

Reach for

Women in the police service have gone from making tea to taking positions in all ranks and all roles in three decades.

Tina Orr Munro interviews Julie Spence, president of the British Association for Women in Policing

Making tea for their male colleagues and cleaning up prisoner's vomit is a fairly accurate representation of the role of women police officers brave enough to enter the police service thirty years ago, according to Julie Spence, president of the British Association for Women in Policing, and chief constable of Cambridgeshire Constabulary.

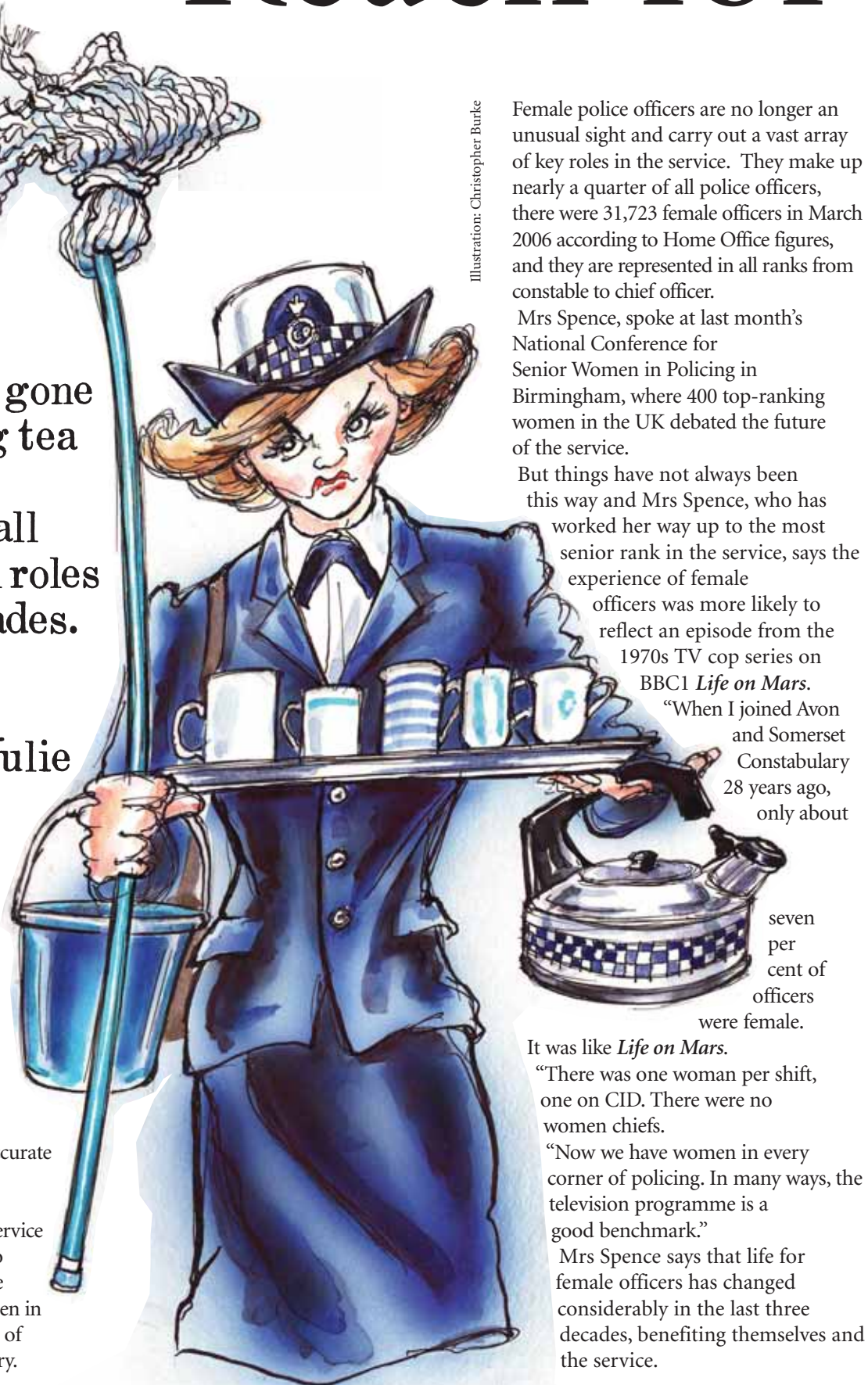


Illustration: Christopher Burke

Female police officers are no longer an unusual sight and carry out a vast array of key roles in the service. They make up nearly a quarter of all police officers, there were 31,723 female officers in March 2006 according to Home Office figures, and they are represented in all ranks from constable to chief officer.

Mrs Spence, spoke at last month's National Conference for Senior Women in Policing in Birmingham, where 400 top-ranking women in the UK debated the future of the service.

But things have not always been this way and Mrs Spence, who has worked her way up to the most senior rank in the service, says the experience of female

officers was more likely to reflect an episode from the 1970s TV cop series on BBC1 *Life on Mars*.

"When I joined Avon and Somerset Constabulary 28 years ago, only about

seven per cent of officers were female.

It was like *Life on Mars*.

"There was one woman per shift, one on CID. There were no women chiefs.

"Now we have women in every corner of policing. In many ways, the television programme is a good benchmark."

Mrs Spence says that life for female officers has changed considerably in the last three decades, benefiting themselves and the service.

the top



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“Women have impacted on operational policing. Women have led child protection which wouldn’t be where it is today without their input. In my own force, Avon and Somerset, it came down to the efforts of female sergeants who really made the difference.”

More recently, the biggest impact on women in policing has been the publication of the Gender Agenda in 2001 which has heavily influenced the way female officers are treated. Following its success, Gender Agenda 2 was launched in October 2006. It now forms part of the inspection regime in forces and is used as a benchmark of progress.

Mrs Spence attributes its success to the fact it is ‘non-threatening’.

“It was always about working with the organisation. We looked at not only the barriers, but also the resolutions

to those barriers. Its biggest impact was to get forces talking to their women. It has touched every corner of the organisation and every force,” she says.

In practical terms, the Gender Agenda has made a difference in many traditionally male areas, most notably fitness testing. While in the past, up to 97 per cent of men sailed through the tests, just 44 percent of women were successful. Now the figure for women is nearer 88 per cent because of changes to the test.

“The test was based on men’s strength. It meant a whole pool of female talent who had all the skills to be a police officer failed a dubious fitness test,” she says.

“In one force, the dog handlers altered their fitness test not for women, but because they were getting too old and couldn’t pass it themselves. Fitness testing for firearms also remains inconsistent across the service.”

Despite the success of Gender Agenda, Mrs Spence admits there is still work to be done, particularly in specialist police departments.

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“We need to do what is necessary and not just shove in a fitness test. We should be looking at health, as opposed to fitness,” she says.

Women are also still under-represented in certain departments. Mrs Spence says that there are a range of jobs that women ‘just don’t warm to’.

“For whatever reason, they are not encouraged into them. Uniform and kit is still male-based and is still an issue. Gun comfort is one area we haven’t bottomed out yet. “We need a serviceable gun with a small hand grip. We need equipment that is gender-friendly.”

Mrs Spence says she has no preconceived notion as to what role women should play in the coming years.

In a key note speech last month, Tony McNulty, police minister, said women officers still feel they need to be ‘one of the boys’ in order to succeed in the service.

Mrs Spence disagrees and insists that women should be themselves and that they don’t have to act like their male colleagues to progress through the service.

But, ultimately she says, it is the behaviour of the service that holds the key to women reaching their full potential.

“We will really succeed when the organisation treats men and women as individuals.”

- The National Senior Women in Policing Conference was called New Dawn, New Horizons – Women Shaping the Future of Policing.

