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## **THE MENOPAUSE AND THE FEMALE POLICE WORKFORCE**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing upon previously unpublished findings from a wider study that addressed the impact of austerity and force change programmes upon the older female police workforce, this paper presents secondary analysis of focus group data to address the equality impact of such developments. The paper directs particular attention to additional challenges faced by women experiencing the menopause and menopause transition. Focus groups were undertaken between November 2012 and June 2013, across 14 force areas within England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The findings raise questions regarding the service's compliance with the legal obligations set out within the public sector general equality duty, which requires organisations to consider how they could positively contribute to the advancement of equality and remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics. The paper concludes by arguing that it is necessary to consider the intersectionality of age and gender, and to further disaggregate (and make publicly available) workforce data to take into account various subcategories of women and men that make up the police workforce. Finally, the paper highlights the need to take into account wider national and international gender equality policy when entering into 'the future of policing' policy discussions, and within future policing equality and diversity strategy.

### **Keywords**

Female; police; menopause; women; equality

## **Introduction**

The UK government's gender equality strategy (HM Government, 2019) addresses gender equality in the workplace, reflecting international action in this area taken by the United Nations, OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Commission, and the European Union (ACEOWM, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). Collectively, this work seeks to facilitate equal access to employment opportunities and decision-making positions by addressing recruitment, retention and progression within the workplace. It also addresses the gender pay and pension gap between men and women, the reconciliation of work and family life, and sexual harassment within the workplace. Within the field of law enforcement, action towards gender parity and the eradication of gender discrimination is also being pursued internationally. Thus, as detailed by the U.S. Department of Justice (2019), within the policing context, action is being taken to secure the representativeness of women across the various roles, ranks, specialist posts and leadership positions within forces (and across the wider police family), with Australia, Canada and New Zealand credited for providing positive examples in their action to address barriers to female recruitment, retention and progression (see also Manitoba, 2014).

Nevertheless, despite international prioritisation, gender equality within the workplace is not guaranteed. As noted by ACEOWM (2018a:4), progress in the EU-28 remains slow, with the rights of women and girls recently subject to challenge in Europe and elsewhere. Moreover, addressing the policing context specifically, scholars of British policing observe that historically, female recruitment and representation has been characterised by fluctuation, with female officers, staff and volunteers often disproportionately impacted by changes in recruitment and workforce losses following periods of economic strain and in response to service need (Jackson, 2006; Emsley, 2009; Joyce, 2011).

With this in mind, it is noteworthy that following the government's 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, between March 2010 and March 2018 the total police workforce of England and Wales shrank by around 18% (Joyce and Laverick, 2018). Nevertheless, with regard to gender equality, it is significant to note that while workforce reductions resulted in an altered demographic profile, the cuts resulted in a higher proportion of female officers (from 25.7% of the total on 31 March 2010 to 30% on 31 March 2019) (Home Office, 2010a:5; House of Commons, 2019:9). Consequently, while it has been argued that the reductions in police expenditure remained 'historically large' and 'potentially challenging' 'for some forces', it has also been suggested that they should not be regarded as excessive, merely serving to correct the unprecedented 'surge' in police expenditure between 1979 and 2001 (Boyd et al., 2011:6). Moreover, it also seems that workforce reductions have provided the opportunity for forces to (partially) redress the gender balance within their police workforce.

However, while the increased proportion of female officers may initially suggest progress in the area of gender equality within policing, the present paper advocates caution in coming to this conclusion. The present paper offers instead a more nuanced interpretation, highlighting the need to remain sensitive to variation and complexity when addressing the subcategories that make up the female police workforce and the female experience within the current policing context in England and Wales.

Thus, in October 2018, a Home Affairs Committee report *Policing for the future* cast doubt upon the inconsequential nature of the cuts, highlighting what was described as a policing climate of diminished resources and increasing demands, resulting in a police service that was overstretched and struggling to cope (Home Affairs Committee, 2018). These findings have reinvigorated debates regarding the role, function and deployment of policing within a climate of austerity (Joyce and Laverick, 2018). Although these discussions are frequently neglected, they have implications for the sustainability of gender equality gains, particularly within a climate in which tough decisions are being made in relation to competing priorities and how to manage an increasing workload with fewer resources. Thus, as argued elsewhere, it is evident that discussion remains limited regarding the impact of austerity and force change programmes upon particular demographic groups that make up the police workforce (Laverick and Cain, 2015).

There are, however, notable exceptions. Thus, in 2013 both HMIC and the Stevens inquiry noted that spending requirements have disproportionately impacted upon the female police workforce, in terms of police staff workforce reductions and reduced flexibility, with implications for retention and progression within the Service (HMIC, 2013; Stevens, 2013). Nevertheless, despite this acknowledgement, consideration regarding the interplay of gender and age typically remains outside impact assessments and debates on 'the future of policing'. This is significant because, in addition to changes to the gender profile of the police workforce, it has been noted that officers in older age groups now make up a larger proportion of the police workforce (Home Office, 2017:11; Home Office, 2018:31). Indeed, one-third of female police officers in England and Wales are now aged 45 or over, with women comprising 62% of police staff, of which the majority are aged over 41 (PFEW, 2019). With progress being made towards the achievement of gender representation within the service and with the service witnessing a trend towards an older workforce, the menopause is becoming increasingly important as an occupational health issue, with the needs of older women within the service requiring particular attention (PFEW, 2016). Non-discrimination and gender equality are universal values and have been assured in a number of international instruments. Within the UK, the rights of older workers have further been secured through an emerging legislative framework that includes the 2010 Equality Act, which has made it unlawful to discriminate against employees due to age, with such regulations applying to the police and other public and private sector contexts. Nevertheless, this is an area of study which remains under-researched and has, to date, received little attention compared with other protected characteristics within the current diversity agenda.

Drawing upon previously unpublished findings from a wider study that addressed the impact of austerity and force change programmes upon the female police workforce (Laverick and Cain, 2014; 2015), this paper presents secondary analysis of focus group data deriving from the original study to address the equality impact of such developments upon the older female police workforce. The paper draws particular attention to the challenges faced by women experiencing the menopause and menopause transition. It commences with a brief discussion of the changing demographic profile of the police workforce in England and Wales. It then discusses the menopause as an occupational issue before presenting the focus group data. The findings of the research raise questions regarding the

service's compliance with the legal obligations set out within the public sector general equality duty, which requires organisations to consider how they could positively contribute to the advancement of equality and remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics. The paper concludes by arguing that it is necessary to consider the intersectionality of age and gender, and to further disaggregate workforce data to take into account various subcategories of women and men that make up the police workforce. The paper further highlights the need to take into account wider national and international gender equality policy recommendations that address wider structural factors and life-course trends, both when entering into 'the future of policing' policy discussions and within future policing equality and diversity strategy.

## **The demographic profile of the police workforce**

### **An ageing workforce**

Within a climate of workforce and police funding reductions, the demographic profile of the police workforce has begun to change. As detailed by the Home Office, 'in the last ten years the proportion of police officers in older age groups has increased' (Home Office, 2017), with the proportion of officers aged over 40 increasing 'from 39 per cent in 2007 to 48 per cent in 2016' (Home Office, 2017:11). This trend is described as observable 'to some extent across all forces' and is regarded as indicative of 'a trend towards an older workforce in recent years', which the authors contend 'is likely to partly reflect trends in recruitment and retention' (Home Office, 2017:11).

The 2017 Bulletin provides further information regarding the variation in the age profile of different parts of the police workforce, noting that civilian staff tend to be older than other worker types (Home Office, 2017:12). However, while the age data tables for the 2017 Bulletin provide information regarding the age of police officers by rank, time series, worker type and police force area, gender remains glaringly absent. Thus, age and gender data are not dealt with together, making it difficult to determine the age and gender of officers and staff within these categories. Part-time data has also recently been removed from service strength data (rendering comparison between pre- and post-austerity policing data difficult). This is interesting given that as of March 2010 there were 2,853 male part-time members of police staff and 15,672 female part-time members of police staff, with 144 male part-time PCSOs and 761 female part-time PCSOs (Home Office, 2010a:21). As discussed in this paper, opportunities for part-time working and flexibility are particularly significant for the retention of older workers and for women experiencing menopause transition; therefore, the removal of this data may indicate a further neglected area regarding the impact of workforce reductions upon equality outcomes within the service. Despite this omission, the 2018 statistical bulletin informs the reader that as at 31 March 2018, 45% of police officers were aged 41 to 55 years old, including 39% of constables, 62% of sergeants, 77% of inspector ranks, 84% of chief inspector ranks, 88% of superintendent ranks, 93% of chief superintendent ranks and 96% of chief officer ranks (Home Office, 2018).

Crawford and Disney (2014:64) attribute impacts on service length to major police pension reforms, including measures to raise the normal pension age and to alter pension calculation methods. Moreover, the average age at which police officers enter the service has also increased over the last few years, enabling the recruitment of candidates with greater experience and enhanced educational qualifications. These reforms and the

associated increase in pension age and service length have implications for organisational responses to the needs of the older female police workforce (NPCC, 2019:2).

### **Women in policing**

As at 31 March 2019, there were 37,428 female police officers in the 43 police forces in England and Wales, comprising 30% of the total (House of Commons, 2019:9). This is an increase from the 31 March 2010 data, which detailed 37,066 female officers, representing 25.7% of the total (Home Office, 2010a:5) and the 31 March 2004 data, which detailed 28,209 female officers, representing 20% of the total (Home Office, 2004:5). Significantly then, as at 31 March 2018, female officers accounted for 31.6% of constables, 22.8% of sergeants and 23.3% of inspector ranks (Home Office, 2018:34). While still clearly underrepresented across all ranks and within many specialist posts, women comprised 21.4% of senior officer ranks (chief inspector and above), compared to 8% in 2004 (Home Office, 2004) and 14.3% in 2010 (Home Office, 2015b). Thus, in 2019 female officers comprised 22.6% of chief inspector, 19.2% of superintendent, 21.3% of chief superintendent and 21.4% of chief officer ranks (Home Office, 2019). Given the age profile of senior ranks (detailed above), it is evident that menopause transition and the menopause will be relevant for a significant proportion of the female police workforce.

In April 2019, the Police Federation of England and Wales (PFEW) reported that in England and Wales, around one-third of female police officers were aged 45 or over (PFEW, 2019). The PFEW consequently argued that 'the menopause presents an important occupational health issue that has the potential to affect thousands of people within the police service' (PFEW, 2019). Workforce data additionally reveals that as at 31 March 2018, females made up 61% of police staff in the 43 forces in England and Wales (Home Office, 2018:35). The gender split in the Special Constabulary was similar to that for police officers, with around 29% of special constables being female (3 in 10) (Home Office, 2018:35).

### **The menopause as an occupational health issue**

The police workforce consequently reflects trends occurring elsewhere. As noted by Brewis et al. (2017:6), across the industrialised world, 'more working women than ever before will experience the menopause transition'. Within the UK, the number of women aged over 45 has been steadily increasing and is expected to continue to rise (NICE, 2015:24). Regarded as 'part of the natural aging process for women', the menopause 'refers to the point in time when menstruation has ceased for 12 consecutive months' (Griffiths et al., 2010:6). NICE (2015:26) guidance describes the menopause as the time in a woman's life when she 'stops having periods as she reaches the end of her natural reproductive life'. This is not viewed as abrupt, 'but a gradual process during which women experience perimenopause before reaching postmenopause', resulting in menstrual irregularities (Griffiths et al., 2010:6).

The average age of menopause in the UK is 51, but it occurs naturally between the ages of 45 and 55, with the period of hormonal change before, during and after the menopause potentially lasting for six years (TUC, 2014:26). However, 'this varies widely and 1 in 100 women experience premature ovarian insufficiency (menopause occurring before the age of 40 years)' (NICE:online). Furthermore, many more women are experiencing induced menopause as a consequence of medical treatment, which can occur at any age after

puberty. NICE (2015:26) guidance explains that in addition to changes in the menstrual cycle, women may experience a variety of symptoms including:

- vasomotor symptoms
- musculoskeletal symptoms
- effects on mood
- urogenital symptoms
- sexual difficulties.

While many women experience almost no symptoms and relatively little discomfort (Brewis et al., 2017), according to the TUC (2013:4), 'around 80 per cent do experience noticeable changes' with 45% of this figure finding 'their symptoms difficult to deal with'. Common symptoms include hot flushes, heavy and painful periods, irritability, fatigue, depression, anxiety, impaired memory, palpitations, night sweats and sleep disturbance, poor concentration, mood disturbance, and skin irritation and dryness (Griffiths et al., 2010:6; TUC, 2013:4; TUC, 2014:26). In April 2019, data from the PFEW menopause survey reported that 76% of participants who had either gone through or were going through the menopause admitted they had found symptoms either moderately or extremely problematic at work, with more than eight out of ten agreeing that tiredness and sleep disturbances were having a detrimental effect (PFEW, 2019). Research into this area has found that menopausal symptoms can pose significant and sometimes embarrassing problems for some women (Atkinson and Carter, 2017; 2018), with different individuals experiencing different combinations of symptoms (Brewis et al., 2017). These include loss of sleep (potentially affecting concentration), heavy periods and hot flushes (which may result in physical distress and embarrassment, particularly in front of colleagues and managers). Further symptoms detailed by the authors include irritability and mood swings, potentially affecting relationships at work and performance. Symptoms can result in absences from work, with very severe symptoms meaning that 'women cannot work at all' (Brewis et al., 2017:20).

Significantly, data from the PFEW menopause survey recently reported that 44% of respondents who had taken sickness absence due to the menopause had not told their manager the real reason for their absence. Moreover, of those who had told their manager the real reason, only 9% said that their absence had been recorded accurately. The data also revealed that 62% of respondents had attended work despite feeling that they should have taken sick leave because they were experiencing symptoms of the menopause, with 35% of respondents reporting taking annual leave or rest days to have time off because of their symptoms (PFEW, 2019).

In addition to the more widely known symptoms detailed above, Griffiths et al. (2010:10) observe other health-related changes associated with the menopause, including an enhanced risk of osteoporosis, stress incontinence, reduced elasticity within the arteries, and weight gain. The authors note that these changes are all associated with an increase in the risk of cardiovascular disease, which is identified as the single leading cause of mortality in postmenopausal women (Griffiths et al., 2010). Griffiths et al. (2010) highlight that

prevention has been associated with lifestyle factors, highlighting the importance of health, fitness and wellbeing for the older female police workforce.

However, some of the health-related problems traditionally identified with the menopause may not in fact be the direct result of hormonal imbalances (Griffiths et al., 2010:10), but rather ‘the effects of other changes for women in mid-life’ that remain ‘difficult to separate from the effects of transition symptoms’ (Brewis et al., 2017:8). Consequently, while neglected within policy discussions until relatively recently (see for example, ACEOWM, 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; HM Government, 2019), and beyond the remit of the recent PFEW menopause survey, it is argued that the interplay of physical changes, domestic and caring responsibilities, individual lifestyles and cultural attitudes generates a complexity that requires symptoms to be placed within their broader psychological and social context. Across Europe, part-time work remains a more common feature of women’s employment (Eurofound, 2014:6), with caring for children and dependent relatives remains a highly gendered issue (Eurofound, 2017:1). Research undertaken by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, 2017a:34) further suggests that ‘a quarter of the UK’s adult population have experienced “sandwich caring” at some point in their lives, where someone provides care for a dependent child or grandchild, as well as a parent’, with ‘those in the middle generation’, and ‘particularly women’, typically affected (see also Altmann, 2015:31-32). Despite this, recent research suggests that only a third of employers have a policy in place to support carers in their workplace (DWP, 2017a:35). An understanding of the cumulative effect of gender, age and biopsychocultural factors is therefore regarded as important when considering the role capacity, retention, progression and performance of older female employees.

Within Europe and the UK, in response to demographic changes research has been commissioned to investigate individual changes associated with ageing; and employers and governmental organisations have made efforts to devise solutions in response to age-related challenges within employment. Such work has directed attention to the needs of the older workforce and to possible adaptations to working conditions and career paths that may be required to facilitate the retention of physical and mental health, motivation and productivity throughout an individual’s ‘extended working life’ (Eurofound, 2015:1). Moreover, the increased prevalence of women within the employment landscape has led commentators to recommend that the impact of menopause transition should be recognised and ‘should be taken more seriously’ (Altmann, 2015:10). Research has consequently encouraged employers to provide adequate support for older women who are going through the menopause, recognising that many women are ill prepared ‘for its arrival, and even less equipped to manage its symptoms at work’ (Griffiths et al., 2010:52).

### **The gender agenda**

The findings detailed within this paper are drawn from secondary analysis of focus group data that comprised part of a larger study which aimed to assess the consequences of the Comprehensive Spending Review and associated force change programmes upon the female police workforce in England and Wales, alongside wider policing reforms across the UK (Laverick and Cain, 2014). The wider study informed the British Association of Women in Policing’s (BAWP) national policing strategic plan, *Gender Agenda 3* (BAWP, 2014), and



raised questions regarding the value of particular sections of the police workforce within a climate of diminished resources. In particular, the research highlighted a number of challenges faced by parents and carers, part-time workers, police staff, dual police families, the older police workforce, and those on alternative working arrangements (Laverick and Cain, 2015).

While the original research was not intended to be a bespoke study of the menopause, the research findings have implications for the retention and progression of the older female police workforce, particularly for women experiencing the menopause and menopause transition. The research highlighted cuts to dedicated equality and diversity resources and training within forces, workforce reductions, and the loss of force resilience. The data also revealed continuing negative cultural narratives of women within the service, and raised questions regarding the potential for the groups detailed above to achieve a work–life balance and a successful career (Laverick and Cain, 2015).

In July 2012, an online survey (Laverick and Cain, 2014: 257-259) was sent to all national representative police staff support associations asking participants to comment on the issues currently affecting female officers and staff within the service. This was followed by six semi-structured in-depth interviews with diversity and equality practitioners from individual forces and national policing bodies. Finally, 31 focus groups were conducted in 14 force areas across the UK, also including representation from national policing bodies and unions. The interviews and focus groups were thematically organised to prompt reflection regarding BAWP’s Gender Agenda aims:

- the value of women in policing
- female representation within key policy forums
- workforce representativeness
- work–life balance
- working environment and equipment.

Forces were selected to include representation from those identified by HMIC as planning to reduce their workforce by more than the national average of 13.3%, alongside those planning lower than average workforce reductions. The objective was to explore the views of police officers and staff from across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, directing attention to participants’ assessments of the issues currently affecting women within the Service. Over two hundred and fifty participants took part. The findings are not representative of the general population of police officers and staff within the police service as a whole, but seek to explore complex issues across a broad cross-section of the ranks, grades and roles, including specialist posts.

Focus group sessions were divided between:

1. Diversity and equality practitioner, female staff support network representatives, and human resources participants [FG1]
2. Male and female parent and carer sessions [FG2]
3. Male and female specialist branches, units or roles [FG3].

Focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. To ensure confidentiality, names of respondents were not recorded on the transcripts; instead, the transcripts note the rank, grade and role of the officer or staff member as a means of identifying them for the purpose of data analysis. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo to identify core research themes (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003).

### **The findings**

In 2016, the PFEW acknowledged that 'older women officers often feel discriminated against, isolated and vulnerable at work' and subsequently described the menopause as 'an occupational issue of growing importance' (PFEW, 2016a). More recently, the PFEW Menopause Survey reported that the 'vast majority (76%) who had either gone through or were going through the menopause admitted they had found symptoms either moderately or extremely problematic at work, with more than eight out of ten agreeing tiredness and sleep disturbances were having a detrimental effect'. The PFEW survey also reported that 'nearly half of respondents (44%) who found their symptoms extremely problematic have considered quitting the force as a result' (PFEW, 2019). The survey provides important evidence regarding the effect of the menopause upon officers and staff in the police service and reflects the findings of other recent studies in the area (Atkinson and Carter, 2017; 2018). Here, we draw out the implications of policing developments for the older female police workforce, highlighting particular challenges associated with the menopause and menopause transition.

### **The institutional response**

Within the UK, a legislative framework exists that has made it unlawful to discriminate against employees on the basis of age. An equality duty further requires organisations to consider how they could positively contribute to the advancement of equality, to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics, and to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people. Nevertheless, our data revealed that female participants approaching the menopause often experienced anxiety and uncertainty about how they would be treated and managed within their own forces. For many of the female participants, the pension reforms were neither expected nor welcome, with the increased length of service featuring frequently within focus group discussions. Women articulated concern regarding role capability and performance, further highlighting a perceived need for the service to employ a strategic approach to personnel management, one that embraces a life-cycle perspective:

**[FG2 female officer, age 35-45]** I will be going through the menopause shortly, and I don't know what to expect. I don't know what [name of Force] will do about it. I don't know how they will support it. There are times in your service where you will go through children and you don't know what to expect... You go through it and within the police service you tend to stay for 30 years, it is now going to be 35 of course. You need to be investing in your employees and going along this life-cycle journey with them and managing men and women, because we all have different needs at different ages and over the cycle of 35 years, you would expect to be a little bit up and down

when you peak performance and when you drop performance, but it is about the overall picture really.

### **Line manager training and support**

Menopausal symptoms have been viewed as posing a number of challenges for older women, with studies revealing that frequently individuals suffer in silence. For example, a police study conducted by Griffiths et al. (2006) revealed that the menopause represented a major challenge for some women's health but was not widely regarded as a legitimate occupational health concern. Participants within later research similarly expressed concern regarding job performance, with a few accounts detailing experiences of disciplinary proceedings resulting from behaviour or poor performance that the participants themselves viewed as directly related to menopausal symptoms (Griffiths et al., 2010:6-8). Participants reportedly expressed anxiety regarding line manager perceptions of competence at work, resulting in reduced confidence, lower self-esteem and consequences for mental health, wellbeing and role effectiveness.

Research has further highlighted a lack of line manager skill to ensure older workers feel comfortable discussing issues related to ageing. Altmann (2015:12), for example, observes that the menopause is 'often neglected or overlooked within the workplace' and is seldom recognised as a potential challenge for women at work. DWP research further suggests that line managers may be reluctant to suggest or offer flexible working arrangements, with employers remaining wary of holding mid-life career review conversations with older workers (DWP, 2017b:11). In addition, studies into the menopause have highlighted a desire on the part of older female employees for greater awareness among managers of the menopause as a possible occupational health issue, alongside the provision of formal information and advice from employers and less formal support. Issues of non-disclosure related to feelings of embarrassment or concerns regarding performance have been highlighted, emphasising the importance of 'informed, sympathetic and appropriate support from line management', which is regarded as 'crucial in order to provide employees with the support they need' (Griffiths et al., 2010:7).

Similarly, our data recognised the absence or inadequacy of line manager training as a key concern. Thus, participants directed attention to the lack of institutional training and support offered in relation to roles and promoted posts, and for the development of skills and knowledge to support staff under their care. As noted by one female officer, 'there seems to be this expectation that you are promoted and you just get on with it' [FG3, female officer, age 46-55]. This situation was identified as 'setting individuals up to fail' [FG3, female officer, age 46-55], and was often reflected in the accounts of both officers and staff:

**[FG1, female staff, age 46-55]** You used to get sergeants com[ing] in and they are expected to know and get on with the job but they haven't got the people-management skills that are necessarily needed so they haven't got a lot of the knowledge.

Concerns were raised regarding the adequacy of existing performance frameworks in identifying candidates with the necessary management skills, characteristics and attitudes required for line management. These observations have been supported by the PFEW

Menopause Survey, which revealed that only 11% of managers said that they had been given training on how to support someone going through the menopause (PFEW, 2019). Within our own research, in addition to the need for support, training and personal development for line managers, the desirability for mentoring remained common themes:

**[FG3, female officer, age 46-55]** I think there should be mentoring if you are going into a senior management role... when I got the job that was it, you carry on and just do what you have got to do and figure it out for yourself. I sit here and question myself 90% of the day, have I got that right?

Conversations frequently alluded to the current inadequacy of the support available to line managers, a situation compounded by workforce reductions, force restructures, reduced training and dedicated equality and diversity resources, centralisation and regionalisation (Laverick and Cain, 2014; 2015). Accounts reported a reduction in local knowledge and expertise, access difficulties and delays in responses, with a number of participants describing existing structures as 'unfit for purpose'. With this in mind, it is important to note that in 2006 the *Gender Agenda 2* publication argued that line managers must have a greater understanding of the issues facing women (BAWP, 2006). Despite progress, our data indicate that these achievements may require revisiting. Thus, line managers consistently articulated concern that they lacked knowledge of, and confidence in, applying a whole range of policies affecting the experiences of many sections of the female police workforce; they also lacked confidence in their skills to deal sensitively with welfare issues. In 2013, the TUC recognised that employers 'have been slow to recognise that women of menopausal age may need special consideration', resulting in ignorance regarding the issues involved, arguing that 'for too long it has simply been seen as a private matter' (TUC, 2013:3). Similarly, Altmann (2015:25) recognised that line managers comprise key barriers to later life employment. A DWP report (2017b:32) also observed that too many line managers remain untrained in managing age-diverse teams, resulting in individuals feeling ill-equipped to respond adequately to the challenges of older employees, while promoting a culture of non-disclosure and a reluctance on the part of employees to ask for adjustments that may help them (see also TUC, 2013:3). Griffiths et al. (2010:52) and the PFEW Menopause Survey both observed disclosure issues where women had taken time off to deal with their menopause-related symptoms; the latter reported that a number of respondents said they would be too embarrassed to discuss symptoms with their line manager, believing that they would be treated in a negative way if they did disclose, as it could be seen as a sign of weakness. The survey further noted that 'often respondents flagged their line manager was male and sometimes younger than them, which they also saw as an additional barrier to disclosure' (PFEW, 2019).

Line managers who contributed to our focus group discussions similarly stressed the importance of management style, skills and knowledge of policies, in addition to the need for guidance on the implementation of policy and access to support. Line managers voiced their desire for additional training to be directed towards a range of welfare issues, including part-time and flexible working arrangements, and support for the older workforce (including menopause and eldercare). When asked what training was available for line managers, male and female officers frequently stated that there was 'none', adding that

despite the existence of strategies and policies, line managers remained 'unaware' or 'lacked knowledge' of their content. As acknowledged by one female line manager:

**[FG3, female officer, age 35-45]** I wouldn't have a clue, to be quite honest with you. I wouldn't have a clue, if someone came to me.

A female staff line manager explained that training was not mandatory and as a consequence, 'the people who didn't go were the people that really needed to', adding 'the ones that needed to develop and learn can't be bothered to go, so the bad ones don't get any better, the good ones do' [FG1, female staff, age 46-55]. Other participants highlighted variation in the implementation of policies across the service in relation to 'how individuals manage, supervise, [and] implement those policies' [FG1, female officer, age 46-55]. Such observations highlight the need for the police service to offer good practice guidance, training and mentoring for line managers, emphasising the significance of career reviews, personal development, training and role change alongside age, gender (and life-cycle) sensitive career pathways for older workers.

### **Workplace adjustments**

As noted by the TUC (2013), workplaces and working practices were not originally designed with menopausal women in mind. Consequently, recommendations have been made with a view to supporting the needs of older women within the workplace and ensuring that employers anticipate and respond to specific health and safety concerns relating to older women (Unite the Union, 2012). In particular, the TUC has emphasised the legislative basis for this responsibility, reminding employers that on top of the 2010 Equality Act, which places a duty upon employers not to discriminate, the Health and Safety at Work Act requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees, which includes undertaking risk assessments for any specific risks to menopausal women if they are employed (TUC, 2013:8). Griffiths et al. (2010) also advocate the implementation of risk assessments that address the specific needs of older women alongside performance reviews that take account of women's health issues, with particular reference to the menopause.

In addition to the provision of emotional, informational and practical support to assist women to prepare for and cope with problematic menopausal symptoms, research by Griffiths et al. (2010:46) has emphasised the importance of implementing workplace adjustments to (a) the immediate work environment, and (b) work routines. As noted by the West Yorkshire Police Federation (2016b:online), women have won employment tribunals against forces where reasonable adjustments have not been made, including a sex discrimination case against British Transport Police in 2011.

### **Adjustments to the immediate environment**

Griffiths et al. (2010) detailed the importance of obtaining fans, good ventilation, air conditioning, access to cold drinking water, and the provision of toilet facilities for those with menopausal symptoms. Their research further noted the desirability of a suitable rest area, and adequate uniforms to mitigate against menopausal experiences, particularly distressing hot flushes and heavy or painful periods. Hot and poorly ventilated environments, formal meetings and high-visibility work such as formal presentations were

explicitly identified as features of work that reportedly made symptoms more difficult to cope with. These considerations again featured within our data. Thus, for one senior specialist female officer, it was particularly important for forces to proactively anticipate environmental considerations rather than responding retrospectively to individual female need, which, in her view, would run the risk of unnecessarily separating and isolating individuals:

**[FG3, female officer, age 56+]** I don't want to be in a box 'oh you're a woman'! I have spent my entire career saying to people, I don't care what you think, this is me and this is the job I do. I am an individual, part of your team, not a woman, not male, all the rest of it... With the menopause, it is more about air conditioners that will benefit everybody and water coolers, rather than the woman having to say, 'I am menopausal, I need...' Having these things available for everyone.

Women disclosed employing a range of precautionary measures, such as having a change of clothes at work and wearing layers. However, significantly, policing trends towards increased collaboration, regionalisation and mobility between forces and divisional areas have reportedly made the storage of personal belongings increasingly difficult. Others noted difficulties for female officers in accessing changing rooms and toilet facilities, along with the provision of additional uniform (Laverick and Cain, 2014; 2015).

In a review of menopause literature, Brewis et al. (2017:9) identify a number of employer interventions within the existing evidence base. Interventions include making changes to organisational cultures; compulsory equality and diversity training; providing specialist advice; tailored absence policies; and fairly low-cost environmental changes. While few publications are identified as having discussed government intervention to better support women in transition, the authors point towards future action in relation to information and awareness raising, such as including the menopause within occupational health campaigns and training, and commissioning further research. To that end, research recommendations have suggested that employers should ensure that all line managers are trained to be aware of how the menopause can affect work and what adjustments may be necessary to support women who are experiencing it. Employer communication in order to demonstrate a positive attitude to the issue is also viewed as necessary, alongside action to address cultural barriers to disclosure and risk assessments highlighting the need to ensure that the working environment will not make symptoms worse. In addition, the review highlighted the importance of flexible working patterns for mid-life women, and it is to this issue that we now turn.

### **Adjustments to work routines**

As noted above, adjustments to work routines have comprised further recommendations within recent research. Workplace adjustments include changes to working hours and enhanced flexibility. Thus, Altmann (2015) argues that employers need to adopt age-friendly policies, including flexible working, phased retirement, family care leave and even gap breaks and family crisis leave. A more strategic approach to the ageing workforce is consequently promoted, where 'health and wellbeing policies take account of older workers' needs (including support for women through the menopause) and where

employers enable staff to combine work with caring responsibilities' (Altmann, 2015:6). Griffiths et al.'s (2010) study similarly advocates adjustments to work routines, with TUC guidance further reiterating the importance of flexible working to enable women to cope with symptoms (TUC, 2014:26). The extension of the right to flexible working is also explicitly celebrated as part of the Conservative government's 'achievements' 'to champion and support the older worker' (Altmann, 2015:5). Consequently, the provision of flexible working remains a key component of recent research recommendations directed towards the support of older workers generally and for women experiencing menopausal symptoms.

In June 2014 all employees were granted a statutory right to ask their employer for permission to work flexibly for any reason, provided that they have worked for their employer for at least 26 weeks continuously at the date the application is made (DWP, 2017b:27). Additional recommendations include proposals to ensure that sickness absence procedures and working time arrangements remain flexible enough to cater for menopause-related sickness absence, the promotion of home and agile working, and the facilitation of part-time work, if required. Significantly, in the light of reported disciplinary proceedings and changes to the fitness requirements, it is important to note that recommendations explicitly included the suggestion that women should experience no detriment if they need time off during this time in their career.

Research commissioned by the DWP (2017b:3) observes that employers view existing flexible working policies and procedures as effective in meeting the needs of older workers. However, their research found that 'these policies are not always clearly articulated and are predominantly used by new parents'. While flexible working may not be routinely offered to older workers, as noted by the DWP (2017a:3), 'employees of all ages, who were able to work flexibly were more likely to be positive about their job'. As detailed by Dick (2009:189) the benefits of reduced-hours working for employees, employers and organisations are well known, with employees reporting considerable improvements in work-life balance and wellbeing and employers using reduced-hours staff in ways that confer advantages to workgroups. College of Policing (2013:7) guidance similarly articulates a number of benefits for the police service, including the 'retention of valuable officers and staff; wider diversity of recruits attracted to and retained by the Service; reduced recruitment and training costs; flexible working to meet operational demands; reduced sickness absence; and improved morale and commitment' (See also Home Office, 2010b). Research addressing the menopause also alludes to the positive benefits of such arrangements. Thus, flexible working arrangements and measures have been suggested in order to assist women experiencing menopausal symptoms to cope with the challenges faced, with attention to the working environment and working conditions comprising key features of BAWP's (2006) *Gender Agenda 2* aims. Such benefits have implications for the retention of experience-based knowledge and skills, workforce representativeness, public confidence and police legitimacy (see Laverick and Cain, 2015).

The implementation of adjustments to work routine nevertheless requires line managers to receive the correct training to successfully support police officers and staff under their care, or within their 'span of control'.<sup>1</sup> The TUC (2013:8-9) recommends that guidance should be freely available in the workplace and that managers should adopt a flexible and sympathetic approach to requests for a break or even a return home. However, given recent changes to flexible working implementation, workforce reductions, changes within shift patterns, increasing spans of control for senior officers, and the much-reduced provision of training and personal development, as detailed within earlier work (Laverick and Cain, 2014; 2015), it seems that significant challenges must still be overcome before the recommendations advocated by Altmann (2015), Griffiths et al. (2010) and the TUC (2014) become a reality. Moreover, as noted by Laurence (2016), while female officers comprise 30% of the police force in England and Wales, they remain highly concentrated in specific areas, with strong inequalities and underrepresentation evident within specialised departments. With the recent reduction in neighbourhood policing and the shift towards reactive policing detailed by HMIC (2013), Stevens (2015) and the Home Affairs Committee (2018), career pathways and flexible working arrangements for the older female police workforce may be becoming more limited at a time when older female workers comprise a greater proportion of the police workforce. Reduced police workforce and resilience, therefore, has important equality consequences, particularly regarding the service's ability to respond to the needs of the older female police workforce.

TUC and DWP research with older workers has highlighted preferences on the part of employees for their employer to offer flexible hours, part-time working, and the options of taking on a less demanding role or working fewer hours (TUC, 2014:4; DWP, 2016). Nevertheless, 'anecdotal evidence suggests that negotiating flexible working arrangements is not always as straightforward as it should be' (TUC, 2014:4), with flexible working remaining 'far from a reality for many employees, including many carers who cannot work without it' (TUC, 2014:23). Similarly, Altmann (2015:31-32) found that while 'older women usually welcome the opportunity to work on a part-time basis to be able to combine employment with caring responsibilities', 'this is not always possible'. Consequently, while it seems that equal opportunities policies have become more widespread, evidence suggests that practices have not (DWP, 2017a:3), with research further suggesting that the ageing workforce 'is not currently a prominent concern among employers' (DWP, 2017a:48).

Within the policing context, a survey of women officers undertaken by the Independent Police Commission for Crime and Justice Studies (Stevens, 2013:105) revealed that half of the participants care for children, 6% care for an ageing parent and 4% have other caring responsibilities. Despite this, 18% of the survey respondents indicated that flexible working is either discouraged or not tolerated within their forces. These findings are significant, given that within the Independent Commission for Crime and Justice Studies research, 20% of women reported being primary carers. Moreover, over half of the officers in the survey indicated that changes in shift patterns present difficulties, with 43% reporting that on-call

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<sup>1</sup> 'Span of control' is a policing term (also used in business management) to refer to the area of activity and number of functions, people, or things for which an individual or organisation is responsible.



duties were also potentially problematic (Stevens, 2013:105). Our data contained a surprisingly high level of reports detailing marked reductions in alternative working arrangements within forces, reflecting the findings of other recent police studies that have noted an unusually low uptake of alternative working arrangements, including flexible and part-time working within forces (Atkinson and Carter, 2017; 2018). Such developments have serious consequences for retention, representation and work–life balance, in addition to personal finances. The findings provide anecdotal evidence to support the concerns raised by staff associations, as detailed within the HMIC (2013) report, regarding the impact of spending requirements upon flexible working arrangements. As noted above, such developments are viewed as having disproportionate consequences for the female police workforce because ‘flexible working is often developed to support those with caring responsibilities’ (HMIC, 2013:84).

**[FG1, female equality and diversity practitioner, age 56+]** We wanted to be an employer of choice. We couldn’t get people and couldn’t retain staff that is the reality of it, so we had fantastic flexible working. As the economy shifted, as things have got harder, we are seeing that policy being eroded. We are seeing more and more managers saying ‘I can’t allow it’, ‘the business need is’, ‘can’t’. I am confident that the policy will be re-written to say we are not going to support it any longer.

Significantly, our data contained numerous reports of wholesale reviews of flexible working occurring across several UK forces, delays in the processing of flexible working applications, and pressure upon officers in particular to move from part-time to full-time positions, alongside a general sense of negativity regarding part-time and flexible workers. These issues were regarded by the participants as generating considerable challenges for carers, older workers and menopausal women, with consequences for the health and wellbeing of these groups (see also Griffiths et al., 2010:53). It is therefore noteworthy that data on part-time employment has recently been removed from Home Office workforce statistical bulletins, making comparison pre-and post-austerity difficult.

**[FG 1, female officer and Federation representative, age 56+]** It has come as a direction from the senior management team, which conflicts with what the direction was from the reviews themselves and actually conflicts with all the College of Policing agreed guidance on how managers should look at flexible working applications. So... those sort of attitudes which I would have seen back in the eighties now seem to be resurrecting themselves in quite a dramatic way, which a lot of our membership are complaining about, and it is ‘if you don’t like it ship out’.

As detailed by Monkhouse (2012:77), cases of sex discrimination make up a quarter of the cases litigated by the PFEW, with many concerned ‘with the practical issues of maternity and flexible working’. For Monkhouse, ‘this raises concerns about institutional sexism where force practices do not meet the needs of women officers who have a family’ (2012:77), to which we may add, on the basis of our research findings, sections of the older female police workforce, who face particular challenges as detailed above. Writing in 2012, Monkhouse observed that while part-time officers comprised approximately 5% of total

police officer strength, concerns had been raised that financial cuts would result in forces considering part-time working as a burden rather than a benefit. This finding was also evident within our data, where part-time workers reported experiencing pressure to take on full-time roles, with little regard for personal circumstances and individual need. Such circumstances impacted upon wellbeing and mental health:

**[FG2, female officer, age 35-45]** I have still got me daughter. I have still got my parents and my father is really frail. You feel guilty because my daughter, she is getting older and that girl [another female officer wishing to secure a flexible working arrangement] could really do with this, and I understand that, I really do. And they [management] just say 'no, you're not doing it'. They just go off sick then and that is what happens, they go off sick because they are so stressed, they end up really stressed out and they go off sick.

**[FG2, female officer, age 35-45]** They did nearly push me to that. I was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. I didn't have one. I had one day off, but I just couldn't cope with it any longer. It took for me to actually go to the door and I was breaking down and I didn't want anyone to see me cry because I took it as a sign of weakness, but I just couldn't take it any more and it took until then for anything to have got done and I don't think I should have been expected to have been seen that vulnerable.

In 2009 Dick observed that most organisations adopt a piecemeal approach to accommodating reduced-hours staff, reflecting an organisational failure to identify roles suited to reduced-hours working. This situation was identified as creating managerial difficulties in accommodating 'reduced-hours workers within systems designed around the temporal rhythms of full-time work' (Dick, 2009:184). Monkhouse (2012:77) similarly concludes that 'there remains a gulf between policy and practice in the service, with little practical recognition of the needs of women in the workplace', arguing further that women 'are still regarded as proxy men who need to bend to the service's practices rather than the other way round'. As noted by one sandwich carer, part-time workers remain negatively regarded and undervalued within the service:

**[FG 2, part-time female officer, age 35-45]** 'We are doing you a favour' is the actual sort of perception you get. In my own experience, part time, term time, it is sort of frowned upon. My manager has actually said to me 'you are part-time, term time, come in when you feel like it time' and that is not actually the case. When I am here I do a full-time job in that part time. I have a bigger workload than my full-time colleagues and still manage it by myself and it is frowned upon in my opinion. It is not something they want to allow you to have, they want to have bums on seats in offices and if you are doing a quality job they are not interested, as long as your bum is on that seat on that day.

## **Conclusion**

Within a context of austerity, the reduction in police expenditure and subsequent workforce reductions have not been inconsequential. Indeed, both HMIC in 2013 and the Stevens inquiry in 2013 have acknowledged that spending requirements have disproportionately impacted upon the female police workforce, with implications for retention and progression within the service. Nevertheless, failure to address the interplay of gender and age obscures the differential impact of the cuts for particular sections of the female police workforce, with older women and those experiencing the menopause and menopause transition facing additional challenges within the workplace.

Flexible working, part-time employment and age-sensitive career pathways are regarded as particularly important for the retention of older workers, especially those with caring responsibilities (who remain disproportionately female) and for women experiencing menopause transition. While women now make up a greater proportion of the police workforce in England and Wales, it is important not to forget, as detailed by Laurence (2016:online) that 'women make up half of the UK population, but not even a third of UK police officers, and occupy less than a quarter of senior ranks within the forces'. Reducing the number of women within the service, or the number of older women in the service, to accommodate operational and business need is not an option without significant sacrifice to the values of equality and non-discrimination.

In 2006, the Gender Agenda challenged the police service to demonstrate that it values women in policing. The national police gender strategy highlighted the need for the service to support work–life balance and to ensure that women are provided with a working environment and equipment of the right quality and standard (BAWP, 2006). Since that time, the 2010 Equality Act and the Health and Safety at Work Act have placed an additional requirement upon employers to anticipate and respond to specific health and safety concerns of employees. Given the findings detailed within our research, we advocate refining these aims to protect particular subcategories of the female police workforce. We further recommend action to address the interplay of age and gender (as protected characteristics) when addressing the equality impact of policies, practices and the delivery of service.

Our findings reflect the need to adopt a strategic approach and to plan more effectively for the trend towards an ageing workforce, particularly within the current period of financial strain and organisational change. Measures are required to address police organisational culture, to implement adaptations to the working environment and working conditions (including flexible working and part-time provision), and to generate life-cycle sensitive career pathways, line-manager training and more appropriate absence policies. Currently, age and gender are not examined together within police workforce statistics, and neither do they feature together within calls for the publication of transparent diversity profiles for every police force (Home Office, 2015a). Perhaps more ominously, details regarding part-time employment have been removed from police service strength data.

Our data contributes to a developing evidence base regarding the importance of examining the intersection of age and gender alongside other biopsychocultural factors when addressing the needs and wellbeing of the female police workforce. We suggest there is a

need for the service to remain sensitive to the potential cumulative effect of changes associated with ageing and menopause transition. In particular, our findings suggest that the service needs to recognise that women of menopausal age may require special consideration and support if it is to avoid accusations of institutional sexism and ageism, and to adhere to the recommendations of recent national and international gender equality strategy within the workplace.

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