

## **Women in Policing: from 'separate spheres' to integration**

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In 1915 Edith Smith was the first woman to be sworn in as a police officer in Grantham, whilst women across the country became voluntary patrols, aiming to protect 'vulnerable' women and children from the dangers of street life but also to prevent sexual encounters between servicemen and 'amateur prostitutes' (to prevent the spread of venereal disease). A small number of 'policewomen' were also appointed to supervise female munitions work. Thus overtly feminist agendas were, from these early days, combined with strategies of moral regulation in which women sought to control the behaviour of others of their own sex. Women's role in policing was linked to a 'separate sphere of usefulness' that pigeon-holed them as experts in matters relating to women and children. Arguments about gender difference shaped their entry into policing. In the 1920s-30s campaigns for the appointment of women police were supported by women MPs of all parties. Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson maintained that women constables 'have a special job to do, work that it is undesirable that any man should be called upon to undertake.... the many difficult cases arising out of offences committed by and on women and children' (*Pearson's Weekly*, 13 Oct 1928). The number of women employed in British policing increased slowly from only 282 in 1940 to 418 in 1945 and 4,000 in 1966. Yet they formed a critical mass of officers who, particularly in the larger cities in Britain, developed a distinct occupational identity.

Pioneering women police officers such as Dorothy Peto (head of the Women Police Branch of the Metropolitan Police from 1930 to 1946) carved out a significant operational role for women in relation to, firstly, child protection, and secondly, indecent assault cases involving female and child victims. This was assisted by legislation such as the 1933 Children and Young Persons Act, which stated that any female child or young person who was 'detained, being conveyed or waiting' at a police station 'must be under the care of a woman'. Women officers developed styles of record-keeping and family intervention that imitated modern social casework. A small number of women were employed within Criminal Investigations Departments (CIDs) for the specific purposes of taking statements from victims of rape and sexual assault. This was a role carried out by Lilian Wyles in the Met and by Mildred White in Birmingham; both developed substantial expertise as statement-takers and were involved in the training of women officers in these specialist areas.

Thus women's association with emotional or caring work shaped their profile of activities in policing. They were aware of the existence of child sexual abuse as well as of the need for some form of aftercare after an allegation had been made, although their pioneering efforts would be judged woefully inadequate in terms of current practice. During the interwar years Lilian Wyles ensured that a clean supply of clothes was available for child

victims following medical examination. She accompanied children in the courtroom when called as witnesses, claiming on one occasion that she had reprimanded a defence barrister after one trial for adopting a highly aggressive style of questioning (see her autobiography *A Woman at Scotland Yard*, London, 1952). In relation to rape cases involving adults, women officers developed a more sympathetic style of questioning. They were, however, constrained by the law and by wider cultural assumption about gender and sexuality. Thus Mildred White told a conference of policewomen in 1937 that rape in adult women was 'very much rarer than is sometimes supposed; in twenty years I have only known three cases in which a conviction was secured' (quoted in L.A. Jackson, *Women Police*, p. 187). Cases that might now be labelled as 'date rape' were assumed by both male and female officers to have involved women's consent.

The existence of Policewomen's Departments, along with separate structures of pay, conditions and promotions, meant that the masculine culture of policing was rarely challenged. Women were 'a force within a force', with a clearly gendered identity as female officers. It was not until the early 1970s, as a result of the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act that women officers were formally integrated with policemen on the same terms. Cases of sexual harassment and discrimination came to light as women battled for a new form of recognition – as police officers.

### **Further Reading**

Clive Emsley (2010) *The Great British Bobby. A History of British Policing from the C18th to the Present* (Quercus).

Joan Lock (1<sup>st</sup> edn 1979) *The British Policewoman. Her Story* (Robert Hale).

Louise A. Jackson (2006) *Women Police: Gender, Welfare and Surveillance in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester University Press).