

CAMILLA DE CAMARGO

# WHEN THE UNIFORM DOESN'T FIT

Innovative solutions to ill-fitting police uniforms are urgently needed (again). Dr Camilla De Camargo discusses the social, physical and mental health and safety repercussions of the current 'unisex' police uniform.

Working collaboratively with officers, academics, and designers, Camilla aims to produce a practical, comfortable, and inclusive conceptual design for all front-line police officers. This is key in supporting a police service that aims to recruit 20,000 new officers by 2025, while improving the diversity of its staff.

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, gender has been segregated by uniform at school and in the workplace, and despite some significant progress, it often still is. Various industries have faced criticism for having sexist uniform policies and demonstrated reluctance to modify outdated regulations, and every so often one of these policies, steeped in inequality, grabs the media's attention, causes controversy, and (sometimes) incites a change. There are many industries that still unwittingly embed gendered discrimination through their clothes and the design of their equipment in the workplace. A prime example of this can be found in police uniforms. Although there are psycho-social reasons why women's police uniforms need to be redesigned (including feelings of well-being and belonging), there is also evidence to suggest that wearing ill-fitting uniforms and personal protective equipment (PPE) can be extremely hazardous to health. Some progression has been seen in some arenas (tennis players/footballers not having to wear white shorts over menstruation concerns for instance), but the police seem reluctant to make meaningful change. Why?

## FITTING IN(TO UNIFORMS)

Clothing has always been a key component in the judgement of appearance and a vital index to status, power and authority. The police uniform, with its iconic symbolic status, is very important to its wearers in conveying feelings of solidarity and being part of a team. It encourages legitimacy and the group-imposed conformity of its members to be enhanced (Joseph & Alex, 1972). After all, the public expect police officers to at least 'look the part' (Craik, 2005, p. 120) and this has led the stylings of both the mens' and womens' uniforms to be very similar in design.

Despite the ever-growing presence of women in the police over the last 100 years, the traditional masculine work ethos persists, and women still face barriers to inclusion (Silvestri, 2017). The design of the women's police uniform is fundamental

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to their integration, acceptance, health, and safety in policing. Previous research has shown that police culture allows a kind of mutual ownership of the police body, and discussions regarding women's 'appearance, body size, and the ability to fit into existing uniforms' are vital (Westmarland, 2017, p. 312). Although workplaces may use gender-neutral language, profess equality and establish unisex dress codes, the work itself is deeply rooted in beliefs about who is expected and accepted to do these roles and the police are no different.

## UNISEX = EQUALITY... RIGHT?

The first police uniforms were the very embodiment of the 'ideal male character' (Gorer, 1955, p. 310) and were designed to be masculine since they typically tried to highlight big, strong, male shoulders (Fussell, 2003). When women first joined the police, during the first World War, the donning of the man's uniform was part of the acceptance test (Jackson, 2006), although when women stayed post-war, the clothes underwent a redesign.

There has been lots of changes to womens' uniforms in the UK since their inception. Historically consisting of button-down coats, frill-neck shirts, kitten heels and chunky boots, and truncheons carried in force-branded handbags (see Kirkham, 1996 for a more detailed list of descriptions); there have been many restylings over the last century, in line with changing fashions and recruitment drives (Heidensohn, 1992). Most of the designs were controversial and not fit for purpose (have you ever tried to run after someone in a skirt and heels?).

Recognition of these shortcomings led to the introduction of a unisex uniform in the late 20th century, although some forces were significantly slower than others to buy into the idea. On the surface, the concept of a gender-less uniform was innovative and promised inclusivity, but in reality still only catered for a singular body type. Most gender-neutral items of police clothing are things that can be either sized up or sized down but essentially much of the clothing lacks compatibility with the female body. The original concept of unisex clothing was created in 1968 by Rudi Gernreich, who created a series of garments, including tops and trousers, that women and men could wear interchangeably, but research suggests that clothing of this nature was suitable only for men, and women who had figures similar to men (Morgan, 2019), much like the current police uniform.

These gendered assumptions became apparent shortly after 'unisex' police uniforms were introduced; an officer reported being asked for her collar size upon joining in 2008 (Company Clothing, 2008), and a dog-handler only got her first women's shirt in 2006, after more than 15 years in the force (Haynes, 2007, p. 4).

*"It reminds you every day you get dressed that you are in a man's job."*

*- PC Chapman cited in Haynes, 2007, p. 4*

## WEARING THE (MEN'S) TROUSERS

Many officers who I spoke to for my research posited that the uniform had significant practical problems and caused worrying health issues. Other UK police research (Stevenson & Black, 2014) surveyed hundreds of officers who lodged complaints regarding most items of their uniforms, but primarily the trousers, stab vests, shirt, polo shirts and boots. My research showed that the current design of the uniform resulted in shirt and jacket sleeves that were far too long, tops that were too short at the back and/or too tight (and revealing) across the chest, painful kit-belts, ill-fitting stab vests, and depending on the force, trousers that were too long or short in the crotch, with outcomes varying from *Candidiasis* (a.k.a. thrush), underwear being revealed and irritation of c-section scars. The rigidity of the trousers can cause discomfort if bloated and tightness can cause period anxiety and/or leakages.

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In the last few years, one female Inspector campaigned her male bosses about standard-issue trousers until she was finally provided with some money to ‘sort it’. Triumphant, she worked with the stores department and sourced various designs to trial. The trousers which worked out best were made by an external company to the police standard, who provided some stretchy trousers that aligned with the current style of her force.

This success at a local level belies a failure country-wide. Back in 2010 a 20-page guide for police forces and uniform manufacturers was written by the British Association of Women’s Policing (BAWP). Claire Ames, then-inspector of Devon and Cornwall Police and BAWP member, said she had personally worn trousers for ten years which were neither comfortable nor practical. She commented on the ‘unisex’ nature of the garments and argued that this does not mean that they are gender-less, more than they are actually ‘primarily designed for a male’. Despite seeking to raise awareness of the need for clothing specifically shaped and sized for women, minimal changes have taken place since the guide was published.

One of the problems with thinking about redesigning the uniform is that there has never been one standardised uniform for officers in England and Wales and each of the 43 forces have their own design and procurement teams. Decisions on uniforms are usually made by senior (often male) chief constables or similar, with varying budgets. There are stylistic and practical differences – for example, the kit-belts are one of the pieces of equipment that reportedly sit uncomfortably on women’s hips, particularly when the trousers are cut too low, or too high. The weight of the equipment either pulls the belt down or the belt rubs on the hips and waist, sometimes causing bruising. Some forces have eliminated kit belts altogether in favour of tack vests (fluorescent webbing that cover the stab vest which you can ‘hook’ your equipment onto), although again, the weight distribution of these are seeing record numbers of women (and even some men) flocking to occupational health with chronic back problems.



## LIFE-THREATENING PPE

A 2017 Trades Union Congress (TUC) report cited one policewoman who admitted she no longer wears her stab vest at all following her mastectomy because of the discomfort it causes (Prospect, 2016). This, in rare cases, can prove lethal. In 1997, British police officer Nina MacKay was fatally stabbed by a man with schizophrenia after removing her stab vest because it restricted her movement (BBC, 1998). This challenge is not restricted to the UK – in 2016, a Spanish policewoman faced disciplinary action for buying her own stab vest (at a personal cost of £430) because the one issued to her was men’s, oversized, and did not offer the appropriate close-fitting protection that she needed.

These problems have been documented on a large scale (Stevenson & Black, 2014), but dismissed due to tight budgets. The stab vests for example are made with mostly flat hard plates, and they do not fit around breasts properly reducing the protection offered. If you have large breasts, the vest rides up exposing the midriff. It also makes it hard for policewomen to reach their guns, handcuffs, and batons. While my research highlights the challenges women face with badly-designed PPE, it seems the design of the stab vest needs changing for everyone – a study in 2009 found that 91% of male and female police officers found their overall stab vest comfort to be either ‘neutral or negative’ (Barker & Black, 2009).

## WHAT’S NEXT?

There are now more than 50,000 women in the police in England and Wales (34.9% of the total). Of new recruits since 2019, 42.5% are women (Gov, 2022). That is a positive development speaking to the increasing diversity of UK policing, but the next part of that story must be about the treatment of those women. The changes that women go through cannot be ignored; pregnancy, childbirth, post-partum issues, maturation, menopause, weight loss/gain, operations (mastectomy, cosmetic enhancements), monthly cycles (this list is not exhaustive). The ill-fitting designs can cause health issues, reduce officer’s safety, exacerbate body dysmorphia and lead to low self-esteem. The unisex design is not currently working (men have highlighted problems too). It is vital that all police forces design alternative options and allow staff to make choices about their own bodies, appearance, and personal characteristics. After all, equality isn’t about *reducing* the options available – striving for equity means adding *more* options to the wardrobe.

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