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.

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.

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 (Westmacott, 2017, p. 212). Although workplaces may use gender-neutral language, proper 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 women’s 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 (Hedkisson, 1994). Most of the designs were controversial and not fit for purpose (have you ever tried to run after someone in a skirt and heels?).

FITTING INTO 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’ (Crain, 2003, p. 120) and this has had the stigmas of both the men’s and women’s 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, 2007). The design of the women’s police uniform is fundamental 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 (Westmacott, 2017, p. 212). Although workplaces may use gender-neutral language, proper 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.

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 Germeisch, 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, 2006), 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 posted 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). Clare 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 their own design and procurement teams. Decisions on uniforms are usually made by senior (often male) chief constables or their own design and procurement teams. Decisions on uniforms are usually made by senior (often male) chief constables or their own design and procurement teams. Decisions on uniforms are usually made by senior (often male) chief constables or their own design and procurement teams.

Women’s bodies are diverse, and female police officers found their overall stab vest comfort to be either ‘neutral or negative’ (Barker & 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 93% of male and female police officers found their overall stab vest comfort to be other ‘neutral or negative’ (Barker & Black, 2009).

WHAT’S NEXT?

There are now more than 50,000 women in the police in England and Wales (14.5% of the total). Of new recruits since 2019, 42.5% are women (Gov, 2021). 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, menstruation, 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, and it seems the design of the stab vest needs changing for everyone – a study in 2009 found that 93% of male and female police officers found their overall stab vest comfort to be other ‘neutral or negative’ (Barker & Black, 2009).

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