

# First Australasian Women Police Conference aims to improve service life

By Janice Jarrett



Helen McDermott addressing the conference.

*Delegates at the First Australasian Women Police Conference held in Sydney recently sought to address why women, although heavily recruited into police services during the 1980s, have failed to make a career of policing.*

The conference, which ran from July 29 to 31, heard that women leave police services in high numbers, and of those who stay, few make it to senior management levels.

Issues highlighted as reasons for the low retention rates and lack of advancement included sexual harassment, inflexible work practices and insufficient career opportunities.

Some women spoke of feeling a need to either 'de-feminise' themselves to enable them to survive in the police culture, or succumb to attitudes such as 'if you can't stand the heat you should get out of the kitchen', and leave the profession.

Discussion included methods of addressing the situation such as reinforcing the positive attributes which women bring to policing, and encouraging change in police culture to incorporate values

traditionally considered 'feminine'.

Organised by the Australian Institute of Criminology, the conference was attended by about 300 people involved in law enforcement, including some of the highest-ranking men and women in Australasian policing.

There was a strong AFP contingent along with representatives from all state and territory police services in Australia as well as New Zealand, the UK, USA, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The Australian Customs Service, trade unions, various public and private organisations, academic institutions, researchers and those from the legal profession were also represented, while a British film-maker presented the film "Service with a Smile", on women in British police services.

Police commissioners from around Australia attended the final day of the conference to hear outcomes and agreed to consider a proposal to establish a national forum for women police. The panel comprised Commissioner Peter Doone, New Zealand; Commissioner Brian Bates, Northern Territory; Commissioner Jim O'Sullivan, Qld; Assistant Commissioner John Murray, SA; Chief Commissioner Neil Comrie, Victoria;



AFP delegates at the conference

Commissioner Bob Falconer, WA; Commissioner Mick Palmer, AFP; and Acting Commissioner Neil Taylor, NSW.

The concept for the conference originated with NSW Police Service Senior Constable Melinda Tynan, who was seconded to the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence in Canberra in

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1994, and Detective Senior Constable Jill Bruce of the Victoria Police, who was also with the ABCI at that time .

Senior Constable Tynan said it became clear to her that there were enormous differences in the conditions of service between the five women police from various jurisdictions around Australia attached to the organisation at the time. Some had no maternity leave and no option of part-time work, communication between women was limited because of their comparatively small numbers, there were few women in senior

management roles and women were seriously under-represented in police associations.

Helen McDermott from the AFP's Briefing and Policy section at Head Office and ACT Branch Secretary of the Australian Federal Police Association worked closely with women from other police jurisdictions in Australia in setting up the conference.

In her address, titled "Women and Police Unions: Equity on the Horizon," given jointly with Marea Rayment of the NSW Police Association, Ms McDermott said that police unions were beginning to value the different way women approached issues.

Lyn Mitchell from the South Australia Police, in delivering a paper on "Women Police in Management", said that the absence of women in role models was linked to women's under-representation in the job generally.

The conference heard that men and women were attributed in many instances with different work practice styles. This, however, should not divide organisations. Rather, the qualities of both traditionally 'feminine' and 'masculine' styles should be integrated and utilised to the benefit of the organisation, and there needed to be greater recognition that feminine and masculine styles were common to both genders in varying degrees.

While the conference provided a forum for women to share ideas and raise problems they

encountered in a career in which they are heavily outnumbered, the overwhelming consensus was that measures to deal with those issues should benefit the policing profession as a whole and not be directed at alienating male colleagues.

Senior Constable Tynan said that throughout the 1980's, women were targeted for recruitment into police services in various Australian jurisdictions and that they currently comprised 13 per cent of police in Australasia.

However, NSW Assistant Commissioner, Christine Nixon, had observed in 1991, that in that state, women in policing were leaving more quickly than they were able to be recruited and trained, Senior Constable Tynan said, emphasising that a critical issue for the conference was planning for the future.

The Federal Attorney-General Daryl Williams, in giving the opening address said that the government was encouraging far greater participation of women at all levels of government and industry, in traditional and non-traditional areas.

"Having more women in decision-making positions through the business, political and community sectors will help to reform institutions simply because more women equates with a greater diversity of talents and skills.

"Women are joining policing in increasing numbers. In 1995 women constituted 13.5 per cent of sworn officers in Australia, with one police service as high as 17.3 per cent.

"But they don't stay. Women leave at disproportionate rates compared with male officers, and they begin to leave from recruitment onwards.

"In Australia data show that (as at mid-1995) women comprise 27 per cent of probationary constables, 20 per cent of constables, 13 per cent of senior constables, 4 per cent of sergeants, 3 per cent of senior sergeants and less than 2 per cent of senior executives.

"In figure terms the statistics are startling, only 28 policewomen occupied commissioned ranks compared to 1,724 policemen.

"What this means is that, somewhere around the senior constable to sergeant level, women are leaving in relatively large numbers. Very few go beyond sergeant rank.

"It therefore seems that a lot of women are failing to find a career in policing. Organisationally, this is not a good situation, since money spent on training is lost. And importantly, valuable human resources are lost"

Mr Williams questioned why this situation occurred saying it could be something as simple as shiftwork and the difficulty of accommodating work and family life.

"Or, and this seems more likely, it could be

something to do with the highly gendered nature of police organisations," he said.

He noted that at senior levels, women in policing have lower levels of representation than they do in parliament, the public service, and Commonwealth boards, councils and other bodies.

"Policing cannot swim against the tide of public sector reform," Mr Williams said.

"Government has a duty to serve the community and to provide equal and equitable access to the services they provide.

"Government also has a commitment to ensure that limited resources are used as efficiently as possible. Policing organisations must reflect the communities they serve. And they must use their resources, both financial and human to greatest effect.

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"Failing to value and nurture the role of women in policing organisations casts doubt on whether these objectives are being achieved."

Mr Williams said that women in politics and the public sector were blazing a trail for policewomen to follow while mentors and support groups had helped them fight ongoing battles.

"I suspect that what you want out of this conference is very simple: the recognition of equal rights and to be given a fair go. But what does this mean in practice?"

"I would suggest that it is not simply a matter of having equal number of men and women. Improving the performance of police services means making the best use of men's and women's skills and talents. Some of these skills and talents may be different and they should be encouraged precisely for that difference.

"You have the support of the community and the federal government in working through these issues."

Mr Williams referred to the Ministerial Council on the Administration of Justice which



AFP delegates with Commissioner Mick Palmer. From left: Federal Agent Ann Dellaca, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Team; Constable Elizabeth Quade, ACT City Station; Sergeant Kathy Mowle, ACT Property, Mitchell; Mr Palmer; and Kim Jerrim, ACT City Station.

issued an Australasian Policing Strategy two years ago which said that 'By the year 2000, we will have a safer and more secure community'. The focus would be on a partnership approach to policing; an increase in community confidence in police; a reduction in the incidence, effects and fear of crime; and an increased level of community safety.

"Each of these concepts will impact on police practice. The aim is to develop a partnership approach to policing, involving the wider community. Police must represent part of the community they serve – 51 per cent of the community are women.

"Women have a critical role in the implementation of the Australasian policing strategy and being catalysts for cultural change."

Commissioner Palmer said in his address that police services were traditionally male institutions established over a century when the world was a different place.

Law enforcement agencies, perhaps because of their separateness and their absolute culture, had continued relatively unchanged for decades. The landscape around them had changed, society had changed in terms of its composition and its expectations, the way government agencies

operated had changed and in many ways the nature of crime had changed as had the nature of the criminal.

"But in some respects, law enforcement has continued on operating in the same old ways," Mr Palmer said.

It was not true to say that major inroads had been made into changing the culture of law enforcement organisations. They remained white male Australian dominated, para-military style, rather conservative and traditional in the way they operated.

"Major inquiries by both Fitzgerald and Wood have shown that in its more traditional manifestations, policing culture has serious dysfunctions.

"In my view, the fundamental mistake too often made is to view policing as having a single culture. The reality is policing has many cultures - most of them very positive and enriching.

"The challenge for policing is to build on the many positives whilst being ruthless in our determination to eradicate the negatives".

Mr Palmer said that women tend to be very good at sharing information and creating networks and thus enhance the communication flow in organisations. They tend to make it easy

for people to express ideas and this helps ensure that decisions reflect as much information as possible. The inclination of women to share power goes to the heart of the reasons why female leadership styles are relevant and needed in organisations seeking to change. Generally, women refrain from asserting their own superiority in a way that can emphasise the inferiority of others. Shared power can manifest itself in the ways women give credit to others – bolstering co-workers and subordinates is especially important in the law enforcement environment where the job can be hard on one's ego, and where continued support and engendering of enthusiasm for the task at hand is crucial.

“To a large extent, a female operating style would reject the military model of command and control in favour of supporting and empowering. Women tend to adopt a partnership model of operating which involves linking rather than force or fear, and their attitudes to team building and consensus are much more effective in supporting periods of change in any organisation.

Kathleen Townsend, First Assistant Secretary in the Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, said in her address titled “Blue Healers: The Challenge of Change for Policing Towards 2000”, that workplaces associated with old-fashioned management and recruitment practices were

extremely unattractive to young women and men.

She also said also that many issues were common to women and men. Concerns about work being valued, experiences of prejudice, balancing work and family and - in the case of police work - the pressure of being in a profession which was subject to critical media scrutiny, were as valid for men as they were for women.

“Highlighting the existence of shared concerns removes the onus on women alone to bring about change and provides common ground for encouraging cultural reform from the top.”

Ms McDermott said it was pleasing to see so many senior men at the conference, both as participants and as presenters.

“The AFP was particularly well represented and we should appreciate that we work in an organisation where our senior managers are willing to listen and learn,” she said.

“The aim of the conference was to look at strategies which will allow policing to better use the difference women can bring, and in my view it achieved this goal. After looking at the existing problems, and exploring the existing strategies and programs, the conference participants developed a range of strategies on conditions of service; career development; support for women; and changing the culture.”

The outcomes will be presented to the commissioners for consideration.



*The police commissioners' panel on the final day of the conference.*