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# Women police in the Nigerian security sector

*Tosin Akinjobi-Babatunde*

This article details the history and philosophy behind major changes in police tradition and organisation in Nigeria in 1955. Women in the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), influenced by their background as enforcers of societal norms, developed a type of social-work-oriented policing. Using primary and secondary sources of historical information, this article discusses the origin of women in the NPF, the specialised role of women in police work, and the changes that have been effected in the roles and functions of women in policing in Nigeria. Situated within the conceptual frameworks of patriarchy and gender, this article argues that gender biases impeded the incorporation of women into the police and, when eventually introduced, gender limitations constrained their roles, operations and activities.

**Keywords** Nigeria, police, women, societal norms, patriarchy

## Introduction

This article is situated within the conceptual frameworks of patriarchy and gender, both of which are useful in explaining the subordination of women in terms of power, status, employment and access to other resources in Nigeria. Gender explains the socially constructed difference between a man and a woman on the basis of their reproductive properties, while patriarchy emphasises the social exclusion of women, based on how the sexual composition of the body defines the social meaning and significance accorded women in the society.

In traditional Nigerian societies, police work was carried out by adult males who were engaged in the prevention and control of crime and disorder. Women played the primary role of socialisation, instilling discipline, morals and virtues in their children as part of the broader system of crime prevention and control in society. The display of deviant behaviour by children was often attributed to a lack of maternal care and supervision, a manifestation of the belief that women were ‘naturally’ capable of preventing and controlling crimes in the society. The policing philosophy and tradition of the colonial state also assigned policing as predominantly a task for adult males.<sup>1</sup> Proposed by the Nigerian Women’s Party (NWP), changes were effected in policing tradition and organisation to establish the ‘Women’s Police Branch’ (WPB) in 1955.

Between the early 1940s and 1955, women police in Nigeria went through the phases of integration, acceptance and development, facing a number of the same problems as women police

throughout the world have faced, such as discriminatory provisions and limited opportunities for professional advancement.<sup>2</sup> However, in other ways, the Nigerian experience at that time was quite different to the rest of the world in that the reform of policing tradition and organisation resulted in the design of an unusual style of social-work-oriented policing, geared specifically towards policing women and children. This new style of policing was radically different from traditional policing operations. In effect, they moved beyond the emulation of the traditional male style of policing to the development of a new style of policing directed at securing the most vulnerable groups in society.

The following section describes the situation that warranted the entrance of women into police work and the organisational changes that took place in the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) as a result. The second section describes the specialised roles and the changes that have been effected in the roles of women in policing in Nigeria, as well as the challenges encountered while working to break the glass ceiling of this male-dominated profession. The third section illustrates the ongoing challenges facing women police in the NPF, and the conclusion discusses the implications of these changes and challenges for women in policing, as well as making some recommendations going forward.

## Integration of women in policing in Nigeria

Although the role of women in traditional crime prevention and control has been overshadowed by the accounts of men and the events that shaped history,<sup>3</sup> women have been involved in the social systems of home, work and community control. The role of women as reproducers of societal norms and values has meant that there is often societal reference to what 'we learnt at our mothers' knees'. This means that society places a high level of importance, as well as expectation, on the behaviour of women – who are supposed to fulfil the responsibilities of caring and disciplining – at home and in public. However, women's involvement in social control has not remained static. In order to meet the needs of women and children in trouble, women have supported formal agents of social control by enlisting in the police and other security sector institutions (SSIs).

The struggle for women's empowerment and equality that followed the end of colonial rule also gradually paved the way for women's integration into the police service. For 25 years after the establishment of the NPF in 1930, consequent to the amalgamation of the north and south protectorates' police forces,<sup>4</sup> no women police existed in Nigeria. Notably, women were not deemed fit for the rigours of police work until the increase in criminal activities involving women suggested a profound need for women police in crime prevention and control. As a result, the campaign for the enlistment of women in the police started.

The campaign began in November 1944, when a delegation of the political and social sections of the NWP advocated for the recruitment of female constables during talks with the chief secretary to the colonial government, A E T Benson,<sup>5</sup> and the police commissioner at the time, C W King. The delegation proposed that women aged 40 to 50 years be employed as police constables 'because they would be better able than men to prevent prostitution and deal with female criminals'.<sup>6</sup> Through such acceptance it was hoped that the police would take on greater social services missions. The proposal was objected to on the grounds that women of such an age would not be able to perform the tasks suggested, and there were strong Islamic sentiments against this proposition among the elite in the north.<sup>7</sup> Although the proposal was not accepted, the NWP did

not relent in advocating for effecting changes to the NPF's traditions and organisation in order to integrate women.

In the early 1950s, about the same time that the NWP was reopening discussions on the issue of women in the police force, events outside Nigeria were pointing to a new consciousness that could not be ignored by the colonial administration. On 2 December 1949, the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) had secured an international protocol for the suppression of trafficking in persons, especially young girls and women, into prostitution. The convention so adopted required the governments of the world to show adequate sensitivity to the need for women police to assist in the prevention of prostitution and the protection of its victims. Between January and February 1953, the colonial government and the police authorities had before them a questionnaire from ECOSOC on the measures used to suppress trafficking in women and girls.<sup>8</sup> As there was no existing structure featuring women police, the colonial administration lacked the type of policewomen desired by ECOSOC. This development compounded the pressure on the colonial administration, as well as the police authorities, regarding the need to enlist women in the police.

The proposal of the NWP and the international consciousness of the need for women to take the lead in suppressing the trafficking of women and children prompted various interest groups and political representatives to support the need for changes in police traditions and organisation. Subsequently, the colonial government announced its decision to establish the 'Women's Police Branch'.

The advert for the recruitment of women police appeared in newspapers in August 1955.<sup>9</sup> Qualification for enlistment emphasised physical ability, a minimum educational standard, and a security check that assessed character and past records through references and a fingerprint check.<sup>10</sup> In the end, the general minimum height qualification of five feet, six inches was waived for women who were two inches shorter, while the test of overall medical fitness was upheld.<sup>11</sup> The minimum educational attainment of standard six (now primary six) or the modern-two certificate was waived for recruits from the north.<sup>12</sup> The screening process relied heavily on physical ability rather than verbal communication skills or a background in problem-solving, as is needed in community-oriented policing where citizens are identified as 'clients' to be served and policing involves more communication skills and negotiating ability. The recruitment criteria failed to correlate morality and the psychological, communication and negotiation skills used in traditional social control with law enforcement. It is pertinent to note that the police service and most other SSIs in the country are yet to change their hiring processes to reflect the reality of modern methods of crime prevention. Given the changes in technology and procedure, it is necessary to find ways other than physical ability to assess applicants' suitability for policing.

Female recruits were expected to be unmarried until they received permission to marry after serving for a period of three years.<sup>13</sup> This remains unchanged under the Nigerian Police Act of 1967, which decrees that – while male police officers are not subjected to any marital restrictions – a woman police officer is not free to decide when to marry and may be subjected to a long period of courtship, depending on her length of service. The suitor must pass a test of good character, after being subjected to 'surveillance', which depends on the subjective evaluation of the Commissioner of Police. Pioneer women police were trained in Western dressing and footwear, gymnastics, swimming, lifesaving, first aid, fire and ambulance drills, police duties, court procedure, law of evidence, criminal law, penal code and field training, with the exception of arms drills. Firearms were considered unnecessary for the roles undertaken by women police, who were considered too weak to handle firearms. In the late 1980s, women police successfully agitated

against their exclusion from arms drills.<sup>14</sup> With the expansion of the scope of modern police work and improvement in the tools of crime, women police now train with, have access to, and carry and use firearms, as well as being tutored on violent confrontation in anti-crime duties. Although changes have been effected in women's involvement in arms drills as part of their response to the exigencies of modern police work, this has not been institutionalised in police legislation and regulations.

The selection and interviewing of the 20 women who were considered fit enough for the positions and rigors of law enforcement was personally made by the inspector-general of police at the time, R J P McLaughlan. The first task of the pioneer policewomen was to take care of female prisoners and juveniles and to obtain their statements. These policewomen were employed for investigation duties with the railway police and at the police headquarters in matters involving women and children.<sup>15</sup> The distinction between social-work-oriented roles for policewomen as opposed to the traditional masculine roles of police officers established a gendered segregation in police work, but nevertheless initiated specialised responsibilities and compounded the social duties of women in the police.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women in the police force, from 6 900 (5%) in 1993 to 36 128 (12,4%) in 2010, but they are concentrated in the lower ranks.<sup>16</sup> In July 2010, UNIFEM data indicated that 97,41% of the female police staff occupied low ranks, compared to 93,02% of their male colleagues; 936 of the 18 745 senior officers were women (5%).<sup>17</sup> The effort to recruit women into police work may have been energised by the drive for equal opportunities for women, the lack of employment opportunities, and the desire for a government bureaucracy that represents all segments of the population. Women have also benefited from demographic changes; the total number of people employed has increased dramatically and so women have filled the gaps, particularly as the supply of male workers has not been adequate enough to meet the rising demand.

## The changing role of policewomen in Nigeria

A total of 20 women started the WPB, and their number increased slowly but steadily over time, standing at 170 between 1955 and 1962.<sup>18</sup> The pioneer policewomen used their duties in the police force to establish a juvenile welfare centre, in an atmosphere different from the ordinary police stations.<sup>19</sup> Over the years, policewomen have headed the juvenile welfare centres in all the divisional police headquarters. These centres serve as part-time counselling centres, where women function more as arbitrators and counsellors than hardnosed law enforcement agents.

The public, as well as male police officers in the force, initially resented 'the intrusion of women constables into what had been purely a male establishment'.<sup>20</sup> The pioneer policewomen were faced with profoundly discriminatory attitudes, as they were poorly represented and not given opportunities equal to those received by their male colleagues. They were also confronted with challenges in the areas of marriage, maternity and posting (as posting affects the upbringing of their children, their education and their overall well-being). Women could not initially rise beyond the rank of chief superintendent of police and many pioneers were retired from the service at that position until the embargo was lifted during the tenure of President Shehu Shagari. These challenges are still noticeable in the police force, and policewomen are networking to combat the problems they face in the profession. However, despite the challenges and hazards associated with the profession, a vast number of women police have distinguished themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Women in the NPF have made a departure from the conventional attachment to children- and women-related duties to other, diverse areas of policing. The scope of police work for women has widened and they have ventured into the 'frontlines' of law enforcement.<sup>22</sup> They are now engaged in surveillance, the prevention and detection of crimes, the prosecution of criminals, community policing, and peacekeeping.<sup>23</sup> Since the establishment of the human trafficking section of the NPF in 2000, it has been headed by women officers who 'have worked extremely hard to raise national profile and international reputation'.<sup>24</sup> Women have also held high positions in the administrative structure of the police – up to the level of the deputy inspector general of police – but no woman has been appointed the inspector general of police in Nigeria and very few have been commissioners of police. In 2007, less than 2% of the station, command, division and area commands were headed by women.

In 2004, the police established a female mobile unit to further protect women and children in the population. The unit has 46 squadrons; each squadron is comprised of about 2 000 mobile policewomen. Their duties are to constantly engage in arms and riot drills, internal security and mob dispersion, especially of riots and demonstrations involving women. It is their obligation to provide security for visiting first ladies, at international women's conferences – particularly when women dignitaries are in attendance – and at international events such as the All-Africa games. The most recent expansion of the roles of policewomen in the NPF is in their involvement in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo, East Timor, Liberia, Congo and the Sudan.

## Ongoing challenges

Gender relations and the status of policewomen in Nigeria have either been grounded in laws and policies and/or patriarchal attitudes. The positions women occupy within the police force depend to a large extent on the individual goodwill of successive police chiefs and their disposition towards women.

The existing Police Act and Police Regulations (1990) view and treat women 'as not on an equal standing with men'.<sup>25</sup> Sections 121–125 and 127–128 are biased against women. As previously mentioned, there is discrimination in terms of the conditions of employment (e.g., the right to get married and have children) and there is an under representation of women in the service as a whole, but specifically in senior positions.

The police services are also seen as insensitive to the plight of victims of sexual and gender-based violence. They have been criticised for being unwilling to intervene in the protection of women and girls in 'domestic disputes', especially in 'more traditional areas of the country' and in cases where 'the level of alleged abuse does not exceed customary norms in the areas'.<sup>26</sup> Not only do the police ridicule and trivialise cases of domestic violence and rape reported to them, but they go further and actually blame the victims for their victimisation.<sup>27</sup> Police personnel have been identified as lacking the knowledge and skills to respond sensitively to gender-based crimes or to deal with vulnerable groups such as children and persons with disabilities, as they have received no training in policing such groups. The inclusion of women has therefore not had the desired impact of changing gender relations within the services and of increasing the security of women in society as a whole.

## Conclusion

This article examined the integration of women into the NPF, the conventional roles of women in police work and the changing roles of women in policing in Nigeria since 1955. Using the

conceptual frameworks of patriarchy and gender, the article argues that gender biases hindered the integration of women into police work until 25 years after the establishment of the NPF. Sexual prejudice, discrimination and exclusion further constrained the roles of women police to the specialised duties of policing women and children. Women police have recently experienced a shift from their traditional limited functions to include other forms of police work, but such changes are not grounded in the police regulations. Although the NPF has had women in its employ for a very long time, there is still a lot that needs to be done to create a police service that is gender sensitive and gender responsive. This includes introducing specialised programmes and units to deal with sexual and gender-based violence, revising laws, police regulations and the police training curriculum, and ensuring more gender-sensitive recruitment exercises. Moreover, given the changing nature of crime and conflict – for example, cybercrime, terrorism and violent extremism – much of which is targeted at women, the retraining of all police, but especially women police, in order to meet these new challenges is critical.

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## Notes

- 1 M Weber, *Economy and society*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1968.
- 2 Before 1975, women police were consigned to a separate division but in practice were dispersed throughout the British system. Women recruited in the India police service were generally assigned to reception work; see PG Shane, *Police and people: a comparison of five countries*, St. Louis, MO: C. V. Mosby, 1980.
- 3 G Vickers, Women's place: images of womanhood in the SBC, 1888–1929, master's dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA, 1986.
- 4 K Rotimi, *The police in a federal state: the Nigerian experience*, Ibadan: College Press, 2001.
- 5 The members of the delegation were: Mrs T. Dedeke, Mrs A. Manuwa (Hon. Secretary), Mrs Ekemode (Treasurer), Mrs Coker, Mrs B. Oyediran, Mrs L. Timson and Mrs E. Kuti-Okoya; extracted from TN Tamuno, *The police in modern Nigeria, 1861–1965*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970.
- 6 TN Tamuno, *The police in modern Nigeria, 1861–1965*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970, 135.
- 7 Northern women were mostly in purdah and were basically housewives not meant to take up paid work or leave the home.
- 8 UNESCO took this action to secure the implementation of the international convention for the suppression of trafficking in persons and of the exploitation of the prostitution of others. The convention was adopted on 2 December 1949.
- 9 I Okoronko, Women police and the future of law enforcement in Nigeria, in A Solomon and I Iheanyi (eds.), *Policing Nigeria in the 21st century*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2007.
- 10 TN Tamuno, *The police in modern Nigeria, 1861–1965*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Modern school was established as an intermediate three-level class between primary and secondary school. Modern two was the second level within the modern school's three levels. Western education was introduced much later in the north, as Islamic education was favoured over Western education.
- 13 Section 124 of the 1990 Police Acts states: 'A woman police officer who is desirous of marrying must first apply in writing to the commissioner of police for the State Police command in which she is serving, requesting permission to marry and giving the name, address, and occupation of the person she intends to marry. Permission will be granted for the marriage if the intended husband is of good character and the woman police officer has served in the force for a period of not less than three years.'



- 14 Interview with Mrs Bosede Dawodu, Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Police Headquarters, Zone 11, Osogbo, 13 July 2011; interview with Mrs Florence Adebajo, retired Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG), 11 July 2011.
- 15 TN Tamuno, *The police in modern Nigeria, 1861–1965*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970.
- 16 PB Dayil and A Sjoberg, Nigeria, in M Gaanderse and K Valasek (eds.), *The security sector and gender in West Africa: a survey of police, defence, justice and penal services in ECOWAS states*, Geneva: DCAF, 2011; A Holvikivi, Summary and analysis of findings, in M Gaanderse and K Valasek (eds.), *The security sector and gender in West Africa: a survey of police, defence, justice and penal services in ECOWAS states*, Geneva: DCAF, 2011.
- 17 PB Dayil and A Sjoberg, Nigeria, in M Gaanderse and K Valasek (eds.), *The security sector and gender in West Africa: a survey of police, defence, justice and penal services in ECOWAS states*, Geneva: DCAF, 2011.
- 18 EP Alemika, Colonialism, state and policing in Nigeria, in *Crime, law and social change*, Nigeria: Centre for Law Enforcement Education in Nigeria (CLEEN) Foundation Papers, 1993.
- 19 RE Ezekiel-Hart, *Keepers of the peace (facts about the Nigeria police force)*, Lagos: Nigeria Police, 1962.
- 20 Ibid., op. cit., 26.
- 21 A number of women police have held the positions of the deputy inspector general of police and commissioner of police in various states in Nigeria. In 2007, a policewoman became the first Nigerian policewoman to become an Interpol commissioner.
- 22 I Okoronko, Women police and the future of law enforcement in Nigeria, in A Solomon and I Iheanyi (eds.), *Policing Nigeria in the 21st century*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2007.
- 23 MAK Smith, The role of women in crime prevention, maintenance of law and peace and national security: an address at the inaugural National Executive Council meeting of the National Council of Women Societies, Abuja, 20 September 2001.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, *National gender policy*, Abuja: Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2007.
- 26 PB Dayil and A Sjoberg, Nigeria, in M Gaanderse and K Valasek (eds.), *The security sector and gender in West Africa: a survey of police, defence, justice and penal services in ECOWAS states*, Geneva: DCAF, 2011, 190.
- 27 Final Report of the Civil Society Panel on Police Reform in Nigeria, 2012, [www.noprin.org/CSO%20Panel%20Final%20Report.pdf](http://www.noprin.org/CSO%20Panel%20Final%20Report.pdf) (accessed August 2015).