



To what extent does the current composition of UK police leadership support the achievement of key Sustainability Development Goals and how are these Goals influencing efforts to address barriers to equal leadership opportunities, in particular gender representation.

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1. A B S T R A C T

Women's commentary within UK police leadership is one of a wide-ranging, prolonged, and sustained campaign to achieve leadership parity with their male colleagues. The traditional held view of policing as a 'monolithic organisation' with males occupying the majority of leadership roles has been researched and debated at length with some claiming that this deep-rooted view prevents women progressing in the profession or even manipulates their career ambitions. World-wide women are disproportionately affected by inequality in employment, including policing. The United Nations 'Sustainability Development Goals' have set out extensive ambitions to address issues around inequality and gender equality, amongst others, by 2030. The aim of this study was to determine the extent by which the current composition of UK police leadership supports these Goals and how they may influence efforts to address the challenges faced by women to achieve equal parity in leadership. An integrative thematic literature review was employed as its primary research methodology. The study found that contemporary research is prone to repeating previously highlighted cultural and structural barriers that add little value to existing knowledge. However, it does highlight a third emerging barrier that of the 'woman herself'. The study concludes that there is some evidence of support for Key SDGs within current UK police leadership with 40% of current Chief Constables now being women. Nationally and locally policing has created and implemented its Vision 2030 strategy as its primary channel to address key SDGs, however as implementation is voluntary and non-enforceable, progress is slow and requires sustained effort.

Key search words: *women in leadership, women police leadership, senior policewomen, equality, leadership challenges and barriers, inequality in policing, gender disparity, Sustainability Development Goals, SDGs.*

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3. INTRODUCTION

Women's commentary within U.K. police leadership, is one of a wide-ranging, prolonged, and sustained campaign to achieve any similitude of parity with their male counterparts (NARPONews, 2024, Cooke, 2025). The traditional and time-honoured view of policing as a male led and operated profession has been debated extensively with some claiming that this view is acutely entrenched making it difficult for women to progress, and manipulates their career ambitions (Dods.Diversity.com, 2023).

Redick (2024) claims that law enforcement is 'a monolithic organisation' with males occupying the majority of leadership roles and further asserts that the underrepresentation of women in policing, particularly within senior roles, is understood to be a by-product of its 'white, male dominated culture' (2024, citing Loftus, 2008). Within the U.K., research figures reveal that 36.8% of police constables and 40% of current Chief Constables in England & Wales are women, highlighting that despite some progress, inequality continues at all ranks within policing and that expected parity remains to be regarded as 'work in progress' (Skills for Justice, 2024).

When considering the global landscape of women in policing, England and Wales rank above the international average of the representation of women within the profession – ranging between 1.5% and 28.8% (Sebire 2020, cites Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013). When considering promotion to senior positions within England and Wales, Sebire (2020) suggests that there is evidence of progress, however adds that a lack of 'sustained progress' has failed to reach any form of parity at the most senior levels and that this is experienced within policing globally.

It is argued that world-wide women are disproportionately affected by discrimination in employment, resulting in them being systematically omitted from partaking in decision making and from attaining positions of leadership (A4ID, 2022). In 2022 women comprised of 40% of the workforce globally, but held only 27.5% of managerial positions, a decrease from 28.5% in 2021, but despite some progress the representation of women remains low and below 50% globally (United Nations, 2024, p.30, UN Women, 2018). The organisation, 'Advocates for International Development', opines that such inequality arises as a result of established and often institutionalised beliefs, behaviours, and culture, which emerge at 'personal, societal, institutional and political levels' (A4ID, 2022, p.iii). It is argued that the same holds true within the UK policing landscape.

The United Nations (UN) Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) are an ocumenical request to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030. Also known as the '2030 Agenda', the goals were agreed in 2015 by the UN General Assembly (Resolution 70/1) and adopted by all member states with 2030 set as the deadline to achieve their aims. The seventeen SDGs, as illustrated below, are universal in nature and set out extensive ambitions to address issues around reduced inequality, gender equality and peace justice and strong institutions, amongst others.



The UN Sustainability Goals (Source: U.N. 2015)

In May 2024, the UN reported that the '2030 Agenda's' commitment to achieving gender equality 'remains a distant objective', highlighting limited improvement in attaining gender parity in public life and managerial roles. It further added that at the current rate of progress, achieving its ambition would take 176 years (p.10). In its progress report, the UN declared that 'increasing women's leadership roles and investment in gender equality are crucial at national, regional, and global levels' (2024, p.2-26), with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) advocating that encouraging more women leaders will achieve greater gender equality (2025). At a national level, the U.K. is expected to implement country led sustainability development strategies to monitor progress made against all 17 SDGs, however it is accepted that action in one area will affect outcomes in others (UNDP, 2024).

It is against this milieu of inequality within leadership, with a particular focus on UK policing, that this research sets out to identify the key SDGs aligned to leadership and equality and will explore the challenges and barriers faced by women who aspire to be senior leaders. Furthermore, it will consider how current policing culture assists or hinders the implementation of the SDGs, and how the SDGs can influence efforts to address and drive current and future change within the focused area of gender disparity within policing. This will be achieved by undertaking a qualitative based literature review as its principal methodology.

The methodology employed will allow the researcher to select and critically evaluate literature that has previously researched and discussed the subject area within the UK policing landscape. An integrative thematic approach will be utilised so as to allow the literature to identify and direct the circular debate concerning the nuances around the links between leadership and SDGs; SDGs and reform; how current police culture and behaviour helps or hinders the SDGs, and finally how the SDGs can be drivers for change.

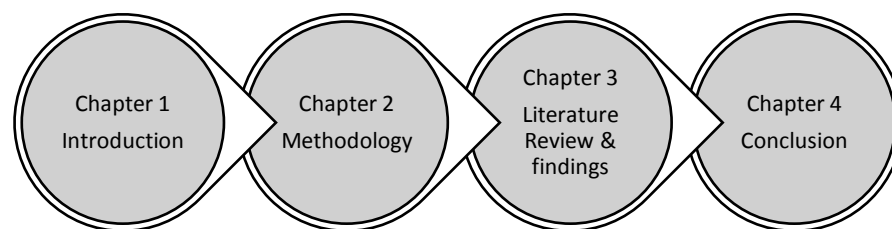
Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to determine the extent to which the current composition of UK Police leadership supports the ambitions of key sustainability development goals and how these goals are influencing efforts to address the barriers and challenges to achieve equal leadership opportunities in the profession, specifically in relation to gender representation.

Within the context of UK policing, the specific objectives of this research are to:

1. Outline and discuss the key SDGs that influence women's leadership and gender equality.
2. Critically explore the barriers and challenges faced by women aspiring to achieve senior leadership positions in policing.
3. Evaluate the impact of the key SDGs on gender parity in leadership.
4. Propose future direction for continued research.

This paper is made up of four chapters –

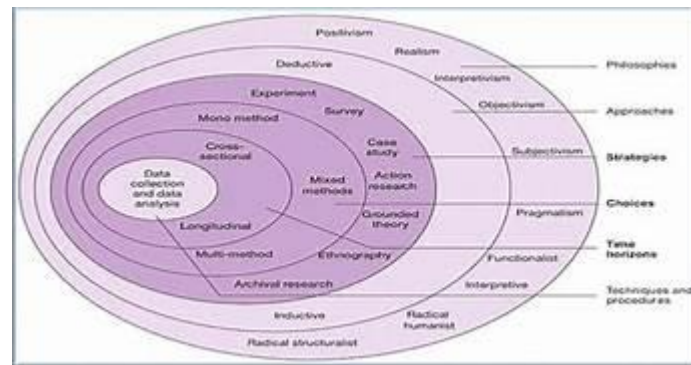


Illustrated Document Structure

1. METHODOLOGY

Research methodology, according to Sreekumar (2023) describes the procedures and techniques used to guide decision making around gathering and analysing information regarding a particular research topic and is considered as a core influence on the overall study (Whiffin, 2021, p.11). In its simplistic form it is a way of explaining how a researcher intends to carry out their research (Indeed, 2025). It is however a process by which researchers design their study, thereby achieving their research objectives and includes all the integral aspects of research including its design, data collection and analysis methods and the overall framework within which the research is conducted (Sreekumar, 2023).

According to Whiffin (2021, p.19), the practice of research is a 'linear process which guides the researcher through a sequence of steps'. Saunders *et al* (2009) however, correlates the process with the image of an 'onion' to outline the different choices that should be considered by the researcher – each choice representing a layer of an onion as shown:



Research Onion (Source: Saunders et al 2009, p.108)

Crawford (2025) asserts that the methodology chosen should come from the research question and not from personal preference for one design over another. It therefore follows that an effective and appropriate research methodology is aligned to the research aim and objectives and as a result it:

- provides a framework and guidelines to assist the researcher,
- assists in identifying the most appropriate research design, data collection and analysis methods, (Open University, 2016)
- ensures that the research findings are valid, legitimate, and reliable and free from bias or errors, and
- confirms that ethical guidelines are adhered to throughout the duration of the research, (Indeed, 2025; Sreekumar, 2023)

For this study, the research will employ a qualitative based literature review as its primary methodology. To capture dialogue around each methodological choice, Saunders *et al*'s (2009) 'research onion' framework is used to provide structure to this chapter.

1 Research Philosophy and Research Approach

The epistemology of this author is one of a pragmatic approach that utilises, both an interpretivist and inductive philosophy. The aim of the author is to explore and gain an understanding around the issues at the core of the research question rather than merely providing a descriptive narrative of them (Saunders et al, 2009). In addition, the interpretivist

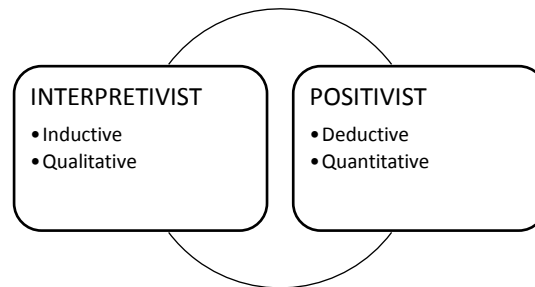
approach affords her opportunity to interpret and understand the collated data, develop theory from the analysis of that data and to consider the impact and influence of those interpretations in the subject area (Cooke, 2025.).

The author is aware that pursuing inductive research has its challenges. Some sources argue that challenges could manifest within inconsistent data collection or data errors; the research findings may prove problematic to interpret; may even be unsuitable if striving to obtain particular perceptions or insights and may be vulnerable to researcher bias (Salomao, 2023). The benefits however outweigh the challenges by offering flexibility, remaining closely aligned to the research context and supporting the initiation of new theory (University of Warwick, 2016).

2. Research Strategy and Research Choices

This study is a qualitative based literature review, a non-empirical study, which does not require primary data. Whilst a literature review is often based on empirical studies they are considered as secondary research rather than primary or empirical research (Kheder, 2025). The study proposes mixed research choices in relation to data gathering and analysis. As a literature-based piece of research it will utilise secondary data which will be primarily qualitative based but has the flexibility to introduce quantitative data to support or challenge any findings if necessary.

The researcher therefore perceives her choices as aligning to recognised methodologies:



Research choices. (Source: Whiffin, 2021)

The research strategy is depicted below with further details provided at Appendix B.

Parameters	• Max 10 peer reviewed studies • Dated 2014-2014 • Key relevant SCDGs
Search terms & key words	• women in leadership, women police leadership, senior policewomen, equality, leadership challenges and barriers, inequality in policing, gender disparity, Sustainability Development Goals, SDGs
Databases & search engines	• UWTSD online library • Google Scholar • Google
Selection criteria	• Enhances current knowledge • relevance • identifies new themes • Contemporary • Authoritative author/expert

3. Research Techniques - Literature review as a Methodology

A literature review is described as ‘a piece of academic writing demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the academic literature on a specific topic placed in context’ (The University of Edinburgh, 2025). McCoombes (2022) views it as a ‘synopsis’ of existing knowledge and debate, assisting in the identification of gaps in knowledge.

Undertaking a literature review has many benefits to the research and the researcher.

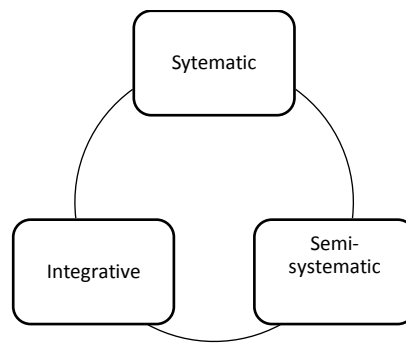
- It can assess the current state of research on a topic and provide familiarity of its boundaries and limitations (Uni of Illinois, 2025)
- It can Identify experts in a particular field – providing resources for consultation in the research to be done.
- Identifies key questions about the topic that needs further research – i.e., knowledge gaps.
- Considers methodologies used in previous similar areas – thereby identifying which work best or determine a new angle (University of North Florida, 2025)
- Evaluates successful and unsuccessful previous assessments/studies (Uni of Illinois, 2025)
- Prevents duplicating same information as others writing on the same topic, allowing the researcher to find their own unique approach to the topic.
- Helps researchers adjust to different audiences (Kaye, 2023)

However, literature reviews are not without weaknesses. Some argue that customary literature reviews often lack accuracy, are often improvised, and fail to adhere to a specific methodology thereby raising uncertainty over the quality of the research content (Snyder, 2019) and the validity of its output (Haddaway, 2020). Furthermore, it is argued that they may be too focused overlooking the bigger picture, the review may lack appropriate critical appraisal by treating all research insights as valid (Haddaway, 2020) and that by excluding grey literature (unpublished information) it can suggest incorrect or misleading conclusion (Haddaway, 2020).

However, Snyder (2019; 2023) claims that a ‘literature review as a research method is more relevant than ever’, arguing that as the pace of generating new research knowledge increases it is becoming inherently challenging to keep informed and to assess new evidence in specific fields.

As a stand-alone methodology, a literature review does present benefits and challenges: firstly, by synthesising research findings and perspectives from a collection of studies it can address research questions with ‘a power unavailable to any single study’ (Snyder, 2023, p551). It creates a platform for advancing theory development, policy, and practice (Snyder, 2023, p551) – but can be time consuming and requires strong analytical skills. In addition, it provides structure and order in areas where research is disparate and interdisciplinary (Snyder, 2023, p551) – however failure to design and execute in line with current methodological standards impacts upon its accuracy, precision, and integrity (p.552). A key challenge according to Snyder lies in the contribution and knowledge development that the methodology promises to deliver (2023, p.552), adding that even providing a clear definition of a strong or sufficient contribution is challenging, in itself (p.553). Finally, a literature review in a field that frequently publishes new studies doesn’t generate significant new knowledge and any new insight is often surpassed by new developments (Grant & Booth, 2009).

A literature review can be approached in 3 ways as illustrated:



The 3 Approaches to a Literature Review

The researcher on this occasion has elected to use an integrative approach to the review and its analysis. This is a recognised approach which aims to analyse primary research findings to provide new and explicit insight about the research topic. According to Snyder (2019) most integrative reviews are used to address ‘mature topics’ or new and emergent subjects thereby advancing knowledge by re-conceptualising theories and expanding on current knowledge. This aligns with the objectives of the research question and other aspects of the proposed methodology. Snyder (2019, p.335) does however throw in caution that few guidelines or standards exist to develop a strategy for the approach, despite this she does however highlight that when conducted successfully and contributes with new knowledge or theory, the ‘rewards [of an integrative approach] are significant’.

4 Research limitations

It is argued that research limitations are the weaknesses or inherent flaws in a study’s design or methodology which the researcher acknowledges may affect the conclusions drawn, or their interpretation. Three issues are highlighted:

- a. Age of the publications – (2014 – 2024) A clear parameter in relation to the age of publications was set as there has been extensive historical research around women in police leadership. Excluding the significant volume of previous studies pre-2014 may impact upon the findings, however this is mitigated where appropriate by introducing other relevant publications, outside of the date parameters to challenge or support the critical dialogue.
- b. Availability of UK relevant key literature – There is a dearth of literature available that specifically addresses the link between women police leadership and the UN SDGs and, in particular within the UK. The implications of this may manifest in abating the critical evaluation of the literature by inadequately challenging or supporting any conclusive argument and undermining the findings of the review. To mitigate this the author will utilise established studies by experts, and will where necessary, select publications that are internationally based but specifically contemplate the UN SDGs and policing as both are fundamentally global matters.
- c. Researcher bias – Bias exists in all research and is difficult to eliminate. It can occur consciously or unconsciously at any stage of the research and impacts on the reliability and validity of the research findings (Smith and Noble, 2014; Scribbr, n.d). Researchers bring their own experiences, prejudices, and philosophies to their study ‘which if accounted for in advance enhances the transparency of possible research bias’ (Smith and Noble, 2014, p.4). To mitigate any bias the author has devised a research strategy and design that aims to reduce familiar ‘pitfalls’ in relation to bias (See Appendix A).

5. Researcher Positionality

Holmes (2020) claims that positionality reflects the position that the researcher assumes within a research study and influences the conduct of their research, its outputs and insights. It is further influenced by the researcher's epistemology and ontology their personal values and their beliefs.

The author has enhanced knowledge and understanding of policing and police leadership from a female's perspective which has been gained through an extensive policing career and latterly an academic career in the subject area. Her experience and knowledge therefore inform her current and future research direction. Her positionality as an insider researcher is confirmed.

6 Ethical considerations

The study will be undertaken in accordance with UWTSD research ethics principles and any ethical considerations reviewed periodically throughout the research process and will be disclosed and addressed transparently.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW – FINDINGS

Silvestri, in her 2006 (p.266) study, argued that although the ‘glass ceiling’ in policing had been broken with the appointment of the first female chief officer, it was somewhat premature for researchers to claim the end of the organisation’s ‘patriarchy’, and claimed that theoretically, there was now no acceptable rationale why women could not achieve parity with their male colleagues in every aspect of policing. The reality was, and arguably continues to be, that women remain underrepresented within police leadership. The contemporary studies in this review, continue to highlight both cultural and structural barriers influencing the progression of women within policing, but significantly also suggests another dimension – that of the woman, herself (i.e., personal barriers).

Greater gender diversity in senior police leadership, is claimed to indicate higher levels of ‘procedural justice and police legitimacy among societies’ (Sebire,2020). A police force’s fundamental objective of being a strong and stable institution rests in part on its ability to reflect society thereby increasing social peace and cohesion, a key objective of the UN SDGs (16).

The findings of this review will be presented by firstly identifying and defining the key SDGs and how they correlate with the current study. It will then consider and evaluate how policing is delivering against the key SDGs, focusing on gender parity in leadership. The review will then seek to explore two key themes from the literature – firstly, the cultural and structural barriers women experience to achieve equal leadership opportunities and secondly, the influence of personal factors upon the desire and progression into police leadership roles. In doing so this chapter addresses objective 1, 2 & 3 of the study.

1. The 17 Sustainability Development Goals

The U.N. Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) are the result of a significant global treaty, known as the 2030 Agenda, adopted by all member states, including the UK, to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030.

The 17 SDGs are grouped into three key areas of environmental, social, and economic issues with each SDG supported by key targets to assist in measuring impact and achievement. The 17 Goals are:



The 17 SDGs, (Source: UK SDG Data, 2021)

The SDGs are universal, they are ambitious, and they require all signatories to contribute to them on an international scale, and then deliver them nationally and locally (UK SDG data, 2021). Furthermore, they require a collective effort from government, businesses, civil

society, and individuals to address (ISO.org, n.d.). However, progress has been challenging and questionable at all levels. It is suggested that while governments, companies, and social sector organisations ‘participate in grand social-symbolic narratives’ that imply progress, the evidence at the ‘coalface’ portrays a different view (Tracey, Stott, 2024). Some claim that financial resources, misleading statistics, the ‘marginalisation of government intervention’, disparate locally accountable approaches, and complex social and cultural problems cojoined with local politics and regional issues are obstacles to progression (Tracey, Stott, 2024). Central to the enactment of all SDGs on a global, national, and local scale is that they are arguably voluntary and cannot be enforced.

Two of the 17 SDG can be interpreted as being particularly relevant to the current study around women leaders, and within policing, namely SDG5 & SDG16. The researcher does however acknowledge that there are elements of these two SDGs cutting across and impacting upon other SDGs, however these will not be considered within this study due to research limitations.

	Goal 5 Gender Equality	Goal 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	
This goal focuses on eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and emphasises the need to ensure women’s full and equal participation in leadership and decision making at all levels (UK SDG data, 2021). One of its key indicators is 5.5.2 – the proportion of women in managerial positions. It is this aspect that is of relevance and can be linked to this current study.		This goal centres on promoting peace, justice and strong institutions and aims to create peaceful and inclusive societies, ensures access to justice for all and to build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Two of its key indicators are 16.6 – to develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels; and 16.7 – to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. Both indicators can be linked to policing and are therefore relevant to the current study.	

Relevant SDGs (adapted from Garcia & Shen, 2022)

2. Delivering the SDGs

In June 2024, the UN reported that almost half of the 17 Goals were recording minimal or moderate progress with the UN Secretary- General commenting that the ‘world is getting a failing grade’ (United Nations, 2024). With regards to Goal 5, the report highlighted that the objective of achieving gender equality remained elusive, evidencing limited progress, and emphasising the need for enhanced and sustained investment in gender equality and women leadership roles (2024, p.2-26).

With a particular focus on policing, Sebire (2020) claims that the composition and culture of a nation’s police service plays an integral role in its ability to achieve these goals and that appointing and embedding female representation in all ranks (Goal 5) within its structure is vital in setting the Force’s culture (Goal 16), a view supported by Mukherjee and Mathew (2024). Garcia & Shen (2022, p132.) however argue that within policing globally, ‘none have achieved the United Nations goal of gender equality and empowerment of women’, and that

a commonality amongst policing is that current gender policies do not offer a remedy for the treatment of women police.

In the UK, the 'Policing Vision 2030' (National Police Chiefs Council, 2025) sets out its aim for UK policing, of being a sustainable and efficient service, by offering five priority themes, referred to as pillars – two are relevant to this study:

PILLAR 3	<i>To respond effectively to all appropriate demand and bring perpetrators to justice. To meet the pillar, focus is placed on 'contributing towards criminal justice reform'</i>	VISION 2030	<i>To develop and inspire our workforce and evolve our culture. To meet the theme a focus is placed on 'ensuring policing is representative and inclusive at all ranks'; 'establish a strong ethical and professional culture' and, 'develop effective leadership at all levels' (p4)</i>	PILLAR 4
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It could be argued that Vision 2030 is UK policing's contributing strategy to the SDGs with its pillars clearly aligned to the UN SDGs, and its delivery date of 2030 (Pillar 3 to SDG 16, Pillar 4 to elements of both SDG 5 & 16), although this is not confirmed within the strategy. In addition, the Vision 2030 document fails to provide or suggest a reporting framework of progress, or how success should be viewed. Like the UN SDGs, the adoption of Vision 2030's objectives are advocated but not mandated to all UK police forces and are non-enforceable.

Within the UK policing landscape some Police Forces are now developing sustainability strategies or policies that are clearly aligned to some of the UN SDGs and the Policing Vision 2030, although arguably are considered as tokenism of police acquiescence. One inherent weakness of the published strategies, when considered in the context of this study, is that there is little or no specific reference to gender representation or parity within leadership and how it will be achieved (West Yorkshire Police, 2024, Staffordshire Police 2023).

3. Cultural and structural barriers and challenges

Insight from national and globally based research has laid claim to a better understanding of the narrative of women's experiences within policing and assert that women in policing continue to face cultural and structural barriers that prevent gender equality and parity in advancement and career experiences (Alexander & Charman, 2024). Globally there is a dearth of evidence of a 'fully integrated police service where women represent 50%' of the workforce and share balanced visibility amongst all roles and ranks (Silvestri, Tong, 2022). Within the UK, policing organisations maintain that women are now 'breaking moulds and challenging stereotypes' (Metropolitan Police, 2025). Statistics will evidence that progress has been made, with the UK globally being 'hailed a success story' (Silvestri, Tong, 2022), however, genuine equality for women in policing remains fragmented (Skills for Justice, 2024, HeforShe, 2021) and conflicts with academic findings (Alexander & Charman, 2024; Silvestri, 2003).

The Cultural and structural barriers to women's progression manifest in diverse ways within the literature and include:

CULTURAL BARRIERS

organisational/police/canteen culture, power relationships, adopting male traits, 'fitting in', excessive workloads, misogyny, hostile behaviours, bullying, tokenism, sexual discrimination & harassment, 'time', resilience, sponsorship, 'old boys club', maternity leave, macho culture.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Work-life balance, flexible working hours, policies and practices, austerity, promotion processes, professional development/experience, mentorship and role models, career development opportunities, child/elderly care, 'time'.

The exploration of each of the above barriers in detail is not possible within this study, however, aligning them to key categories, affords the opportunity to draw out some significant and focused claims and discussion. Three categories are highlighted - *'fitting in'* (or acceptance); *'hostile behaviour'* (or misogynistic behaviour) and *'time'* (hours worked, hours served, timing of advancement).

Drew and Sanders (2020, p.47) assert that central to any discussion around barriers for women in policing, rests on the impact of organisational culture. They define it as 'macho, masculine and conservative', with those that don't fit the cultural norms and values being excluded. Haake *et al* (2017, P.3) supports this view, adding 'reluctant to change' to the definition. They also assert that leaders (i.e., women) who fail to 'fit' the norms of police culture are often deployed to roles that are not seen as 'real policing', implying the more 'macho', exciting roles. They further claim that empirical research suggests that women need to be 'credible and capable, and more qualified' than their male counterparts to be accepted as police leaders, a view supported by others (Llamas *et al*, 2023; Astley, 2019). Silvestri however opines, that female leaders represent a double threat to police culture in that they are 'a woman, and a woman in control' (2007, p52).

Alexander & Chapman (2024) explore the extent to which 'cultural and structural barriers' persist for women in UK policing and address the three above categories. They claim that 'fitting in' and being accepted, alongside social identity is important and an acknowledged aspect of any organisations culture. However, within policing, they claim that the prevalence of a macho culture and the need to prove their worth results in women adopting a 'get stuck-in' attitude to the role to be accepted, and as a result the authors suggest that the higher-ranking women in policing today 'tend to have or, to have adopted, more masculine gender identities', and similar behaviours (2024, p.300). They go a step further by adding that the need for acceptance where traditional police cultures still exist, results in some leaders having to sacrifice their personal values against the 'status quo' (2024, p.300).

Many of the studies refer to the existence of hostile behaviour, which according to Durrant (2021) appears to reflect a much-dated misogynist culture and questions why it has resurfaced in the 21st century. Alexander and Charman's study revealed persistence of such negative cultural elements within policing, disclosing frequent instances of sexual harassment, bullying and, other hostile behaviours (2024, p.295). They suggest that as a result women adopt masculine identities as actions of resilience to survive these negative cultural aspects, pointing out that the degree of resilience for women is greater when

advancing their career (p.295). Astley (2019) supports these findings and adds that due to these hostile behaviours of discrimination and misrepresentation, women leaders are often denied of their successes as their seniority increases. Interestingly Astley points out that the adoption of male traits by women leaders are disliked by both male and female colleagues resulting in further misogynistic criticism, and a lack of trust (2019, p.64).

Llamas *et al* (2023, p.3) suggests that some women are seen to be promoted as organisational 'tokens' based on their gender rather than ability and as a result are subjected to hostile behaviour, unwanted resentment, excluded from groups and exposed to a 'boys club' mentality. Other studies support this view conceding that some male officers continue to hold this view, and that policing organisations have surrendered to the pressure to recruit and promote more women due to legislative directives, fuelling further resentment and hostility (Drew and Saunders, 2020, Silvestri and Tong 2022). They add that against this backdrop, the challenge for policing now is how to increase the representation of women in the more senior ranks (2020, p.477) but add, that simply increasing the number of women in the organisation will not simply translate into meeting the challenge without the existence of policies to address existing inequalities.

Cunningham (2024) endorses the above findings by claiming that the culture within policing continues to be male dominated with attitudes of male superiority and the customs of undermining and undervaluing of women officers. She suggests that the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' is still visible within policing, and should be considered in terms of its use as a 'label', and as a 'concept' (2024, p.4), furthermore advocating that instead of viewing misogyny as individual actions, consider it as being located in 'social systems and environments as a whole' where women will tend to confront hostility simply because they are women in a man's world. This she argues is certainly true of policing where the organisation is central to the sustainability and reproduction of misogyny and its traits.

Hack and O'Shea (2023) contend that changing policing's organisational culture into 'a gender – equal space', where hostile behaviour is not tolerated, will require sustained police, and political leadership, supported by three points of action – 1. police leadership needs to be empowered to make changes, 2. 'top-down' efforts must provoke zero tolerance to misogyny to change the views of officer's and leaders and, 3. enduring political pressure with clearly defined steps to tackle it. They add that permitting misogynist behaviour impacts fellow officers, public trust, and police effectiveness.

Navigating the ranked police structure continues to present a gender bias according to Alexander and Charman (2024) and when combined with cultural elements associated with 'time', it particularly deters the progress of women. Researchers have previously found that 'time' impacts on many areas of policing - the time served, the time worked and the timing of progression (Alexander and Charman 2024; Silvestri, 2006). The rate at which officers progress through the earliest of ranks has a positive effect on progression to senior officer positions, however as women only apply for posts if they fulfil all expected criteria, they do not apply for the first rank of sergeant in the same numbers as men (2024, p.296). For senior leadership posts to be achieved haste continues to be the essence of success, however managing this in a profession that values 'time served' becomes testing for women before they even contemplate interrupting their career to take maternity, adoption or carers leave or employ flexible working practices (Alexander and Charman, 2024, p.301, Astley 2019). In response, Silvestri (2006) highlights that the majority of policewomen therefore lack a strategic plan for their progression and advancement to senior roles to exploit 'time', relying more on opportunity.

When exploring 'time worked', it is suggested that long hours are still considered a trait of 'masculine' organisations and a facet of police culture (Alexander and Charman, 2024), and when associated with commitment to the role and career success, it impacts 'negatively on women in the workplace, and in policing' (2024, p.301). Silvestri (2006, p.274) reveals that working long hours has become 'an indicator of commitment and stamina', with most senior officers working in excess of required hours. An additional issue surfacing is that of part-time working; there is evidence that it can limit women's career progression in particular and is not generally subscribed to by them who aim for the highest rank (Alexander and Charman, 2024, p.301). Balancing childcare with the demands of a policing career has been described as an 'irresolvable conflict' for senior women (Alexander and Charman, 2024, p.301) despite implementation of force policies and legislation. Balancing work and family life is still assumed differently by gender within senior roles and has a greater impact on women's career advancement, intimating that some women have paid a 'child-tax' (no children or smaller families) as a result (Alexander and Charman, 2024, p.301).

Silvestri (2006) argues 'time worked' and 'time served' are fundamental elements of the 'smart-macho management culture' that portrays police leadership and the identity of a police leader. She further asserts that women are complicit in emphasising 'time served' as a key aspect of their identity, their rank, and attainment of commitment and credibility through their own condonement of 'fitting in' (2006, p276).

4. Personal barriers

Personal Internal Barriers

Self, self-confidence, self- efficacy, imposter syndrome, no interest in promotion, low self-esteem, mixed identities, overthinking, introvert, personal choices

Sabat and Mishra (2010) declare that the 21st century is deemed the century of 'equal participation of women' in all aspect of endeavour, yet they assert that policing is one profession that presents challenges to this parity by instituting barriers for the progression of women. They categorise these barriers as personal 'internal' and 'external' barriers. Personal barriers are defined as within the individual, whereas external barriers refer to factors present within the work environment or its structure (Sabat, Mishra 2010, p366) as discussed above.

The reviewed literature highlighted a few, but significant elements of 'personal internal' barriers for women that had been touched upon in the studies but not in any depth, as illustrated above.

Drew and Saunders (2020) found that officers, regardless of gender, made personal assessment of their own 'readiness' to progress in the profession based on skills,

experience, confidence, and personal motivations and that it was acceptable for officers not to engage at all if that was their desire. Silvestri (2005) claims that in trying to understand why women's underrepresentation continues to concern academics and others alike, despite evidence of progress, she feels that the explanation rests with women themselves, rather than barriers imposed by organisations.

Llamas et al (2023) raised the notion of women 'juggling multiple identities', which builds on 'identities' discussed earlier, and refer to women officers as 'actively resisting and portraying stereotypical norms of femininity and policing' thereby adopting mixed identities allied to being a woman and a policewoman. Silvestri (2007) refers to the lack of emphasis that women officers place on their personal lives, views and personalities when undertaking their role, with their 'work identity' (policewoman) prioritised over gender (woman) in distinguishing their identity.

Workman-Stark (2024) undertook research in relation to 'work identity' within policing and found that police work identities were categorised into 3 types – behavioural, cognitive and verbal. She suggests that cognitive 'work identity' is used to understand multiple identities and that individuals can create an identity hierarchy to better manage personal and professional identities such as within policing, but they can have positive and negative implications for individuals. She claims that despite women advancing in their careers they continue to engage in identity work seemingly based on 'cultural norms and the enduring legacy of having to behave in a certain way to be accepted. As a result, they may not necessarily be their authentic self.

Although not UK based, Mhina *et al's* study (2022) offers some insight into self-confidence amongst women officers seeking advancement. Participants defined 'self-confidence' as how they felt about themselves and their capabilities. The study highlighted that those women leaders with self-confidence were comfortable in sharing personal values and beliefs which allowed them to be authentic. When explored further it was seen as an essential coping strategy; a behaviour central to attaining leadership success and, assisting in finding solutions to daily challenges. It was not however considered as a 'major obstacle for women' (2022).

Llamas et al (2023) highlights the challenge of being an introvert alongside 'overthinking' in their study. They point out that being a female introvert, or a female introvert in policing, is not necessarily an issue but may impact on how the individual processes thoughts and communicates. Llamas et al (2023) suggest that introverted women leaders who prefer to process their thoughts and operational decisions internally and alone, may be socially disengaging themselves and may place themselves at a disadvantage of not involving their staff or peers in decision making or planning, thereby presenting as being 'aloof'. They assert, that as a result, women leaders find it difficult to influence others, win support, promote themselves and experience difficulties in communicating ideas or explaining rationale for decision ultimately impacting their confidence and assertiveness, resulting in them being invisible (2023, p.13). In effect becoming barriers to their own aspirations.

Kaufmann (2024) claims that introverts can lead effectively and that the trait should be seen as a strength. She adds that introverted leaders have unique characteristics that allow them to succeed – they are excellent listeners, they can easily build rapport due to their empathy and listening skills and often prioritise the development of others. However, introverted leaders face some challenges which include self-doubt, feeling inauthentic and trouble being perceived as a leader.

A final element of 'personal barriers' is that of 'imposter syndrome'. Sabat and Mishra, (2010) claim that the subject of low self-esteem amongst women leaders is subject to much attention with previous research stressing that women are susceptible to low self-evaluation of their abilities and professional performance. This they claim is attributed to 'imposter syndrome' and manifests in women in senior positions believing that their professional success is the by-product of luck or pretence rather than ability, and that these beliefs could expose them as incompetent at any time.

Imposter syndrome is a psychological term that refers to behaviour where people doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud (police1.com, 2025). It can prevent women from pursuing career advancement, taking on leadership roles or being open to new opportunities (Common.purpose.org, 2024). However, it can have strengths – harnessing feelings of self-doubt can motivate an individual to strive for excellence, embrace their vulnerabilities enabling better connections, being aware of their boundaries and limitations, and encourages empathy (Common purpose.org, 2024).

Sabat and Mirsha (2010) add another dimension to the dialogue of 'personal factors' by claiming that women in policing are plagued by 'self-efficacy' and 'low output expectations'. They argue that 'low outcome expectations', the belief that actions will not have desired outcomes, serve as barriers to women as they reduce the prospect of women engaging in behaviours that aptly challenge restrictive conditions or their goals in the workplace (2010, p.371). They further claim that 'Self efficacy' expectations directly impact on career aspirations and assist in translating aspirations into goals and goals into action (2010, p371).

Police officers, irrespective of gender, often find it difficult to disclose personal challenges or to seek support partly due to the 'macho' culture associated with policing (Porter, Lee 2023). Officers are expected to suppress emotions with any deviation from this presenting as a weakness which could impact upon their career (Porter, Lee 2023, p2215).

The study suggests that both cultural and structural barriers still exist despite numerous legislative and policy changes. It is argued that none of the barriers come as a surprise, and all are global in their reach making the link between them and the UN SDGs clearly visible. The identification of personal barriers amongst the literature is arguably a refreshing finding as most previous and current research fails to acknowledge or explore this dimension. Although not investigated in depth within the research it does pave the way for future research

It is fitting at this juncture to note limitations with the reviewed literature which may have influenced the interpretation and impact of its findings. Firstly, reference to ranks 'Ranks' (including senior officers) do not transfer between different countries and terminology varies considerably. Although the study aimed to concentrate largely on UK policing, deviation to global policing occurred due to limited primary and supporting literature in some of the barriers explored. Secondly, the diverse cultures, structures and approach of policing bodies in different countries and jurisdictions are influenced by their political social and economic histories and the relationships between police and state; this may have influenced the views of the researchers and their participants.

6. CONCLUSION

A woman should be 2 things – WHO and WHAT she wants to be.

(Coco Chanel, n.d.)

The barriers and challenges faced by women in policing to achieve gender parity amongst senior positions continues to attract academic interest. The subject area is seen as multifaceted, yet globally relevant and is now supported and sponsored by international (UN SDGs), national (Vision 203) and local strategies.

The challenges and barriers highlighted within this study are numerous, familiar and, arguably adds little value to existing knowledge. However, UK policing has arguably seen significant improvement in gender parity and representation at an organisational level since the appointment of the first woman chief officer in 1995. Policing has been seen to address the equality challenges posed by previous research, where women are now offered flexible working options, new entry and exit points, are visible within the hierarchy of the organisation and within specialist roles once deemed as 'men only' (firearms, motorcyclists, divers). Being the 'token' woman is now arguably redundant as a phenomenon, as is the theoretic 'glass ceiling'. Today 40% of Chief Constables are women signalling that UK policing has made some in-road to gender representation at its highest level.

With such visible success it is difficult to understand why contemporary researchers continue to explore the issues which arguably only serve to repeat previous findings and fail to contribute to the existent knowledge base. By adopting a literature review as the primary methodology this study is guilty of re-conceptualising historical issues, however its contribution is sited in the distinction it affords to the third 'barrier' that emerges from the literature i.e., personal factors, which is only marginally explored by the studies. The third barrier therefore questions whether a woman's success is impeded by cultural and structural obstacles or whether the woman herself is the obstacle.

Policing is changing at a rapid rate, with cultural change on the horizon as police officers no longer see it as a 'career for life', with this comes challenges of how its organisational structures and culture must adapt. Academics will argue that gender equality is not solely about police structures and processes but more about the cultural characteristics of the societies it serves. Policing, and academia, must therefore accept that gaining parity in gender equality is reliant on a number of issues, but it is significantly controlled by personal choice.

In responding to the research question, the author concludes that there is some evidence to suggest that the current composition of UK police leadership is supporting the achievement of key SDGs pertinent to this study. In response to SDG5, 40% of Chief Constables are now women. It is accepted that this could be deemed as work in progress, however nationally the rank of Chief Constable is facing difficulty in attracting applicants to the position with an urgent call to establish why senior leadership is no longer attractive to both men and women. Nationally and locally, the creation and implementation of Vision 2030 is policing's most notable channel to address SDG 5 & 16, however implementation of its objectives are voluntary and non-enforceable; whilst its progress is slow and requires on-going effort and adjustment as the demands of policing transform.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research, and their rationale, can be found at Appendix A.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Self-confidence, self-esteem, overthinking, introvert behaviours, and anxiety are conditions and behaviours that affect the working population. The extent to which such 'personal factors' impact on policing and its staff is unclear. This study considered these factors as a possible barrier to policewomen's progression but was unable to explore in depth. The policing population is now becoming more diverse and more inclusive where neuro- diversity is no longer a barrier to recruitment; women are entering the profession at a later time of life and as a result experience perimenopause and menopause during their service; and society in general is more open about mental health – the impact of these matters has not been considered from a policing perspective or gender specific viewpoint. A knowledge gap therefore exists. Future research needs to focus on the extent that these conditions and behaviours impact on:
 - career progression,
 - operational decision making,
 - managing risk in operational situations and
 - the challenges of leadership and management of staff
2. There are nationally a number of vacancies at the very senior ranks of policing especially amongst Chief Constable. Whilst research shows that there are barriers to women's progression to senior positions, these opportunities for progression are available yet there are challenges in attracting interest and applications from female officers, as well as their male colleagues. Further research would be beneficial to explore the reasons why there is now a lack of interest in roles that were fiercely prized and pursued and why women in particular are not seizing upon these opportunities.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

APPENDIX B

Item	Choices	Notes
Philosophical stance	Pragmatism - Interpretivist - Inductive	
Data collection and analysis	Mixed Qualitative data – secondary data only Thematic based analysis	Quantitative data to be used to support/challenge if relevant
Research technique	- Literature Review - Integrative approach	Technique is imposed by set task
Key Terms & Phrases	women in leadership, women police leadership equality, inequality in policing, Sustainability Development Goals, SDGs, leadership challenges and barriers	Single words not specific enough phrases to be used to locate subject specific data. all terminology must be directly related to research question
Research parameters	- Principal Literature within last 10 years or authoritative author - Maximum 10 articles/studies – published only	Ensures it is current. Restrictions imposed by word count and timeframe. Data to support or challenge literature review can be outside of parameters.
Databases & Search engines	Primarily On-line: UWTSD on-line Library Google search platform Google scholar	Hard copy publications can also be utilised and referenced
Selection criteria for articles	- Aligned to agreed key terms. - Relevance - Influences or enhances current knowledge. - Supports/challenges research question and findings. - Identifies new or emerging issues/themes. - Provides unexplored unconventional approach to historic and current issues	As per research parameters

Ethical considerations	• All secondary data to be acknowledged to avoid plagiarism – UWTSD Harvard Referencing to be used. • Researcher bias to be addressed and limitations to be declared. • Researcher positionality to be disclosed.	Minimised as no participants. Consider ethical issues at each step of methodology
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