

“Since 1996: Women Leading Change”
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by

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I have been asked to speak with you today about the changes for women IN policing that have occurred since our inaugural 1996 conference in Sydney.

At that conference, I gave a keynote address along with then Commissioner Mick Palmer of the Australian Federal Police on “Where to From Here?”. At that time I was a Commander with the Northern Territory Police, operating out of Darwin.

I recently went back and read the paper that I gave in July 1996 and it was a bit depressing really. I sat back and thought that the issues that I raised 11 years ago still very much exist today.

I stated in my 1996 paper:

In line with the general themes of the conference, advice is provided to women on ways of enhancing their job satisfaction and career prospects within policing. More importantly, the paper highlights some key and critical organisational structural issues which simply must be addressed by management if we are serious about maximising the contribution of women employees and addressing real and perceived inequities in the workplace. It is only then that policing will be able to meet the challenges and demands of the 21st century.

Some of the issues that I raised included:

- The fact that the number of women who have made it to high rank are so few that someone familiar with policing in Australia would receive no prizes for rattling off their names.
- Recruitment levels for women had levelled out at around 30%, with the possibility that physical pre-entry testing was operating to unnecessarily reduce female recruit numbers.
- The lack of sufficient female role models within policing and willing mentors/sponsors.
- A male bias in promotional procedures with value placed on a continuous, uninterrupted career and entrenched regard for seniority, coupled with a lack of senior policewomen to sit on selection or assessment centre panels.
- A perception that women lacked long term commitment and that only men could lead men ie. a credibility issue.
- Ambition by women not being well regarded and women’s contribution to management and policing in general being often under-valued. The ways in

which organisations had been managed in the past had consistently legitimised male, power-oriented and competitive behaviour.

- The danger of “role traps” for women.

I made the point that the police culture was one of the greatest barriers for women in achieving job satisfaction and advancement. I even suggested that the culture could be quite “hostile” when it came to pregnancy and the associated maternity leave or family responsibilities. I commented that the work climate still appeared to be conducive to sexual and racial harassment and that women were often under inordinate stress.

I outlined some personal or individual strategies for remedying the situation. Drawing on research from Kanter (1977), I stressed the importance of structural change within policing:

- changing the power structure;
- increasing the proportional representation of women; and
- changing the structure of opportunity (or expectations and future prospects).

I stated that I believed that there was a real commitment within policing to address the issues and concerns raised.

An AIC paper by Irene Froyland and Vicki Wilkinson on “Women in Policing” from 1996 identified the main issues for women in policing as:

- The recruitment of women;
- The deployment of women as specialists or generalists;
- The representation of women in senior ranks and management;
- Police culture and attitudes to women police; and
- Working conditions.

As you would probably agree, a lot of the issues that I and others have raised still exist today. But of course we have made inroads. We certainly have experienced improvements in percentages of women in policing and the numbers of women in senior decision-making roles. Having been given the chance, women have made it obvious that they CAN do the job and do it well. **BUT WE STILL HAVE A LONG, LONG WAY TO GO!**

We have experienced major improvements in flexible working practices such as part-time policing, re-engagement, working from home and even casual policing (which is being looked at in WA). This has not only benefited women but men as well, hopefully assisting us to become an employer of choice. Retention/attrition is such a critical issue in WA Police that we simply have to become more progressive, innovative and flexible or we will fail to provide minimum staffing levels required to meet demand.

At a national and even international level, we have achieved a degree of mobility between jurisdictions coupled with recognition of prior experience and qualifications. There has certainly been a lot of movement into the Australian Federal Police, who clearly value the skills and qualifications of State and Territory police personnel. In

WA, we are recruiting very large numbers of police officers from the United Kingdom and we are now tapping into South Africa as well. In addition, we are exploring recruitment opportunities in countries like Singapore and Hong Kong.

Today, there is also greater opportunity for work-life balance and less of an expectation that you have to work long and crazy hours and be a workplace "martyr". It is great to see an appreciation of quality and productivity as opposed to the number of hours that you have put in.

There has also been a greater opportunity for secondments outside of policing. I was fortunate, for instance, to have had a 2 year secondment to the Northern Territory Attorney-General's Department during 1997-1999, where I had the opportunity to work as the Director of the Policy Division. This experience gave me an invaluable whole of government perspective. I also headed up the then Australasian Centre for Policing Research in Adelaide for 5 years, from 1999-2004, whilst on secondment from the NT Police. I then moved to WA Police in September 2004 to an Assistant Commissioner position. Such flexibility and mobility is a very promising development within policing and a strong indication that we are indeed moving to become more of a "profession".

There is certainly high level debate occurring on professionalising the policing occupation, with all that that involves. In the last 10 years or so, we have certainly seen an increased emphasis on professional development and the attainment of formal qualifications, for both men and women.

In more specific terms, there have been a range of great developments such as:

- Women's networks within policing agencies as well as inter-agency networks;
- Leadership and mentoring programs for women (which are more accommodating of women's needs and obligations through, for instance, less rigid residential requirements); and
- The establishment and strengthening of the Australasian Council of Women and Policing Inc. (ACWAP) and the Commissioners' Australasian Women in Policing Advisory Committee (CAWIPAC). (Both groups have become quite strategic in their approach and have greatly assisted women in policing, both sworn and unsworn.)

We have seen percentages of sworn women in policing increase from 13.5% overall (Wilkinson and Froyland 1996) to much healthier figures ranging from 17.8% to 27.3% in the jurisdictions in 2005/06 (WA Police HR Benchmarking Report (n.d.)).

We also have seen the numbers of female Commissioned Officers in Australia increase significantly from a mere 28 officers in 1995 (Wilkinson and Froyland 1996) to 149 as at 30 June 2006 (WA Police HR Benchmarking report (n.d.)).

WA, for example, has experienced a significant increase in the last few years. When I arrived in September 2004, there was 1 female Superintendent and 2 Inspectors. Today, we have 1 Assistant Commissioner, 4 Superintendents and 9 Inspectors. However women still only make up around 7% of all Commissioned Officers in WA, with the percentages of female Commissioned Officers ranging from around 5% to

19% within the jurisdictions (WA Police HR Benchmarking report (n.d.)). The numbers of senior unsworn women are still very low as well.

Hence, there are more female role models and more senior women available to assist more junior personnel, but such women are still clearly in the minority. The numbers of senior women are well below the suggested figure of 30% required to develop a critical mass in order to gain acceptance for their own leadership/management style and dynamics.

I would like to think that there is less discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. For those of you who were at the conference in 1996, you might recall that I recounted that I had received a letter advising that I had been successful in securing an interview for an Assistant Commissioner position in the NT. However, the letter went on to suggest that I wear a coat and tie to interview!! I can happily say that that type of advice has not been offered to me in more recent times.

To my way of thinking, there has also been much more equitable deployment of women to specialised areas within policing and to remote/regional postings. There are not too many areas that we haven't infiltrated!

Physical testing has generally been made more job-related and gender/age relevant, not without resistance I might add. A lot of the 6 foot walls without a footing have disappeared from the physical agility tests or obstacle courses. Over the years, there have been lots of gripes, of course, that we have been "lowering the standards" to let more women in. It is one of the major hypocrisies of policing that we can be so physically demanding of our recruits and then take very little interest in their continued health or fitness as they progress up the ladder (although admittedly this is changing in many of our agencies).

And, of course, we have celebrated our first Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, who has been a real champion for women. Christine is living proof that a woman can effectively lead an organisation that is still predominantly made up of men. The world has not come to an end! The sky is not falling in Victoria! Indeed, the situation is quite the opposite.

Women are no longer "invisible" at meetings, conference and learning events. We actually get acknowledged by speakers and senior people. But I do hate it when I get called "Sir", even when I am chairing selection panels for Commissioned Officers! This could of course be nerves, but on other occasions, when passing men in the hallways on a normal working day, the "Sir" is a spontaneous, intuitive reaction. It says quite a bit about the culture! At least in the last 10 years I haven't been mistaken for a secretary or the Commissioner's wife, which used to occur when I attended Commissioners' Conferences and Senior Officer Group meetings! You would have to admit that the work environment is much more supportive and less discriminatory than it used to be. There is, however, still some work to do in the broader community as I have been surprised in recent times how many community members, well-educated ones at that, still use terms like "female policemen"!

There are still stereotypes out there in the community too about what senior policewomen are like. I am often told, after giving a presentation to a new group of people external to WAPOL, that I am not what they expected!

I think it is easier for women these days to remain true to themselves and retain their femininity and develop their own style of leadership and management. Women are still less likely to be tamed or captured by the culture. I have seen this anecdotally with several women coming forward in internal investigations and relating what actually happened, usually at some personal expense. We should be very proud of the strong ethical stance taken by such women.

Having said all that, some things haven't changed enough.

I work with some fantastic male colleagues. However, there is still too much heroic, ego-driven, control-seeking leadership within policing. Women's management style is sometimes still perceived as indecisive and not assertive enough. A consultative and considered style of decision-making/leadership for normal business activities is still largely frowned upon. I love the work of Amanda Sinclair, particularly her more recent book "Leadership for the Disillusioned" (2007). There is so much in her book that I can relate to! As women leaders, I think we need to become more comfortable in acknowledging and using our own power and in understanding organisational politics. After reading Amanda's work and having heard her speak, I feel more confident in my own leadership style and in continuing to challenge the status quo.

Getting back to basics, it makes common sense to move away from the Command and Control model and adopt more of a situational and coaching leadership style, more in line with business best practice and what motivates people in general and the younger generations to work for you. In my career, I have had to lead and manage academic types and lawyers, which presents its own set of challenges! However, there is clearly a place for the Command and Control style within policing in major operations and crises or emergencies.

It's still very difficult for senior women in policing, with very few other senior women to speak to on confidential or sensitive issues. It certainly can be lonely at the top!! It is really important for senior women to have ways of dealing with personal stress. It is often very difficult to de-stress or "vent" within the workplace without those trusted friends who fully understand your issues. I find particularly at senior levels that you need to be so very discerning in what you share with others. Information, particularly confidential and sensitive information, is one of the currencies of power within policing. Women are often not prepared to "play the game" if it means compromising personal values or their integrity. But it also means that by inference you miss out on a lot of organisational information and intelligence. It is even harder when you are relatively new to an organisation and the State!

A critical issue is that we still need more women on the peak decision-making bodies within policing. For instance, we do not have a woman on the Corporate Executive Team (CET) in WA (which is made up of the Commissioner, the two Deputy Commissioners, the Executive Director (a non-sworn position) and a non-sworn Director of one of the Commissioner's direct-report portfolios). I wonder how many of the Australasian jurisdictions, other than Victoria, have the same situation. Men

and women often complement each other in style and approach and there is clear benefit in having diversity, whether in age, gender or backgrounds, on Boards and decision-making bodies. We often do think quite differently and have different priorities and approaches.

I believe that there are still issues with promotional processes and I have had to take a strong personal stand on including sworn women on all sworn promotional panels, which you think would be a non-issue. Fortunately, I have a supportive Commissioner who will listen to concerns.

There is also still a real danger when it comes to “role traps” for women. Women are often great organisers and can still often end up in administrative roles, particularly highly demanding ones such as staff officers to members of the Senior Executive, as just one example. We need to ensure that more women get the opportunity to work as the OIC’s of police stations, for instance.

I also believe that we need to be far more active in attracting women to a policing career and making sure that we do everything reasonable and possible to retain both our men and women. Some jurisdictions are working much harder than others at attracting more women. Victoria really stands out in this regard. Does this tend to indicate that we will only see really significant improvements in numbers when we have women as Commissioners? Some food for thought.

Our organisational cultures must truly come to value diversity and we need to ensure that we work towards eliminating all forms of discrimination, sexual harassment and bullying. Have you noticed that sexist people are the ones that generally make the racist comments as well? Many of the so-called “women’s initiatives” will also benefit indigenous people and the CALD groups as well.

It is the hidden and subconscious biases that are the hardest to identify and tackle.

Over my career I have had the benefit of several high profile male mentors within policing. In the last ten years or so we have seen the emergence of more male champions and supporters. It is really important to include such people in committees and in the promotion and implementation of women’s initiatives. We need to acknowledge their contributions and also work with people external to the organisation, both men and women, to enhance the quality of policing services to our communities. Networking remains a very valuable tool, particularly at a strategic level with key players and organisations. ACWAP is very valuable in this regard, particularly as it reaches out to political leaders, academics, the media and community groups.

Whilst much has been achieved since our first conference, we must continue to ensure increased diversity in the workplace, equitable and accountable HR practices, and a supportive and ethical organisational culture. It is not just about numbers and percentages of women, it is about power distribution and structures, fairness and equity, the true application of merit and women’s perceived prospects for the future. We must strive to create and lead resilient, effective and flexible organisations for the future.

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