

# Boys in blue – and the girls too?

**Constable Steve Walker highlights the instances where the AFP can justify discrimination between men and women and where long standing police culture maintains an unjust balance.**

There exist two levels of discrimination in work practices between men and women in policing. The first is the legal and justified discrimination that is based on meeting the aims and objectives of policing, in protecting the rights of the individual. The second is a more common and diverse, unjustified discrimination, which exists through a long-standing police culture that has socialised many of its members into practising discrimination along gender lines.

The Australian Federal Police has developed and implemented programs directed at eliminating all forms of identified, unjustified discrimination and has introduced measures to enable full equity of employment opportunity. These programs include further development of objectives tailored to meet the government's equal employment opportunity requirements while recognising the unique work requirements of the AFP.

How then is it not only practical, but in some cases legal, for some discrimination to occur within a police organisation? It must first be understood that there is a difference between the terms sex and gender. Sex defines the actual physical difference between men and women, while gender is a constructed term that differentiates between men and women on the basis of perceived differences in natural ability.

In some cases there exists legislation which demands segregation of

female and male areas of responsibility. One such case exists in the area of drug law enforcement where all police members are equally trained and equally capable in effective body search techniques.

Legislation however, is specific in that it allows for searching of people by officers of the same sex only. The rationale behind this legislation rests in the protection of the basic rights of an alleged of-

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fender. It is these basic rights that are protected by recognising sex differences between officers rather than ability based on gender.

In at least two spheres of police work, sex is a justified discerning factor. The first is physical training. The physical differences between men and women are recognised and women are given the choice between being tested with their male colleagues or choosing a slightly different procedure. The difference here is only in the push up, chin up and 2.4km run. These three exercises recognise the physical attributes of women in the pursuit of Occupational Health and Safety principles, rather than a generalised gender difference.

A second example of sex as a justified discrimination, is based on a choice or preference granted to vic-

tims of crime. In most general cases, and specifically in the case of victims of sexual assault, it is the choice of the individual as to who they are more at ease with talking. In some cases it may well be a male officer, but on the whole, especially when the victim of sexual assault is a female, she will choose to talk to a female officer. Again, as with body searches, this is expedient and protective of the rights and wishes of the victim.

Whereas there is legal and justified discrimination based on sex differences, there exists in policing further discrimination based on gender. This type of discrimination is unjustified and undermines, rather than enhances, the effectiveness of police operation.

Unjustified discrimination still exists. In one squad, a source claims that women and men on the whole, perform virtually the same role. However, women more frequently tend to become property officers, cataloguing items found by their male colleagues in the execution of a search warrant. Women, it is claimed tend to navigate rather than drive police vehicles. They tend to be appointed as radio operators and do more than a fair share of photocopying. Men within this area on the other hand, are the sole users of bolt cutters, sledge hammers and shotguns. These differences are justified to those male supervisors involved in this and other areas of the AFP on the grounds that women are more meticulous than men and so, on the whole, make better property officers and navigators, while men are much stronger than women, and are thus better at using bolt cutters and sledge hammers. They are considered being more 'natu-

rally adept' to handle a shotgun.

While many of these types of claims may seem justified to some supervisors, they are fundamentally (and blatantly) unjustified and discriminatory. A female police officer recently represented Australia in shooting at the Law Enforcement Olympics. The officer achieved the ranking of the best police markswoman in the world, and was awarded two gold and a bronze medal for her efforts. This type of ability displayed in female police officers highlights the lack of credibility in an argument justifying the *men only* shotgun practice.

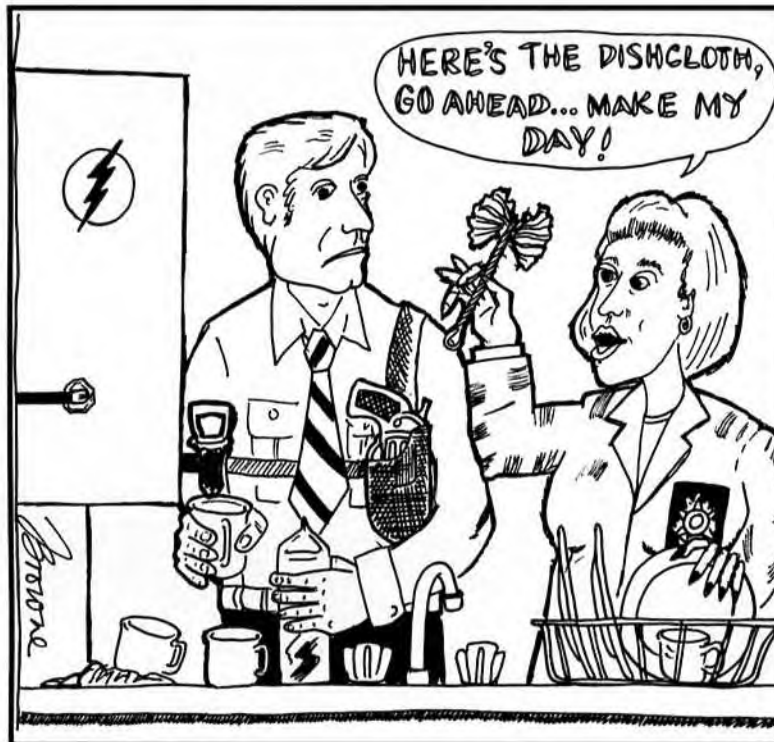
A further recurring aspect of gender discrimination which is common is that of the domestic (or home and clerical duties) and *matron* (or caring and nurturing) type role of policewomen.

Policewomen tend to perform more office duties than their male counterparts and this, according to one source, is due to the fact that policewomen go out of their way to learn new equipment and procedures — becoming the 'expert' in a unit. According to a further source, policewomen tend to be the only members of a unit who wash dishes, clean mess rooms, tidy desks and so on. It appears that these tasks *naturally* fall to policewomen only because policemen do not see their role in performing these duties. One source was baffled at the apparent skill a policewoman had in making a better cup of coffee for a superintendent than her male colleagues. It is perhaps this culture that caused a sergeant's recent and sincere claim that he wished he had a "nice girl to take care of the paper work, filing and to keep the place tidy".

Another type of role which usually falls to policewomen is that of the caring and nurturing *matron*. Despite a woman's personal atti-

tude or experience in the care of children, the policewoman is nearly always singled out to take responsibility of a child. Often this direction is disguised as justified due to a woman's natural affinity with children, according to one Family Law Squad source.

Policewomen only appeared in uniform for the first time in 1947, and were only permitted to perform general duties, (duties other than administrative or support) in 1973. By 1978 all other police serv-



ices had followed in allowing policewomen to perform duties to the same extent as their male counterparts. It is no wonder then that such strong socialisation processes exists within police services, given the history of male dominance.

Even as late as 1984, a survey of NSW Police found that many male police officers believed women were physically and emotionally unfit for the rigours of policing. While often there are times in police work when physical strength is demanded and some men and women are more capable in this respect than others, the difference is that when a man displays physical weakness, the tendency is for colleagues to regard it as an individual failing. On the other hand if a woman does not contribute

equally, in a fight for example, her characteristics are transferred to all policewomen as a group. If she endeavours to be *one of the boys* she contradicts many socially developed male ideas of acceptable feminine behaviour.

According to figures released in the AFP Equal Employment Opportunity draft policy, the AFP currently has the highest level of women than any other police service in Australia. Women are assigned to both plain clothes and uniform duties, ranging from general duties work to diplomat and VIP security.

Women officers are now appointed to promotional and recruitment boards to highlight the importance of fairness and equity toward all parties. The AFP recently established a *Women's Desk* which is responsible for examining issues relating to women as an occupational group. A women's forum is now conducted on an annual basis, while equal employment opportunity issues form part of standing agenda items of police consultative committees and councils.

The AFP has done much for the removal of unjustified discrimination and the differentiation between the roles of female and male officers, but it still has a great deal further to go before full equity is realised. There still remains only two female commissioned officers while there are no female representatives on either the Police Board of Management or National Consultative Council.

The AFP legally and justly discriminates on the basis of sex — utilising the difference between the sexes to achieve the aims and objectives of policing. Yet, like so many other areas of society, it can at times discriminate unjustly on the basis of gender, due to a long standing police culture that is only now slowly changing. ■