Women in International Policing: Replacing an “Old Boys Club”?  

Saskia Hufnagel§ and Maira Hassan

ABSTRACT

Globalisation has increased the importance of international police cooperation. While cross-border law enforcement can be traced back as far as the Nineteenth Century, police cooperation today—such as Joint Investigation Teams, International Liaison Officers, and Interpol—only came about in the Twentieth Century. It was developed to counter transnational organised crime, such as drug crime and immigration crime, as well as terrorism. But, another aspect of international policing is that of peacekeeping; that is, the deployment of national police to countries during or after conflict to maintain law and order where the local police do not have sufficient capacities. This paper examines how women have been elevated in this police cooperation role, particularly Interpol and international peacekeeping. The discussion focusses on whether there are indications that internationally related tasks and agencies provide a more accepting environment for female police officers as opposed to a national police force setting.

Keywords: international police cooperation, women in policing, Interpol, peacekeeping

INTRODUCTION

Police organisations have changed significantly since the 1970s because of the challenges of globalisation. The first deployment of international liaison officers took place about this time and developed into the type of police attaché we see today. During this time, the organisational arrangements changed as well (Weisburd and Braga, 2006: 360). One of the most important changes has been the introduction of more female police officers (Natarajan, 2016: 8–9). Some countries have used female police officers in the role of international liaison officers and in other high-profile international positions; for example, within Interpol (Interpol, 2012; Interpol, 2012a).

§ Corresponding author: s.m.hufnagel@qmul.ac.uk
As a general observation, the number of women included in international policing exceeds the number of women in national police forces. By way of example, England and Wales employed 28.2% female police officers in their forces in 2015 of which those in senior ranks (i.e., chief inspector/lieutenant and above) was 21.4%, compared with 30.2% of women at constable rank (Home Office, 2015). The German Federal Police (Bundespolizei) comprises an even lower 13.9% of women officers (Bundespolizei, 2015; Deutscher Bundestag, 2014). According to hiring data gathered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, women account for about 12% of active duty police officers in the United States (Moraff, 2015). In Australia, the Australian Federal Police is looking at introducing gender targets as less than 20% of uniformed staff are women and only 15 of 84 senior leaders are female (Anderson, 2016).

These are just a select number of countries, however, considering that they are some of the most developed nations in the world, a higher number of female officers could have been expected considering gender equality legislation. In contrast, the number of female officers working at Interpol amounts to 44% (Interpol, 2014).

This paper assesses whether there are indications that the inclusion of women in international policing and peacekeeping roles has followed similar developments and what aspects might lead to different levels of inclusion of female officers within these diverse policing tasks as opposed to a national police force setting.

INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL POLICING

For the purposes of this paper, international policing will be defined as police work that crosses international boundaries and is carried out by police officers who are employed by their home nation state but deployed to either a foreign country or a multinational policing organisation; such as Interpol or Europol. International policing can, of course, also be carried out within the nation state; for example, if police request legal assistance from another national police force. However, this is not discussed here because the officers investigated should be immersed in a non-national policing context.

The tasks of the officers selected here as international are removed from those of a national officer as they have no enforcement powers in their international line of work. An exception to this definition of international policing is that of international peacekeeping missions, where officers retain, or are given...
special enforcement powers, to carry out (national) front-line policing tasks in combat zones.

WOMEN POLICE IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

Research regarding women in policing emerged as an important criminal justice issue in the 1990s (Heidenson, 1989; McKenzie, 1993). However, among studies at the time, few focused on women in international policing (Hazenberg and Ormiston, 1995; Hazenberg and Ormiston, 1996). Of the international policing studies, most were carried out within a European context that lacked a wider global perspective.

At the national level, Germany, Sweden, Britain, the Netherlands and Norway have had women working in their police forces from the early-1900s, other European states only started to employ women in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Austria, Spain, Luxemburg and Ireland (Brown, 1997: 2–3). According to data from the European Network of Policewomen (2008), within Europe (rather than the European Union), countries with the lowest percentage of female officers were Turkey and France, while the highest percentages existed in Estonia, Sweden, United Kingdom, Italy, Norway and the Netherlands (see also Holm, 2000: 43, Pruvost, 2009: e36, Home Office, 2016).

In most European countries, a so-called staged approach was applied when women were first integrated into the police forces. This approach has currently also been recommended for the integration of women police in strongly patriarchal societies, such as Brazil and India (Macdowell Santos, 2005; Natarajan, 2008). The staged approach means that the female staff starts not armed and working mainly with children, female victims and in the context of domestic violence (Prenzler and Sinclair, 2013: 117). The introduction of women to the police through specialised all-women units has in some countries been claimed to make acceptance for male colleagues easier as they do not seem to encroach on male territory (for example the Polish Women’s Police Brigade, see Brown, 1997: 4).

To increase the number of women in policing, different jurisdictions have employed different approaches. The litigious approach was adopted in America and Australia (Brown, 1997: 7). Legislation in America and the United Kingdom led to changes regarding discrimination in the workforce, enabling further integration in the 1960s and 1970s (Prenzler and Sinclair, 2013: 117). Other approaches to reinforce women participation in policing included support, training, the introduction of paid parental leave, part-time employment
opportunities, childcare support and special women units (Prenzler and Sinclair, 2013: 117). However, in 2006 it was estimated by the British Association of Women Police that to ensure an adequate progression and cultural integration of women in the police, a 35% representation of female officers would be necessary (Prenzler and Sinclair, 2013: 116; Brown and Heidensohn, 2000).

Instead of a balanced parity of fifty-fifty, this percentage is stated as representing a “tipping point” where the organisation in itself shifts, the path to equality between men and women within the number of officers in reaching complete parity becomes less pronounced and the remaining gap to 50% less incremental. According to Brown (1997), this would be the tip-over point to gender balance and ensure that acceptance exists throughout the force and the community (Brown, 1997: 15).

The goal of 35% (at least for uniformed staff/officers) has not been achieved in all national police forces. South Africa and Australia come close, with up to 30%. Although Belgium is in this same realm, the number includes civilian staff, which comprises 50% of female police staff in Belgium. The Estonian police have 45% female staff, but nearly half of these are non-uniformed personnel (Institute for Public Security of Catalonia, 2013: 21).

The low number of uniformed staff has often been blamed on the misconception that women are not able to exercise frontline policing due to the need to use physical force, while the office workers or detectives could be regarded to use “soft” policing skills. The inability of women to exercise enforcement powers as well as the necessity to use physical force could be viewed as a male policing “myth” (Silvestri, 2017: 9), but the lower numbers of female officers in operational and uniformed policing indicates that this myth is shared by many countries across the globe.

An example for the myth working in the favour of women could be given at the national level by the case of France. In France, a country with one of the lowest numbers of female officers in Europe generally, the number of women in police leadership positions is disproportionally high. There are more women commissaires (18% in 2005) and inspectors (17% in 2005) than patrolwomen (14% in 2005) (Pruvost, 2009: e36). Pruvost argues that a reason for this are the more managerial (less enforcement) oriented tasks attributed to higher ranks and the consequently higher level of acceptance towards women exercising them.
Another reason is likely the ability of women to enter managerial levels from the outside without rising through the ranks (Ewijk, 2012).

WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL POLICING

Compared to national policing, there is a higher number of women involved in international police organisations, such as Interpol. Officers deployed to Interpol do not have enforcement powers, so there is no link to be made to the requirement of physical strength. Interpol is not a “dangerous place” and working there does not include operational tasks, unlike, for example, war and war-like zones where international peacekeepers operate. Covering all time zones, Interpol has three Command and Coordination Centres that offer an around-the-clock point of contact for national police forces seeking urgent information. After the Second World War, the first headquarters was established in Lyon, France. In 2011 a further Coordination Centre was opened in Buenos Aires and a third has become operational in Singapore in 2015 (Interpol, 2016).

Table 1—Numbers of women in Interpol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female Officers</th>
<th>Total Number of Interpol Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>No Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Interpol Annual Reports 1999–2014)

While the subject literature on the establishment of Interpol is plentiful, with Anderson (1989) discussing the “old boys club” of Interpol’s former influential leaders, less has been published regarding women in this organisation (Manzoor Arain, 2014). However, the Interpol annual reports from 1999 to 2014 show how
the numbers of women in the organisations have grown from 36% to 44% based on the total number of Interpol staff. These data are shown in table 1.

They demonstrate that the goal of having 35% women to have a fully implemented female component was achieved in 2000 (perhaps earlier, but these data were not available to this study). This situation is different from most national police forces around the world.

To explain the phenomenon of number equality in this organisation, it is useful to look at the advertisements for positions published by Interpol. At the time of writing there were several employment advertisements posted on the Interpol website. The fact that many positions were open to non-police might also explain the higher number of women in Interpol. Furthermore, the position of criminal intelligence analyst can attract a disproportionate number of female applicants, a position in much demand by organisations such as Interpol (Sanders, 2015).

Some of the tasks highlighted in these job advertisements included: maintaining relationships; analysis and dissemination of information; identifying country specific cooperation problems; organisation of meetings and conferences; preparation of reports and presentations; and liaison activities. These job requirements have little in common with operational policing at, say, street level enforcement. The positions furthermore required university degrees—in some cases advanced degrees (e.g., master’s degrees or PhDs)—and knowledge of certain foreign languages, which is not usually a selection criterion in local police forces. But, none of the tasks required physical strength. The myth that women are not naturally capable of using force, unlike men, might hence work to their advantage when applying for positions in international policing organisations (Interpol, 2015).

WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING

Women’s participation in international peacekeeping, especially in comparison to other forms of international policing is low (UNSC, 2013). According to the United Nations statistics from September 2015, women constitute approximately 3.2% of the total military personnel and approximately 10.8% of the police involved in UN International Peacekeeping missions. In 2014, the percentages were 3.0% and 9.1%, and in 2013, 2.7% and 9.7% (UN Statistics, 2010, 2013, 2014). In fact, the increase has been incremental, less than 1% over the five years,
with 2.6% women military and 9.2% police peacekeepers in 2010 (UN Statistics, 2010).

There is some research, conducted on European peacekeepers that has attempted to answer how women are perceived by their male co-workers regarding what has become known as gender mainstreaming. This employment approach was adapted in response to UNSCR Resolution 1325 (2000). The research investigated whether women in international peacekeeping roles were effective. This is because gender mainstreaming has been criticised for being a “quick fix,” or what some have termed as the “add-and-stir” approach that merely increases the number of women but changes little else (Valenius, 2007; Simic, 2010). However, even these numbers have not increased drastically (table 1), which begs the question: What is the reality of gender mainstreaming in international peacekeeping operations?

**MORAL POLICING ROLE**

The pressure exerted by Resolution 1325 has to do with the fact that “...peacekeepers have been responsible for rape and sexual assaults on women and children in host nations” (Bridges and Horsfall, 2009: 122). The implication being that these were committed by male peacekeepers. Consequently, the role, it seems, women play here is that of something akin to “moral policing.” Bridges and Horsfall (2009) admit that “…of course, the presence of female personnel cannot stop sexual violence; it will deter some men,” suggesting that “…a balanced force can ‘reduce the level of sexual harassment and violence against local women’” (Bridges and Horsfall, 2009: 125, emphasis in original).

This seemingly positive attribute to women’s presence is somewhat jaded. Simic (2010) outlined how “…it is assumed that women are more peaceful than men and that their mere presence...can...potentially decrease sexual offences committed by their male colleagues” (Simic, 2010: 190). This reflects a study conducted by the UN Division for Advancement for Women (1995) that suggested that “…men are more likely to behave in a civilised manner if surrounded by their own women” (Simic, 2010: 190). Not only does this force women into becoming the conscience of a male-dominated workforce, but more damagingly, it disallows men to be viewed as civil on their own accord; it reinforces the perception that the male sex drive is something that men cannot and should not have to control unless made to do so.
THE ESSENTIALIST ARGUMENT

In contrast with the pacifying role of women, the perception of male masculine behaviour provides some natural morality and is perhaps the key issue in the evident lack of gender-parity in peacekeeping. It seems that some male peacekeepers consider women to have a pacifying effect. In Valenius’ study of Finnish Peacekeepers in Kosovo (2007), a male peacekeeper recounted that:

…two teenage Kosovo Serb girls…were weeping, watching their village burn. He could not do anything to comfort the girls. A female peacekeeper arrived and according to him, by her mere presence she was able to calm the girls down. He admitted that he was helpless in that situation because of his gender. (Valenius, 2007: 515)

And yet, in other accounts, women are found to be less, if at all, sensitive in accordance to their assumed nurturing nature. The all-female Indian police unit in Liberia, for example, portrays a “…fit into military hypermasculine environment” implying that the increase of female peacekeepers “…will not necessarily increase sensitivity to gender issues” (Simic, 2010: 194). It turns out that the essentialist label of being inherently and overtly sensitive forces women to not associate with it. In Sion’s study of Dutch peacekeepers in Bosnia and Kosovo (2008), women peacekeepers, in order to be trusted and be taken seriously by their male colleagues, found it “…important…to be part of the male group” (Sion, 2008: 569).

The consequence of this was that “…as part of being ‘one of the guys’” the female peacekeeper was forced to “…suppress her sexuality and femininity” by becoming a “…non-woman: a nonthreatening being who is able not only to listen to men’s fantasies and adventures, but also help them by supplying soft pornographic magazines” (Sion, 2008: 569). Moreover, due to this gender-essentialist perception, many female peacekeepers, despite being qualified for combat, were given roles that their male superior officers deem more fitting. In the case of Dutch peacekeepers, “…some of the women said they wished to serve in a combat role but were refused on the grounds of being a woman”; essentially, “…instead of the functions they had been assigned to before the peacekeeping mission, they were given simple and unchallenging administrative work during the mission” (Sion, 2008: 575).

This reflects the earlier theory of the skills advertised for Interpol positions as descriptive of feminine or non-risk qualities (i.e., communication skills and
language proficiency) over enforcement or tasks requiring physical strength (masculine qualities) which are usually associated with policing. Far from the assumed perception of women’s role in a male-dominated workforce, women, at least in the context of international peacekeeping, neither desire to be the “moral police” in keeping their male colleagues in check, nor do they wish to be isolated as the “soft and sensitive” ones, forever penalised, despite being trained and qualified, for the stereotypes bestowed on their gender.

**ABSENCE OF MEN IN “GENDER”**

With this lens of women’s perceived value, there is little chance for a fluid penetration or a true mainstreaming into peacekeeping. In reality, the addition of women in peacekeeping operations “competes for attention” (Carey, 2001: 63). Pruitt (2015), in her role-play stimulations with students studying peacekeeping, observes that:

> …the young woman leading the military component of this role-play did not noticeably pay any more attention to gendered issues than previous or current male students. She, like other students, appeared at times overwhelmed by the complex realities of competing interests…and along with her teammates in the first instance decided to ‘pass the buck’ on these issues to the NGOs, who, not having communicated with the military group on this issue, assumed the military group would handle it (Pruitt, 2015: 92).

The idea of gender-mainstreaming reduces the role of women into a task, a symbolic “check-box” amongst other management priorities. However, it is passed on to another party due to the inherent inability for women’s inclusion to be reduced to a mere administrative project; it is not task-based but ideological. In addition, the notion that women are the ones who ought to care about this most and push further to implement gender mainstreaming, takes the onus away from men. The term *gender mainstreaming* is problematic in itself. Carey (2001), in discussing Women and Peace and Security, outlines issues Hilary Charlesworth identified with gender mainstreaming where “…*gender* is assumed to be a synonym for *women*. This assumption leaves male identities unexamined and requires women to change but not men” (Carey, 2001: 62, emphasis in original).

Accordingly, in the analysis of gender essentialism in Canadian Foreign Aid, Tiessen (2015) praises the Dutch report (Dutch National Action Plan) for noting “…that ‘securing male understanding and support for UNSCR 1325 is crucial for its effective implementation. One way to achieve this is to broaden the
conception of gender by including masculinities perspective on peace and security’” (Tiessen, 2015: 91). Otherwise, women are left with a heavy burden of not only proving themselves and being accepted in the “old boys network,” but also ensuring that their presence is some catalyst for change and accomplishment of the UN Resolution.

MAKING “SPACE” FOR WOMEN

One of the illustrations of the absence of men in achieving gender mainstreaming (i.e., gender parity) is reflected in the physical space of peacekeeping missions. Firstly, the space within the job description favours men over women. In the context of Finnish Peacekeepers in Kosovo, “…it was pointed out that without military training, female peacekeepers would not be able to carry their weight with regard to patrolling and defending the camp” (Valenius, 2007: 516).

Where countries have mandatory male conscription, one can see the domino-effect of lower numbers of women in peacekeeping operations. And, those women who do manage their way into such postings, can find peacekeeping operation camps isolating experiences. In Camp Ville where Finnish, Swedish, Slovakian, amongst others were being accommodated, the female peacekeepers had segregated barracks (Valenius, 2007: 517).

Although understood to prevent sexual harassment, the lack of fairness is apparent: “…if the male colleagues harass them…the system responds by moving the women” (Valenius, 2007: 517). In the same camp, “…pornographic films are shown on request on the public internal TV channel after 10pm” despite public nude photos of women being prohibited (Valenius, 2007). The inconsistent messages given from the practices allowed and the moving of the women as a solution reinforces the same hypermasculinity. A certain kind of masculinity, “…the heteromasculinity of 22–24-year-old men” (Valenius, 2007: 517), is being encouraged, making little welcoming space for women. Unfortunately, not having a clear stance and constantly deterring from adopting a comprehensive resolution of the ideological issues does not help men understand their role within a gender-equal regimen and it does not allow women to feel like they belong.

Ultimately, argument comes down to the question of how women “fit” into this historical and ideological manifestation of hypermasculinity naturalised in the concept of the military spilling over into peacekeeping missions. According to a study Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Operations in 2000, among many findings one is that of a turn-over whereby
having 30 percent female mission personnel corresponds to more local women quickly joining peace committees “…which are less hierarchical and more responsive to female concerns” (Bridges and Horsfall, 2009: 125). This bodes well with the 35% goal for national forces estimated by Brown and Heidensohn as a “tipping point.” However, it is difficult to conclude that the mere increase in numbers could be the magical solution without falling into the trap of an “add and stir” approach.

Having a positive action might aid in facilitating at least an adequate initiation to the possibility of gender-parity. In other arenas, such as the recent fifty-fifty representation of women and men in the Canadian cabinet, if nothing else, may help to naturalise the idea of women’s presence in a historically male-dominated work space. Nonetheless, simply allowing women into the “old boys network,” especially in the context of peacekeeping missions, making them “one of the guys,” seems to change little else within the work space, job description or ideology of the men who ought to be seen and included too as equal stakeholders of gender equality in peacekeeping.

DISCUSSION

When comparing the required skills for the position of law enforcement officer at Interpol with the tasks of a peacekeeping officer, or police within national contexts, it becomes apparent that physical strength plays no role at Interpol. The first issue addressed regarding peacekeeping was the bias towards women’s skills, separating tasks into masculine and feminine tasks. Looking at the Interpol job description, one would be hard pressed to find many tasks falling into such groups. If anything, most tasks could be described as being feminine with the exceptions of occasional night shifts and the ability to work under pressure.

An assumption can be made by looking at the national police and peacekeeping situations that the more physical strength the task seems to require, the less women will be involved. If the tasks do not require physical strength or even enforcement powers, and are cut-out for more commonly perceived female attributes, such as networking, communication and good organisation skills, women are likely to be considered for the job—even in higher (managerial) ranks. The fact that the Interpol tasks are largely characteristic of office-like work and less archetypally police work, might work in favour of female applicants and explain the higher number of women in Interpol.
International policing tasks outside the peacekeeping realm could be qualified as less gendered or even more female. Job descriptions assessed show mainly communication, networking and organisation skills required. Nevertheless, one could claim that most of the operational tasks of an officer require these skills and physical abilities are of comparatively low significance even in national/operational positions. Harris and Goldsmith (2010) claimed in their peacekeeping research that men opposed women in policing to keep the myth of dangerous policing alive. While the argument for physical strength or the lack thereof could be upheld in an operational/enforcement power context, it certainly cannot be insisted upon in other international policing scenarios. Therefore, women might be more likely to be accepted at the international policing level and in international policing agencies.

With regard to national and frontline policing, it is rather shocking to see the low level of women involved in most countries around the world. Acceptance of women in this profession by society in general, and their male colleagues in particular, is still low, even in societies with advanced, constitutionally granted gender equality rights, such as Germany and Austria. Unlike the female officers in the U.S. and Australia, who campaigned for their rights before the courts, using gender equality legislation to better their situation, women in many European police forces are still a small minority. Regardless, most European countries have deployed women internationally as liaison officers, to Europol and to Interpol.

The numbers are disproportional to the national numbers. This could be explained by the required skill-set being more attractive to women or, more likely, by the fact that women, even if they prefer frontline policing tasks and master them successfully, choose a work environment where they feel accepted and treated equally to men.

Coming back to the French example, where the proportion of women in managerial ranks was higher than in lower ranks, women are more readily accepted at a higher rank level, or international agency level, because they are not operational and no myth about dangerousness must be upheld. The problem is, however, how women get to the higher ranks or international levels in the first place. Women still must go through the ranks in most countries to achieve leadership positions and international postings. They might therefore never achieve the more accepted ranks and tasks due to issues such as childcare and lack of acceptance within the lower ranks. For women to be represented more equally
in the police, these are important problems that need to be addressed at the national level.

Lastly, have women changed the “old boys network”? The evidence is not compelling. Women have chosen to be part of networks where they feel accepted and treated equal to men, such as Interpol. While Anderson (1989) concluded that Interpol is an “old boys network,” one might say today that it is an “old boys and girls network.” Police women in international capacities enjoy higher acceptance and feel treated equally to men, which creates more self-confidence and increases numbers of applications. If the tasks are not gendered, the network cannot be gendered either. Eliminating the myth of the dangerousness of police work might therefore more generally lead to higher acceptance of women in policing and equal treatment to men.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Saskia Hufnagel is a Senior Lecturer in Criminal Law at Queen Mary University London. She previously worked as a Research Fellow at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security (CEPS), Griffith University, Australia, and was a Leverhulme Fellow at the University of Leeds. She completed her PhD at the Australian National University’s College of Law, while holding a permanent teaching position at the University of Canberra. She has published on national and international police cooperation, security, comparative constitutional law, and art crime. Dr Hufnagel is a qualified German legal professional and accredited specialist in criminal law.

Maira Hassan obtained her LLB (Hons) from Queen Mary University of London and completed her undergraduate degree in Media, Information and Technoculture (MIT) and French literature at the University of Western Ontario. She is currently an LLM candidate at Peter A. Allard School of Law, University of British Columbia and the recipient of the Allard Scholar Graduate Fellowship. Her present graduate research is on Women in Canadian Peacekeeping, but she is furthermore publishing in the area of extraterritorial policing.

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