

## **Change and the Probation Service in England and Wales: A Gendered Lens**

Jill Annison<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*The National Probation Service in England and Wales has been buffeted by change in recent years. This has happened at a time when rhetoric has become increasingly punitive, with probation emphasising its role in providing punishment in the community. It therefore seems surprising that there has been a decisive shift in terms of the gendered composition of its staff - there are now many more women than men working in probation. This review outlines quantitative changes and then explores qualitative research data from women probation officers. These different perspectives provide an in-depth account of this interesting and still-changing organisational setting.*

**Keywords:** Probation – Gender - Organisational change – Occupational culture – Feminisation - Work-life balance.

### **Introduction**

The National Probation Service in England and Wales was created in 2001 following the enactment of the Criminal Justice and Courts Services Act 2000. This put in place a new organisational structure, amalgamating the 54 previously autonomous Probation Services into one national organisation with a local area configuration<sup>1</sup> (Morgan 2007; Raynor 2007). These new arrangements also endorsed the changed remit of the Probation Service from its social work foundation to a focus on “enforcement, rehabilitation and public protection” (Robinson and Crow 2009: 45). Further politically-led restructuring in 2004 led to the establishment of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), which brought together the Prison and Probation Services within an operational set of structures to “ensure the end-to-end management of offenders, regardless of whether they were given a custodial or community sentence” (Home Office 2004a: 14). The pace of change continued still further when NOMS (and hence probation) formed part of the new Ministry of Justice in 2007. Finally there was another re-configuration of the National Probation Service into 35 Probation Trusts following the Offender Management Act in 2007.

There has been a considerable amount of academic interest and research regarding this fast-changing situation, particularly in relation to policy and practice issues (see, for instance, Gelsthorpe and Morgan 2007; McNeill, Raynor and Trotter 2010). However, gendered analysis has been a relatively under-developed aspect in the literature with regards to recent

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Annison is Associate Professor (Senior Lecturer) in Criminal Justice Studies, Plymouth University. Email: [jannison@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:jannison@plymouth.ac.uk)

developments in probation. This is surprising given the striking change in the gender composition of the Probation Service, from being a male-dominated organisation until the mid-1990s, to the position now where there are many more female than male employees (Annison 2007). Such switchovers have taken place in the past in other occupational areas but have been comparatively rare on such a scale (Coventry 1999).

Furthermore, this gender shift in probation is particularly interesting in terms of its place within the highly politicised world of criminal justice and its repositioning from a welfare-based approach to a more punitive and managerialist stance (Cavadino and Dignan 2007). The change from a predominantly male-staffed organisation to a situation where there is now a clear majority of women staff across all practitioner levels also seems worthy of further investigation in view of the recent ideological and structural alignment at central government level, which places probation alongside the male-dominated Prison Service.

This article therefore carries out a gendered review of this organisational change within probation in England and Wales. The account focuses on how the situation has changed over the past two decades, initially outlining change in statistical terms, and then drawing on qualitative research findings in order to develop a more nuanced and analytical understanding of the shifting scenario.

### **The Historical Context**

The centenary of probation in England and Wales was celebrated in 2007 (NAPO 2007); the 1907 Probation of Offenders Act is generally identified as the key legislative landmark which enabled the courts in England and Wales to enact probation orders when dealing with offenders. However, national coverage of probation as a public service body was not fully in place until after the Second World War (Whitehead and Statham 2006; Nellis 2007a). A hierarchical, predominantly male organisational structure gradually developed, with small management teams operating across specific geographical areas<sup>2</sup> headed by principal (later chief<sup>3</sup>) probation officers. Operational work was located in local probation offices, headed by a senior probation officer (SPO) who supervised the work of probation officers, ancillary and clerical staff (Annison 1998). The preponderance of male staff across all probation officer grades in the Probation Service in this early period was ascribed to the relatively good conditions of service particularly in comparison with social work, the flatter pyramid shape of the organisational hierarchy, (with considerable autonomy at main grade level), and a reliable source of funding from the 'law and order sector' (Hearn 1982: 194). From the 1950s to the 1980s the relative proportion of male to female probation officer staff (all grades) was approximately 70 : 30 (Annison 1998)<sup>4</sup>, although as in many organisations at that time, the clerical support staff were mainly female.

The organisational set of arrangements became more managerialist through the 1980s and into the 1990s, when national standards and key performance indicators placed a tightly controlled framework around probation's work. In addition, Michael Howard's 'prison works' stance in the mid-1990s<sup>5</sup>, and the increasingly punitive political rhetoric emanating from Government in relation to community sanctions, had a masculinised element, given the official aim to recruit ex-police and armed forces personnel into probation (The Guardian, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1994). Indeed the groundwork for the later positioning of the Probation Service can be seen in an announcement by Baroness Blatch in 1995, (at that time Home Office Minister of State responsible for the Probation Service), when she said:

Although the work of probation officers includes a social work dimension, it is very distinct from that of social workers. The Probation Service is an important part of the

criminal justice system and plays a critical role in the corrective punishment of offenders.

(The Guardian, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1995)

These strident declarations thus seemed intent on placing probation firmly within the masculinised coercive apparatus of the penal system (Franzway, Court and Connell 1989).

**Probation under John Major’s Conservative Government: 1990-1997**

The 1991 Criminal Justice Act was heralded as a major landmark in penal legislation; it was intended that sentencing would be based on ‘just deserts’ and would draw on a ‘justice’ model of proportionality, with punishment fitting the crime. Probation’s role was crucial within this framework given the concomitant intention that there would be increased number of offenders sentenced to community corrections supervised by probation staff. However, the vagaries of political will meant that these legislative intentions were soon overturned in the 1993 Criminal Justice Act. This brought with it serious ramifications for the Probation Service; probation was no longer seen as occupying a centre-stage position in the penal system and its role was redefined “as an adjunct to, rather than a replacement for, the central role of imprisonment” (Beaumont 1995: 61). As a consequence probation experienced a rollercoaster of change in terms of staffing levels: an initial steady increase of overall staffing numbers in the early 1990s was then hit by legislative change which reversed this expansion, with a further imposition of cash-limited budgets. Alongside this, probation officer training was discontinued – the so-called ‘Howard Gap’ (Hanson 2008).

Probation as an organisation thus went from a scenario of upbeat optimism in the early 1990s to a situation where the very future of the service seemed under threat (Mair and Burke 2012). Moreover, Conservative ideology at that time emphasised the appropriateness of probation as a direct-entry, second career option for male applicants with experience from the uniformed services<sup>6</sup>. Given this context it is therefore surprising to find that it was over this period of time that the gendered organisational change within probation from male to female started to gather pace as shown in the graph below:

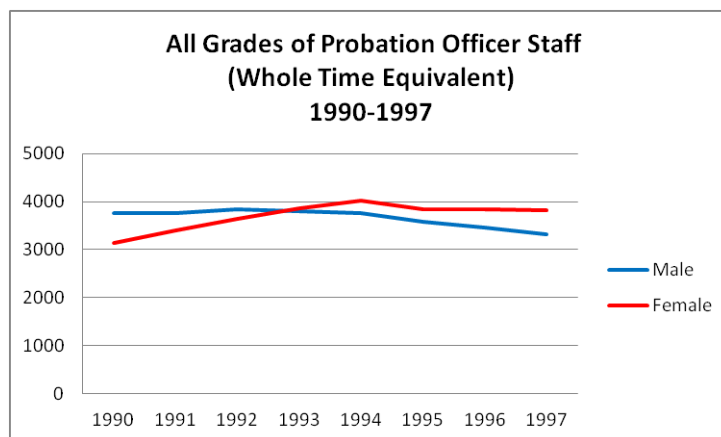


Table 1: All Grades of Probation Officer Staff (Whole Time Equivalent) 1990-1997<sup>7</sup>

It can be seen that the change from a masculinised to a feminised service reached a decisive moment in 1993, with more women than men probation officers in post (as a whole-time equivalent total of all grades) employed in England and Wales. Overall staffing numbers provided a ‘cloak’ of gender neutrality, which masked the counter-intuitive changes that were taking place: as the political rhetoric became more and more hard-line – and arguably more

stereotypically masculine in tone (Scourfield 1998), probation experienced a noticeable shift towards becoming a more female-staffed service.

### Gender Differences – Women Maingrade Probation Officers (1990-1997)

The changes highlighted above regarding probation’s training and value base and the highly politicised and managerial context at that time, provide the backdrop to the changing gender composition of probation officer staff at all levels within the service. This situation is now further deconstructed to review the gendered change at the professional entry level of the organisation, which over the period 1990-1997 was at maingrade probation officer grade:

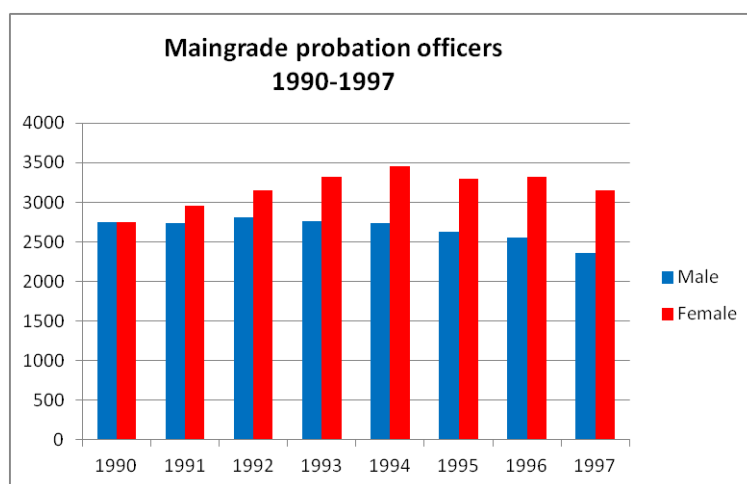


Table 2: Maingrade Probation Officers 1990-1997

This graph indicates the strong inroads being made by woman probation officers and the declining numbers of men probation officers. While the overall total rose and fell across this period, the male / female ratios started to shift markedly – from 50:50 in 1990 to 43:57 in 1997 (see Annison 2001).

Some insight into the motivations for women joining the Probation Service can be gleaned from qualitative research undertaken in the mid-1990s (Annison 1998)<sup>8</sup> which investigated the ‘situated actions and vocabularies of motive’ (Mills 1972) of staff coming into the Probation Service. These interviews were carried out at the time of the publication of the Dews Report (Home Office 1994) that had reviewed probation officer training – and which subsequently led to the suspension of a qualifying training route into the Probation Service (the ‘Howard Gap’). This break in training lasted from the mid-1990s until after the election of the New Labour Government in 1997. The Dews Report’s findings criticised both the social work value and knowledge base of maingrade probation officers and found that the existing training arrangements (as a specialist part of the Diploma in Social Work) “did not meet the needs of the modern probation service and did not offer value for money” (Home Office 1994: 1).

Furthermore, amongst the discourses that ran through the Dews Report were themes of gender expectations and an underlying normative assumption of ‘traditional’ gender roles within the Probation Service. For instance, in the section where the increasing number of young women entrants was noted, there were disparaging comments about unmarried, separated or divorced staff (Home Office 1994: 15). These responses seemed redolent of the ‘family values’ ideology being touted by Conservative politicians at that time and indicated, at Government level at least, that a battle for probation and its staffing gender balance was taking place “about where in a process of change to draw the line” (Franzway, Court and

Connell, 1989: 159). As this was the point when - somewhat paradoxically - so many more women started to join the Probation Service, it is relevant to revisit these qualitative interviews to analyse themes that arose then – and consider whether and how these illustrate and explain the subsequent gendered staffing patterns in probation.

In the interviews undertaken with maingrade probation officers who had entered the Probation Service in the late 1980s and into the 1990s there was acknowledgement of the increasingly prescriptive managerial styles within the probation workplace and the impact that this was having on the working lives of probation officers. However, there was also clear recognition of the opportunities that were available as far as many of the women interviewees were concerned. For instance, Beth<sup>9</sup> commented:

“I felt quite positive actually. I felt even though there was this sense of doom and gloom from [name of training course] in terms of where the Probation Service was going, that there were going to be constructive changes and that there was going to be accountability that perhaps it didn’t feel was around before and I think that’s important actually. It’s important for me – I’m the type of person who needs a framework in my working life... This is the job you’re here to do and you have to be accountable”.

Some of the women probation officers in this study also highlighted professional and practice developments within probation which they found interesting and challenging, as confirmed by Lesley:

“It was a new and exciting time in that we were just getting into doing lots of groupwork... We were in there at the forefront, developing induction groups... We liked to think of ourselves as, you know, ‘being there’ and ‘pushing the frontiers out’. So it was quite good and because there were two or three really enthusiastic members of the team, it just took you all along with it really”.

These two quotes were representative within this research study, with women probation officers seeing opportunities for professional development and locating a place for themselves within the Probation Service. This viewpoint was appositely summed up by Jackie who stated:

“I think I do a good job. I think I’ve got a lot to offer the Service as time goes on, and I want to offer it, you know”.

Alongside this, the women probation officer respondents (and indeed some of the men) commented on the increasing volume of work and the conflicts this sometimes caused in terms of a work/home life balance. For the women respondents there was particular concern about the mismatch between their professional aspirations and the work environment they found themselves in. For instance, Sarah, a probation officer who was living with a partner but who did not have any children, commented that:

“It worries me enormously that it could take over my life completely and I don’t want it to. So I try to devise strategies for what I do at work, even if it means spending more hours in the office so I don’t have to take it home”.

Being a mother complicated matters still further for her colleague Jackie: she placed great importance on making dinner for her family every evening, but in order to do so she did what she characterised as a split-shift in terms of her probation work, continuing to do paperwork late into the night. She viewed this routine as essential to maintaining a stable family life

while also undertaking her probation role, but this ‘double day’ working pattern was stressful (Reskin and Padvic 1994) and she was concerned that her family responsibilities detracted from her professional identity.

Concern about the work / home divide was echoed by Rebecca, an experienced maingrade officer. She responded emotionally in the interview when recalling the conflicts she had experienced, particularly early on in her career, when trying to balance organisational demands and family responsibilities:

“The pressures were great. I feel I had to deprive them [the children] of a lot because the training was so intensive, it was hard work, and looking back I don’t think my needs were considered... So it was a struggle really”.

Rebecca indicated that, taking everything into account, she valued her professional role and this element of her sense of identity and self-esteem. Nonetheless, she continued to feel that there was conflict for her in trying to meet the demands of her work as a probation officer, as set against her role as a wife and mother.

These discussions with women probation officers revealed that there was a difficult balance being negotiated by many of the individuals in terms of their daily working lives, alongside personal relationships and wider commitments and interests. Yet in spite of these challenging situations, these women did not regret pursuing their professional ambitions: importantly, they had breached the barricades of the previously male-dominated organisation.

### **Probation under New Labour – 1997-2010**

The election of the Labour Government in 1997 seemed to remove the threat of extinction that had been hanging over the Probation Service under Conservative rule. Probation initially obtained considerable funding from New Labour’s Crime Reduction Strategy and there was huge impetus for probation to develop evidence-based interventions under the ‘What Works’ agenda (Burnett and Roberts 2004). Nevertheless, this early promise was not sustained: research into the outcomes of accredited programmes (mainly groupwork provision) did not match the over-blown hype from politicians and policy-makers (Maguire 2004; Raynor 2008) and momentum was lost as the new initiatives went mainstream. Probation also found itself caught up in the zeitgeist of new managerialism under the Labour Government and faced the unrelenting demands of auditing and accountability, with an increasing emphasis on competition, innovation and efficiency. Despite meeting many of the key performance targets, the thrust of modernisation under Labour brought in contestability<sup>10</sup> in respect of work with offenders, threatening probation’s public service monopoly in providing community sentences<sup>11</sup> (Senior, Crowther-Dowey and Long 2007).

The wide-ranging impact of these major changes on probation policy and practice interventions with offenders has been well-documented and analysed (see, for example, Mair 2004a; Green, Lancaster and Feasey 2008). Over this period probation again experienced changing fortunes in terms of professional and organisational aspirations and found itself being subjected to:

‘a central ‘command and control’ approach, [which stifled] professional decision-making and innovation and thus improvements in effectiveness; a focus on hitting numerical targets rather than on the professional engagement with individuals that supports reducing reoffending.’

(Lawrie 2011: 53)

The wider organisational context therefore continued to be one of change and challenge for probation throughout the period of Labour Government rule. It is against this backdrop that the gendered lens is again applied.

### Gendered Change – Maingrade Probation Officers (1997-2010)

The examination so far has outlined the tipping point from male to female staff and has highlighted the particularly noticeable trends that took place at maingrade probation officer level in the years of the Conservative Government from 1990-1997. The review here in relation to maingrade probation officers, (i.e. qualified entry level), covers the period from the 1997 election of the New Labour Government, throughout their period in office, and then into the early period of the Coalition Government<sup>12</sup>. The initial statistical overview shows a consolidation of the situation in terms of the relatively low male / relatively high female staffing distribution<sup>13</sup>, while the subsequent probe into qualitative data extends the analysis to consider the responses from women probation officers working in the organisation at this time.

The graphs below show the statistics from 1997-2006 (headcount) and then from 2008-2011 (FTE figures)<sup>14</sup>:

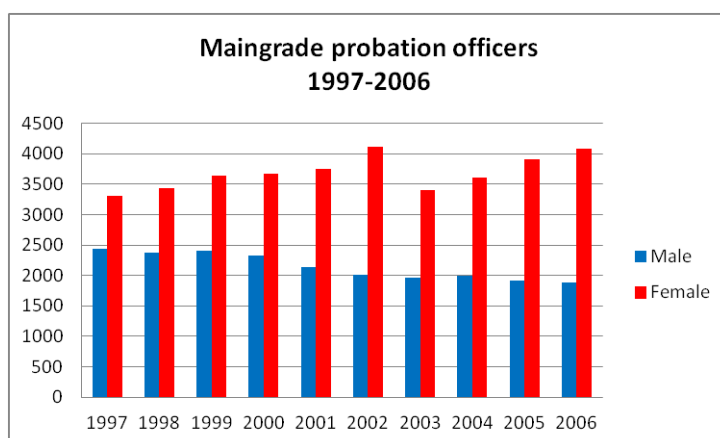


Table 3: Maingrade Probation Officers 1997-2006

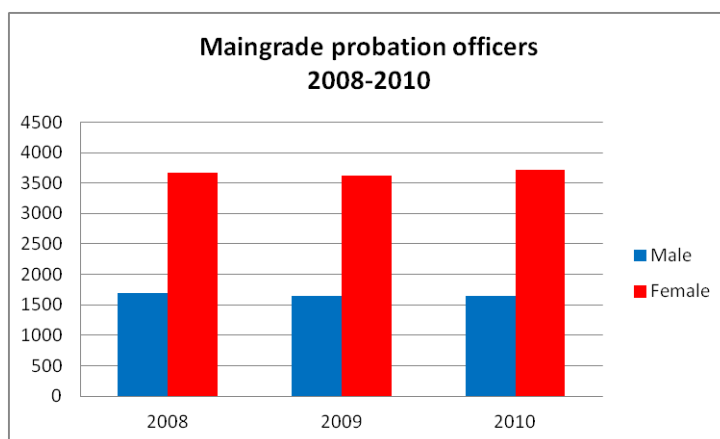


Table 4: Maingrade Probation Officers 2008-2010

There were variations over these years in terms of the overall total of maingrade probation officers which reflected changes in national and local workforce recruitment and retention at this level.<sup>15</sup> However, the downward trend of male probation officers in relation to female maingrade officers can be seen to have continued to 2006, stabilising in more recent years at a ratio of approximately 69:31.

It is interesting to note that within the Human Resources Workforce Profile Reports relating to probation that were compiled annually from 2004 to 2007 (Home Office 2004c; Home Office 2005; Home Office 2006; and Ministry of Justice 2007), the gender comparator that is referred to is the gender distribution recorded in the Public Service generally, which it approximately matches (see, for instance, Ministry of Justice 2007: 1). This is stated in factual terms and is not subjected to any detailed analysis within these reports. In contrast to this, *The Heart of the Dance*, which outlined the diversity strategy for the National Probation Service from 2002 to 2006, identified the falling numbers of male probation officers as an area requiring remedial action, stating that there was a need to “significantly increase the representation of men in the NPS workforce” (National Probation Service 2002: 11). The focus on gender as part of Government policy and political rhetoric therefore seemed to convey mixed messages and came in and out of focus at this time.

The extent of this change in the gendered staffing composition has not been replicated in associated criminal justice agencies in England and Wales, such as the police and the Prison Service, and this possibly accounts for the lack of a concerted response in relation to probation which might otherwise have been expected at Government level. In addition, it is worth noting that while probation is a core agency in the criminal justice system in England and Wales, “from a wider perspective it is a relatively small player” (Mair and Burke 2012: 2).

As far as the police force is concerned the Fawcett Society’s Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System (2009) reported as follows:

<b>2003/2004</b>	<b>2009</b>
<p><b>Women represented:</b></p> <p>21% of constables            11% of sergeants            9% of inspectors and chief inspectors            8% of superintendents and above</p>	<p><b>Women represented:</b></p> <p>27% of constables            16% of sergeants            14% of inspectors and chief inspectors            11% of superintendents and chief superintendents.</p>

(Fawcett Society 2009: 17)

The overview above shows some advancement into the police ranks by women over time but on nowhere near the scale that has happened within the Probation Service. This slow pace was confirmed recently by the Ministry of Justice when it was noted that “women represented 26% of the 143,734 police officers in post (based on full-time equivalent posts) in 2009/2010. This is 0.6 percentage point rise on the previous year.” (Ministry of Justice 2010: 57).

As far as the Prison Service is concerned in England and Wales, Walklate summarised the situation in the Prison Service in 1999: “14 per cent of prison officers were women, with 13 per cent of those operating at governor grade being female” (Walklate 2004: 11). Information from Liebling, Price and Shefer (2011) reveals the following information from the HM Prison Service Annual Report for 2005/2006:

“22 per cent of prison officers are female (4,345 in total). The proportion of female prison officers has risen sharply in recently years (in 2000 only 17 per cent were female). The female percentage is slightly lower as the grades advance: 19 per cent of senior officers are female and only 14 per cent of principal officers are female.



However, this proportion has risen even more sharply in recent years. In 2000 only 9 per cent of senior officers and 8 per cent of principal officers were female so their representation has more or less doubled in six years. This increase stems from the high proportion of new entrant prison officers who are female. Between 1 April 2005 and 31 March 2006, for example, 31 per cent of newly recruited prison officers were female (Prison Service 2006)".

(Liebling, Price and Shefer 2011: 16-17)

There are thus parallels with the Probation Service in terms of a trend of increasing numbers of female entrants – and yet, the Prison Service remains a predominantly male service<sup>16</sup>.

### **A Time of Change and Consolidation – Some Qualitative Insights from Women Probation Officers**

The analytical spotlight in relation to the Probation Service in England and Wales now turns to focus on findings from another qualitative research study (Annison 2006). This source enables an investigation of the gendered expectations, assumptions and challenges that were experienced by women probation officers who entered the organisation in the early 2000s. In this research study carried out in 2006, postal questionnaires were sent to graduate trainee probation officers from the Cohorts 1-5 from the Diploma in Probation Studies<sup>17</sup> that had run from 1998-2004 in the South West of England (Annison 2006). This asked about their career trajectories both before and after their qualifying training. While the replies were generally brief<sup>18</sup>, the respondents did provide some insights into their motivations, experiences and career plans. For instance, career development was often mentioned alongside more vocational reasons for wanting to work as a probation officer (see Annison, Eadie and Knight 2008). Nevertheless, as indicated in the quote below, this was not straightforward for women entrants:

“The Probation Service can be sexist – most highlighted when I had children. Old style managers took [a] dim view of working mums and were inflexible and discriminatory at times in relation to career progression”.

(Woman probation officer [01] from Cohort 1)

Other respondents also noted that they had experienced sexism; for instance, one commented about this in relation to the way she had been treated in comparison with a male colleague (woman probation officer [20] from Cohort 1). Another respondent (woman probation officer [06] from Cohort 5) stated that she had experienced discrimination “mostly from other agencies; have felt on occasions I have had to justify my skills, knowledge and experience being a younger female”.

On a more positive note there were comments from some women respondents who indicated that they had found an overall balance between an enriching career pathway and their personal lives, particularly in relation to motherhood. The comments below seem indicative of Catherine Hakim’s (2000) characterisation of adaptive women wanting and finding a flexible balance in relation to the personal and professional aspects of their lives:

“First baby due in 7 weeks time – so likely that career will take a back seat for a few years. I hope to return following a year’s maternity leave, 2 days a week”

(Woman probation officer [06] from Cohort 2)

Nonetheless, this contrasted with the more strident comments from another respondent (woman probation officer [21] from Cohort 1) to the effect that she had had to take “complete and utter responsibility for my own development and progression”. This riposte raises

questions about the situation with regards to more career-minded women within the Probation Service and the focus thus now shifts to review the position of women chief probation officers.

### Gendered Change – Chief Probation Officers

Following on from the review of the considerable changes that have taken place at maingrade level, the gendered lens is turned to scrutinise change at the top managerial layer of the organisation. As before, there is a statistical overview and then findings from qualitative research are drawn upon to study the viewpoints of women chief officers, not least to probe into the breaching of vertical segregation in the organisation.

The role of the chief probation officer (CPO) has changed significantly over the period under review in this article. Reorganisation has brought about a decrease in the numbers of staff at this level: the changes arising from the creation of the National Probation Service in 2001 reduced the numbers from 54<sup>19</sup> to 42 - with an associated diminution of power and the re-categorisation as chief officers or chief executives, signifying the wholly managerial role with direct accountability to government (Mair 2007). Further restructuring of areas into probation trusts following the 2007 Offender Management Act has again reduced numbers – this time from 42 to 35.

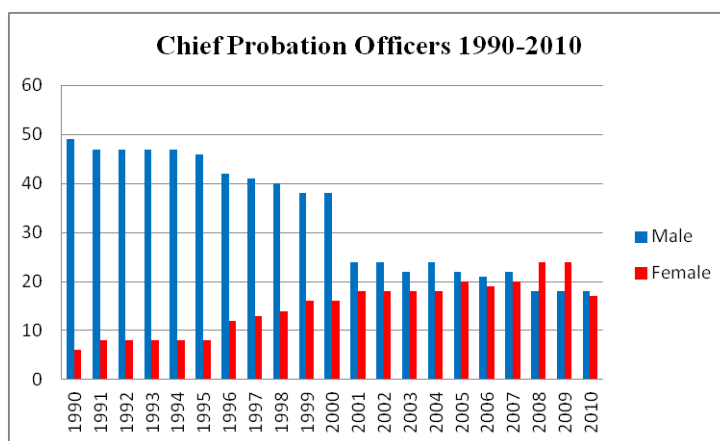


Table 5: Chief Probation Officers 1990-2010<sup>20</sup>

This graph demonstrates the remarkable change that has taken place at chief officer level in the National Probation Service in England and Wales in terms of gender composition. The situation with regards to chief officers can be located within Kanter's (1977) characterisation of types of gender representation within an organisation: in the period up until 1996, women chief probation officers were 'token' representatives at this level (the maximum total of women CPOs in England and Wales in the annual figures did not reach more than 8, a proportion that did not exceed 15: 85 female / male ratio). As indicated in the graph above, the situation from 1996 to 2000 brought about a shift to a 'tilted group' (women still in the minority but increased numbers). However, in 2001, when chief officers were all subjected to a new appointment process (and the overall numbers were reduced), the numbers of women rose yet again, forming a much more balanced group (see Kanter 1977), with variations from year to year of the gender balance within the relatively small number of people at this level.

Although the role of chief officer may have lost some of the authority and power that was intrinsic to the autonomous probation areas in place prior to the creation of the National Probation Service in 2001, these posts are still at the pinnacle of the local organisational structures in terms of operational matters, with direct responsibilities to central government.

These therefore remain prized management roles, subject to intense competition when a vacancy arises. While the move to a more gender-balanced group at this level is striking – and the achievements of these women noteworthy – the wider context of the change and turbulence that has impacted on probation in England and Wales in recent years presents a less benign scenario. As Ryan and Haslam have hypothesized “women’s perceived suitability for senior positions is likely to increase under conditions of organizational crisis” (Ryan and Haslam 2007: 554). They also caution that:

It is already well established that women face greater challenges than men in their attempts to climb to the top of the corporate ladder... It now seems apparent that in addition to these obstacles, the leadership positions that women occupy are likely to be less promising than those of their male counterparts. So, in addition to confronting a glass ceiling and not having access to a glass elevator, they are also likely to be placed on a glass cliff.

(Ryan and Haslam 2005: 86)

It is with these cautionary observations in mind that responses within a qualitative research study in relation to chief probation officers are now explored (see Mair 2004b<sup>21</sup>).

### **Career and Life Experiences of Women Chief Officers**

The motivations of the women for gaining promotion to this level and their experiences of this overall process are explored by drawing on the qualitative interview data from a research study carried out in 2000-2002. One of the aims of this research study was to “investigate the social and educational backgrounds and career histories of CPOs” (Mair 2004b) and it is thus possible to delve into the qualitative responses of many of the women chief officers who were in post over this period.<sup>22</sup>

The eleven women who were interviewed were aged between 47 and 57 years old and all had attained promotion to chief officer level via careers in probation (Mair 2004b). In line with an approach adopted by Billing (2011) the areas of interest here are the self-presentation and self-construction of these women and the way that they conveyed the ‘story’ of the choices they had made and the way they had positioned themselves with regards to their jobs.

Previous research in this area in probation had indicated that “women at all levels were less likely than men to have confidence in their ability to succeed”: “women ACPOs [Assistant Chief Probation Officers] felt their small numbers had made them highly visible and they felt disadvantaged by the prevailing ‘masculine’ culture” (Collier 1994: Abstract). The responses from the interviews within the more recent study (Mair 2004b) contrasted markedly with Collier’s (1994) findings. The tone of all of interviews with the women chief officers conveyed the message that although they had often encountered obstacles in terms of career progress, they had taken advantage of opportunities when they arose and, most of all, they did not view their rise as women to these top positions as exceptional. For example:

“I think quite honestly the same reason I applied for every promotion was because people around me were telling me they thought I ought to... It was sheer luck and opportunism, I was given opportunities to act up, I mean I was ambitious so I always took them, I saw them as wonderful opportunities to develop my understanding and my practice”.

(CPO Respondent 19)

They did not see themselves as trailblazers and seemed to feel that the ‘glass ceiling’ had been broken by other women ahead of them (Davidson and Cooper 1992). One respondent

noted the importance of the influence and support of an established woman CPO when she was considering making an application for promotion:

“Talking about those sorts of things, those little seeds, and again, once my boss, when I was Assistant Chief, whom I have enormous regard for and is a nationally renowned figure, you know, once she gave me the stamp of approval, said yes you can do this and I will support you. That was the bit that gave me the push”.

(CPO Respondent 46)

Progression to this level was presented by these respondents as having been challenging, but clearly achievable, albeit with support (Gaston and Alexander 1997). However, if the ‘glass ceiling’ was not seen as an issue, the metaphor of the ‘glass cliff’ was apparent in several of their accounts (Ryan and Haslam 2005; Ryan and Haslam 2007). For instance, while the tone of CPO 08’s account was self-assured, it was obvious that during her career progression through middle management, she had been appointed to positions where there had been staff difficulties and there was a high risk of failure:

“The post I was given as new SPO [Senior Probation Officer] was one where the team had driven the previous SPO into a nervous breakdown... So that was my first SPO job... – and I wasn’t driven into a nervous breakdown...”.

(CPO Respondent 08)

This experience tallies with Ryan and Haslam’s (2007: 557) line of argument that as the organisational culture moved away from the ‘think manager - think male phenomenon’, the openings that became available for women managers were often extremely challenging and involved direct responsibility for dealing with unresolved crises in these settings. This ‘glass cliff’ experience was reported by another woman chief officer:

“I took over a Service that was very dysfunctional, extremely dysfunctional, and had had not a lot done to it for about fifteen or twenty years. And so practice was way in the past. Management problems had existed, and I have a strong view that communication, coherent communication, actually explaining to people what you’re about, is extremely important. So I put a lot of my time and effort into not only trying to sort out the structural problems that existed within the Service, which were huge. But also making sure that I got out and talked to staff, and spent time with staff...”.

(CPO respondent 32)

The comments about leadership style in this quote are interesting insofar as few of the women chiefs spoke explicitly about campaigning for change in transformative or feminist terms. Nevertheless, they did emphasise their commitment to adopting an inclusive organisational approach, reminiscent of Cockburn’s ‘different way of doing things’ (Cockburn 1991: 71):

“You need to be strong, you need to be a good leader, you need to have an understanding of what your staff are trying to do, you need to be able to be alone without worrying about it. You need good person skills, you need to be able to get the best out of your immediate team, but you also need to be able to provide the right kind of focus and image for your staff”.

(CPO respondent 28)

These quotes indicate the strategies, skills and life choices made by these women in reaching the pinnacle of the organisation. It was striking that they spoke of having individualistic

styles and they showed a keen awareness of how to manoeuvre their way successfully through the organisational labyrinth (Eagly and Carli 2007). While these can be seen as progressive and mainly positive developments, there were also challenges and consequences in terms of life-style choices for these high-achieving, work-centred women and their families (Guillaume and Pochic 2009), as illustrated by the quote below:

“I don’t think you can disentangle one’s personal life from one’s professional life. At least I find that difficult... I mean it was no longer an option to be married to somebody and have children and both have a parallel career. So I suppose that was probably crucial really in the decision taking at the time...”

(CPO respondent 39)

These heartfelt words encapsulate both the strides that this respondent had made in terms of her career but also the tensions that had ensued within her private sphere. As Wilkinson has pointed out “economic enfranchisement has sharply reduced women’s willingness to remain in a subordinate or dependent role in the family” (Wilkinson 1994: 30) and while the career trajectories of these women chief probation officers demonstrate progression within the organisation, this last quote demonstrates some of the many challenges and adjustments that have taken place along the way.

### **Gendered Change – Analysis of Key Issues**

This review has explored significant changes that have taken place in relation to the Probation Service in England and Wales and its staffing composition over the recent past. The statistics outline the switch-over from a predominantly male workforce, to a situation where there is now a ratio of approximately two-thirds female to one-third male probation officers and gender parity at chief officer level. Even so, as Britton (2000) has cautioned, analysis needs to extend beyond a nominal approach in organisational change in terms of gender. She suggests that while “it is certainly reasonable to speak of particular occupations as feminized or masculinised”, a more incisive analysis is needed to consider the extent of the transformation of the gendered nature of the workplace (Britton 2000: 426).

In terms of probation’s recent organisational transformation this is a crucial aspect to consider, not least because of the wider political context to this change. In this respect it seems paradoxical to say the least, that the tipping point from more male to more female probation officers took place at the time when the Conservative Government’s rhetoric was explicitly encouraging male recruits to join the Probation Service. Yet some key countervailing issues can be identified: in the 1990s and into the new millennium there has been a trend of younger women seizing opportunities provided by work and education<sup>23</sup>. Over this period probation has been repeatedly restructured and reorganised, with IT being embedded into practice and the delivery of interventions becoming increasingly amenable to adaptable work patterns. As noted by Wilkinson (1994: 11) “Employers increasingly want a more flexible and dextrous workforce – attributes associated much more with women than men”. In this respect the new Diploma in Probation Studies, which combined both academic study and practice competences, alongside the increasing diversity of practice posts, attracted well-educated and well-motivated women applicants (Annison 2007), with the gender representation at this level in 2007 being 72.86% women to 27.14% men (Ministry of Justice 2007).

It is more problematic to account for the fall in male probation officers but it is possible to put forward several factors: first, staff were offered early retirement and voluntary redundancy packages during the various organisational restructurings. In view of the gender distribution in probation throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this meant that many long-serving male staff left at different points over this period<sup>24</sup>. Second, probation as an

organisation had periods of expansion in the 1990s and into the new millennium. Women grasped these opportunities to enter this organisational setting, seeing an opportunity for professional and economic self-fulfilment (Mulgan 1994). Yet, as Coventry has observed wryly, “it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how many more men would have entered an occupation if more women had not entered” (Coventry 1999: 48). Nevertheless, it is possible to surmise that one factor which may have discouraged some men to consider this career route during the period of the Diploma in Probation Studies qualification (from 1998 to 2010) was the relatively low salary for the two-year period as a trainee probation officer<sup>25</sup>.

Beyond this, a further trend has also impacted in recent years: over the period 1998 to 2008 the number of probation service officers (PSOs - the level below probation officers) increased by 2.5 times and “from 2003 onwards, there were more PSOs than qualified probation officers... As a result, PSOs accounted for almost half the frontline probation staff in 2008 (46.4 per cent)” (Mills, Silvestri and Grimshaw, with Silberhorn-Armantrading 2010: 31-32). Furthermore, since 2010 this has been the main entry point for new practitioner staff, as the new Probation Qualification Framework is modelled on progression from this level (see, for instance, London Probation Trust, 2012). The gender balance at this level of the organisation is similar to that at probation officer grade: the statistics for Quarter 3 in 2010-2011 show 67.14% women to 32.86% men PSOs (NOMS 2011). Staff appointed in these roles generally undertake direct work with lower-risk offenders, with a more restricted range of duties than fully qualified probation officers. However, it has been noted that “under the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Offender Management Model, the distinction between probation officers and PSOs is further blurred as either can be designated an offender manager” (Ferguson 2007: 235). This raises concerns about issues of de-professionalisation within this reconfiguration<sup>26</sup> and about the overall direction of change (Mayo, Hoggett and Miller 2007). While, as Acker has suggested, management restructuring and role changes can lead to interesting jobs, decision-making is often relocated downwards and frontline employees gain additional responsibilities without higher pay (Acker, 2006). Of particular note in this respect are the pay differentials between the probation officer and probation service officer grades in England and Wales: typically, for qualified probation officers the salary range is currently between £28,185 - £35,727, while for PSOs the salary range is from £21,391 - £27,102 (Prospects Careers 2012).

Turning to the chief officer level, the change in gender distribution over the last few years is very apparent, with the responses from the female chief officers indicating that the challenges have been grasped forcefully by many women in this position. Even so, the cautionary warning sounded by Ryan and Haslam (2007) in terms of the ‘glass cliff’ at a time of restructuring and high management turnover does seem apposite in relation to the appointment of women chief officers in probation in recent years. Moreover, in spite of the increase of women at this level, concern has been expressed by Worrall and Mawby (2012) that any cultural transformation has remained at surface level, with the ‘daughters of NOMS’ being subsumed by the discourse of masculinity that still pervades the criminal justice system and penal policy more generally.

## **Conclusion**

This review has outlined the significant change in the gender composition that has taken place within probation over recent years. The statistics provided a detailed overview which was then explored at maingrade and chief officer level via qualitative research findings. This approach developed an in-depth analysis into the gendered change within this organisation, acknowledging the continuing fluidity of the situation. Most strikingly the ‘ideal worker’ (Acker 2006) seems to have changed within probation, with women responding in terms of

adaptability and in addressing the requirements of competency frameworks. Nevertheless, this has often been at personal cost in terms of a work-life balance and has presented challenges within the work setting. Although many women have gained in terms of career progression, the wider picture shows an organisation where the day-to-day work with offenders has been increasingly transferred down to semi-professional level (Senior, Crowther-Dowey and Long 2007). Meanwhile, at the highest management level change has brought about a different range of issues, including a contraction of posts and a reduction of power at the pinnacle of the organisation. Looking to the future across all levels, the loss of the public sector monopoly in this area of work in the criminal justice field brings the prospect of further uncertainty for probation and instability across all roles within the organisation.

This gendered investigation has revealed change on an unparalleled scale within probation in England and Wales; in particular, it has shown the inroads made by women staff into the organisation over the recent past. While this scenario has been viewed as a positive development by many of the respondents in the studies that have been explored here, analysis of the wider situation and of the complexity of these changes, has indicated that this may be a much more mixed scenario, especially given the increasing role responsibilities, downward pressure on pay levels, and the challenges facing the National Probation Service in retaining its position within this part of the criminal justice system in England and Wales.

## Notes

The author would like to thank the participants in the research projects cited here (Annison 1998; Annison 2006; Mair 2004b). She is also grateful for the helpful comments on the article from the two anonymous referees.

<sup>1</sup> The 54 probation services were reduced to 42 local areas, which aligned with police areas across England and Wales.

<sup>2</sup> There was some consolidation of smaller probation areas in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> This re-designation came about in the local government re-organisation that took place in 1974 (Annison 1998).

<sup>4</sup> There were some regional variations. For instance, the 1961 figures showed that London had a relatively higher proportion of women probation officers where there was a male / female ratio approximately 60: 40 (Annison 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Howard was Home Secretary in the Conservative Government from May 1993 to May 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Probation had recruited ex-servicemen and male retired police officers in earlier years. However, these employees did not always fit the stereotype that might be expected (or hoped for by the Conservative Government). For instance, this can be seen in a response by Sean, a probation officer respondent in Annison (1998), who commented ironically: “We’re preparing the way. We want good sensible, firm people – you know, ex-Army officers. But of course, I fit the bill, I’m an ex-serviceman and I can assure my Chief that I’m adaptable to any circumstances!” (Annison 2001: 97). Discussion with him in fact revealed a very welfare-oriented approach to his work.

<sup>7</sup> Figures for the period 1990-1997 were obtained from Home Office (1998) and from personal communication with Peter Ramell, then statistician at HM Inspectorate of Probation, London.

<sup>8</sup> As well as quantitative analysis, the study also included qualitative interviews with 31 probation officers working at different grades and from three different probation areas.

<sup>9</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>10</sup> Senior, Crowther-Dowey and Long observed that contestability “is said to open up the possibilities for all the relevant sectors to apply – be it the public sector, the private sector or the voluntary sector (2007: 64). However, for probation this political decision “has culminated in a situation where probation managers have nothing whatsoever to gain, apart from an impending sense of crisis” (2007: 210).

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted though that electronic monitoring (particularly ‘tagging’) has always been carried out by the private sector rather than probation in England and Wales (Nellis 2007b)

<sup>12</sup> The General Election took place in May 2010 and the Coalition Government was formed shortly afterwards.

<sup>13</sup> Information obtained via email communication with staff at the Probation Workforce Planning Planning and Analysis Group, Directorate of Finance at NOMS. It should be noted that this information was available via the Internet in the four issues of the Ministry of Justice Human Resources Workforce Profile Reports which were published between November 2004 and September 2007, whereas these full statistics are now only released on request.

<sup>14</sup>The figures for these graphs have been collated from Home Office (2004b and 2004c); Home Office (2005); Home Office (2006); Ministry of Justice (2007); and NOMS (2011). The statistics are presented in two graphs due to a change in the way the information has been collected by NOMS: prior to 2006 this was by headcount figures in December each year, whereas the later figures are Full time Equivalent (FTE) figures. In addition gender data was not collected for December 2007 due to an alteration in the way data was obtained from the probation areas / trusts (NOMS 2011).

<sup>15</sup> The number of trainee probation officer (TPO) places varied over this period (affecting the ‘pool’ of graduate TPOs available) and this also interacted with overall staffing vacancies, which depended on national and local funding decisions.

<sup>16</sup> Liebling, Price and Shefer (2011) also noted different gender balances of staff across the individual prisons in the prison estate.

<sup>17</sup> This was a 2-year distance learning degree which also incorporated an NVQ Level 4 qualification.

<sup>18</sup> This was a postal questionnaire with an overall response rate of 64%.

<sup>19</sup> Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Probation Services had amalgamated in April 1996 reducing the number of chief probation officers from 55 to 54.

<sup>20</sup> The statistics were collated from sources outlined in Notes 7, 13 and 14.



<sup>21</sup> These research findings were obtained from the ESDS Qualidata, UK Data Archive. Acknowledgements are as follows: ‘Chief Probation Officers: A Criminal Justice Elite, 2000-2002’. UKDA Study Number 4953. Principal Investigator Professor George Mair, Liverpool John Moores University, School of Law. Sponsor: Economic and Social Research Council, Grant Number: R000223319. Distributed by UK Data Archive, University of Essex, Colchester, July 2004. UK Data Archive bear no responsibility for their further analysis or interpretation.

<sup>22</sup> 11 interviews have been drawn on (out of a total of 47), which are identified as female respondents on the study outline table.

<sup>23</sup> The Human Resources Workforce Profile Report on probation published in September 2007 outlined that the average age of the Trainee Probation Officer group was 31.52 years, with the observation that “the consistent low average age in the TPO group will continue to have a knock on effect on the average age of the Probation Officer group once TPOs graduate into PO roles” (Ministry of Justice 2007: 20-23).

<sup>24</sup> In the chapter drawing on his research study with Chief Probation Officers, George Mair comments that “Some 20 (three females) out of 27 respondents were leaving the probation service on 31 March 2001, with 16 of these accepting what were agreed to be substantial redundancy packages” (Mair 2004c: 257).

<sup>25</sup> Information from a contemporaneous webpage on the National Probation Service website states that the salaries for trainee probation officers ranged from £14,500 to £15,500 (National Probation Service, n.d.).

<sup>26</sup> Similar controversies over role boundaries can be seen in other criminal justice agencies such as the police and in the public services more generally in England and Wales (for example, the National Health Service and in primary and secondary education).

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