefully redeploying jobs to male constables. This is problematic because in Australia, deployment of officers to jobs should only be based on availability and should not be determined by an officer's perceived competency or capability to respond to situation based on their sex (unless an officer is conducting a frisk search or pat down, and this depends on the sex of the person being searched). For example, Constable 7 said:

At my station, two female officers found offenders and took them back to the car. But another male officer turned up and just delegated that the female officers go back and pick up items, he said, 'Girls go do this'. And they were like, 'that's a no'. But then he refused to leave until another male officer came and they could take over the job. It's like there's an expectation that when female officers are deployed to certain jobs, the male officers will come in and take over, sort things out, do the real police work, you know. (Constable 7).

The constables talked about the '*open understanding*' that all officers working in a police station are aware of the differential deployment of female constables, and that it is accepted as a normative workplace practice. Although this was not acknowledged as official workplace protocol, many of the constables spoke about differential deployment of female officers being witnessed by officers, and by members of the public, and that this type of practice '*ruins the confidence of female cops over time*' (Constable 7). Many of the constables in this sample acknowledged that this staffing practice sends clear messages to female constables and citizens alike, that the organization determines that there are clear differences between male and

female officers and their ability to effectively police. For example, Constable 1 said:

> Three coppers here started at the same time, two females and one male, and both females had a shift at the front counter, pretty much straight-up, but the male was in the car, doing jobs on the street, there's a difference in deployment, that females are being treated differently, and are being given different jobs, basically because they're women, it's obvious, but we all accept it, right. (Constable 1).

Many of the constables spoke about deployment and how it may affect their future careers. They spoke about how workplace experience (or the lack of it) could potentially affect their chances of promotion. Promotion was discussed by all the constables in this sample, and it was very clear that all the constables were thinking about promotion and their long-term goals in policing.

Promotion disparity and restrictions for female officers, organizational staffing and police practice

All the constables spoke about perceived or actual barriers to promotion and apparent disparity in organizational processes that lead to promotion. They were very specific in identifying barriers restricting promotion, such as fulfilling time requirements in general duties policing, gaining initial approval from their immediate supervising officer to apply for promotion, and their ability to meet (and answer) selection criteria that is required to prove competency for promotion at different ranks. Many of the constables spoke about observed disparity in promotion procedures, such as constables being subject to varying opinions and biases of immediate supervisors regarding suitability for promotion. They spoke about discretional practices from senior officers to determine which applicant has the greatest merit. Some constables spoke about these issues affecting all officers, but most of the constables spoke about promotion being difficult for female officers, and how females in policing are immediately affected by different barriers to promotion. For example, Constable 11:

> There are barriers for female cops, like when you're applying for promotion or something like that, and you know, it's expected, seniors will probably see a female and say no, and that type of mentality, that knowing, I guess it stops many women from applying, because there will be a barrier, because they're not male, and because females are not considered real cops, if you know what I mean. (Constable 11).

Some constables in this research spoke about barriers to promotion and female officers being specifically affected by the 'boys club' (Constable 3, Constable 17, Constable 28). They referred to policing and police work as a male dominated profession that awards preferential treatment to male officers based on their sex; thereby excluding or mistreating females (Rabe-Hemp, 2008b), and that this exclusionary practice is a normative organizational and cultural practice in policing. For example, Constable 16 said:

> In every station I've worked in, it's still very much a boy's club regarding promotion, and if you're female then you're on the outside, whereas if you're a guy, you'll be fine, you're in and you'll get promoted, I've seen that. (Constable 16).

Only one constable spoke about female officers being advantaged by their sex in relation to promotion in policing. For example, Constable 4 spoke about hearing information from colleagues regarding female officers being promoted over male officers by virtue of their sex. Constable 4 stated that male officers are experiencing discrimination in the workplace regarding promotion, with females being unfairly advantaged.

> Some cops, they're like, 'if you're a female, you'll get promoted, just for being women', and you hear them say 'it's got nothing to do with experience or competency it's just because they're women'. I'm hearing a lot of male cops say that, so now, many of the boys are like 'male cops are the ones being discriminated against, not females'. (Constable 4).

Most of the constables recognized that discrimination in the workplace occurs for female constables in relation to unequal recognition of ability and lack of opportunity to gain leadership experience in senior roles, but none of them talked about whether this would increase attrition of female officers from police work. When the constables were asked why they thought female officers would leave policing, there was some variation in replies in relation to differing circumstances. The responses were underpinned by the premise that attrition of female officers from policing is strongly influenced by a female officer's sex (being a woman) rather than specific conditions which may occur and influence their decision to resign.

Workplace attrition and female constables, organizational staffing and police practice

The constables in this research spoke about female constables being less likely than male constables to handle workplace stress. Many of the constables spoke specifically about female constables struggling with task completion and police work in relation to their sex. Rather than blaming this on lack of training, insufficient guidance, or clear operational instruction, many constables linked high attrition rates of female constables with their inability to complete policing tasks and to engage in police work. For example, Constable 19 said:

> Female cops at our station quit all the time. There was one female officer, she like quit in a big drama, and everyone at my station was really pissed because she blamed everything on not being accepted or included, and being treated differently, because she's a female, but most cops thought she was incompetent because she's a woman. I mean, they let her in, she was trained, just get on with it, stop whining, you know? She was sent to jobs, okay, maybe not all of them, but what did she expect? I mean come on; everyone knows policing is for male cops, right? (Constable 19).

Some of the constables spoke about attrition and female constables in relation to negative workplace experiences and sexual harassment. Some constables mentioned how sexual harassment and ensuing stereotypes regarding female behaviour in the workplace can affect attrition of female constables. For example, Constable 18 said:

I've been here when male officers have been stripped down of rank, or moved on, or being investigated for making sexualized comments against female officers, and okay the male officer saying them gets punished or whatever, but then there's the female officer getting those comments, they're worn down, they've had enough, they are then 'that officer' the one who caused the male officer to be sacked, so then they end up leaving, it's just shit, it's really shit. (Constable 18).

Other constables spoke about exclusion of females in the workplace affecting attrition of female constables, particularly when female constables are not perceived as competent or are not considered 'real' police officers because '*most cops see policing as "men's work"'*. (Officer 18). Some of the constables spoke about how these issues affect female constables' morale, workplace stress, and, therefore, increases the likelihood that female constables will resign. For example, Constable 41 said:

There is an added amount of stress being female or different brings to police work, especially when you are looked at or judged for being female and different by other colleagues, or by the organization. It's that knowing that you are considered different, that guys are thought of as real police officers. I've seen it drive off a few of my colleagues, they've quit the job, it's not surprising women get fed up, it's a lot of shit to take. (Constable 41).

When the constables were asked about how each of these issues (recruitment, deployment, promotion, attrition, and female officers) collectively affect police staffing and practice most of them spoke about a negative effect on policing in relation to these issues as being conjointly normative in their effect on staffing and practice and '*expected in policing*' or '*the way it is*' (Constable 4, Constable 19, Constable 37, and Constable 41). When the constables were asked what could be done to solve these issues, almost half of the constables in this research stated that they did not have a solution or could not think of one that the police organization could apply. The constables viewed these problems as being systemic to police work or '*expected*' because it was normative organizational staffing practice that male officers would compensate for these issues (Constable 3, Constable 19, and Constable 32), with many of them using colloquial expressions to describe this, such as it being '*part and parcel of police work*' (Constable 7). Interestingly, analysis of the data indicated that there were no counter cases or deviations of opinions to contradict this finding. In addition, no solutions were offered, or differences of opinion expressed from the constables regarding this systemic practice, with many of the constables expressing the same opinions regarding how recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition affect female constables in the workplace, and the negative impact this has on organizational staffing and police practice.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this research. Additional research with other police organizations may determine if the results are generalizable and representative of the experiences and perceptions of constables (or other officers) working in different Australian police organizations. As stated, the police organization stipulated that all individual constable responses would be de-identified in terms of the constable's race, ethnicity, sex, or age as such a comparative analysis between the constable's responses and specific identifiers (such as sex of officer) was not possible, thereby limiting further analysis of the data. Data collected in real-life situations such as during participant observation of female officers in the workplace, and data collected from interviews conducted with senior officers may offer additional insight into how recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition affect female officers, and the impact this has on organizational staffing and police practice. Whilst this research was conducted in Australia, and the findings may not be generalizable to policing outside of Australia, the findings have policy and practice implications for recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition of female officers globally, and provide several important insights into the perceptions (and experiences) of male and female constables regarding recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition, and how they conjointly affect female officers, and the impact this has on organizational staffing and police practice.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that from the onset of recruitment female officers are singled-out by their sex. This occurs during the recruitment process, throughout initial recruit training, during placement within a police station or area of command, whilst being deployed or not deployed to police work, and during consideration or application of promotion related processes. This raises questions about targeted recruitment drives that are underpinned or focussed on the sex of officers, and the effect this has on the overall experience of females entering policing and engaging in police work (Howes and Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). Without careful consideration regarding how recruitment of females in policing can be achieved without increasing resultant negative workplace experiences of female officers in relation to deployment, and promotion, then it is likely that the attrition rates of female officers will remain high (Alecu and Fekjaer, 2020).

Given that female constables are at an increased risk of resigning from police work, (as stated female police officers can account for up 23% of annual attrition rates of officers in Australian police organizations) high attrition rates of female constables from policing will reduce the smaller number of female officers potentially considering (or being considered for or applying for) senior roles and promotion (Brown and Silvestri, 2020). This reduces the likelihood of female officers implementing systemic change within police organizations regarding workplace experiences of female officers (Herrington and Schafer, 2018). Placement of female officers within the senior ranks of a police organization does not guarantee that attitudes towards female officers will change, and it is not a panacea for removing or reducing discrimination or bias within the workplace. But it is likely that female officers in senior ranks may be able make systemic and workplace change in relation to staffing and police practice (Miles-Johnson, 2021); however, this remains to be seen.

In Australia, Superintendents, Commissioners, Chief Constables, or Police Chiefs have careers spanning at least 15–20 years before being appointed to a leadership position within policing (Police Association of New South Wales, 2021). But if female constables continue to experience the same workplace problems regarding recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition, then it is highly likely that reforms in police work will not occur. This is because fewer female officers will stay in policing or be promoted. For example, in 2017, the majority of police officers in Australia were employed at constable rank (approximately 64.8%) and female officers comprised 18.7% of this number, with fewer female officers being employed in a senior role such as at a sergeant level (4.8%), and even fewer female officers being employed in commissioned roles or in a leadership position (1.2%) (Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency, 2019). Drew and Archbold (2023) argue that the lack of female officers rising above the rank of constable has not changed significantly across Australia, with the number of female officers in leadership positions not being comparable to their representation within each of the Australian police organizations (Drew and Archbold, 2023). It is argued, therefore, that until police officers and police organizations place the sex of an officer in a secondary position, whereby the sex of an officer does not become the primary focus of an officer's competency or capability then organizational change is unlikely to happen.

Australian organizations are challenged by the need to recruit and retain female officers, but police organizations must focus on 'police officers' workplace experiences collectively, rather than the workplace capability of officers identified by sex and change the perception of policing as an equitable profession within Australian culture. Then it is likely that police work will not be seen as 'men's work' and recruitment and retention of female officers will improve. Drew and Archbold (2023) argue that the lack of gender equity in policing, particularly in relation to police work being viewed as men's work, is often underpinned by the perceptions of male officers in senior ranks whose views may be detrimental in encouraging female officers to apply for promotion. In addition, the negative opinions of male officers regarding the competency of female officers in the workplace is a critical factor regarding whether female officers continue in the profession (Laverick and Cunningham, 2023). Without this change, discriminatory organizational staffing, and exclusionary policing practices will continue to unnecessarily displace female officers in police work and maintain organizational problems regarding staffing and effective police practice.

By virtue of their sex, Australian female officers experience (and will continue to experience) discrimination and exclusion in the workplace regarding staffing. The gendered nature of policing and gendered perceptions of police work is slowing the progress of female officers within the profession (Drew and Archbold, 2023). Female officers will experience the negative effect exclusionary workplace practices have on police practice, which in Australian policing is a systemic and normative part of policing culture, one that is seen as being expected, and all the constables in this research acknowledged it. But this is problematic, especially when Australian police organizations have strategically sought to recruit (and retain) more females into policing (see New South Wales Police, n.d.; Northern Territory Police, n.d.; Queensland Police Service, 2020; Robinson, 2015; Victoria Police, 2020).

Understanding how the sex of a female officer may form an antecedent to exclusion, will, therefore, help police organizations develop preventative, and where necessary, intervention policies for exclusionary practices that can be implemented from the onset of a female officer's career. Developing prevention and intervention policies regarding exclusion may not be a new idea, but developing prevention and intervention policies which focus on female officers in relation to exclusion in recruitment, deployment, and promotion, leading to attrition, has not been considered in previous strategies targeting the solving of staffing issues and police practice. If police organizations want to prevent exclusionary practices in relation to recruitment, deployment, promotion and attrition of female officers, then the sex of an officer should become a key component within prevention and intervention strategies.

Given that police organizations in Australia (as in other Western police organizations) are dominated by the number of male officers (to date 65.5% of Australian officers are male) (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023), exclusionary specific initiatives preventing negative outcomes for female officers in relation to recruitment, deployment, promotion and attrition should be outlined within organizational blueprints and strategic plans. Identifying upheld traditional notions of machismo relating to police work (which permeate police culture) negatively associate the sex of female officers with a lack of capability, then making cultural change to eradicate this notion will have better implications for future policing initiatives. Recruitment plans, deployment schemes, and promotion policies relating to the long-term careers of all officers, but especially those for female officers, are more likely to be successful if police organizations are willing to address these issues and instigate cultural change. Without this adjustment, the staffing crisis will continue. Police practice will become more unbalanced in terms of the lack of representation of females within policing, and negative workplace practices regarding recruitment, deployment, promotion and attrition of female officers will not be resolved.

APPENDIX A

BROAD DISCUSSION PROMPTS

What do you think the police organization could do to increase the diversity of the workforce?

Who do you think the police organization should strategically recruit?

What do you think are the barriers that would stop someone from joining the police?

How does the organization rate in terms of its inclusion of male/female officers?

What are the factors that you think determine the roles and duties of an officer—what determines the deployment of an officer to a particular task?

What do you think are the barriers that would stop someone from gaining promotion in the police organization?

Do you see particular individual or groups of officers being promoted over others? And what would the reasons be for this?

What do you think are the reasons why an officer would leave the police organization?

What do you think the police organization should do to help prevent an officer from quitting?

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