

# ‘Bad Apples’? Identifying aspects of police culture that enable police perpetrated violence against women and girls

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## **Abstract**

Challenging the assertion that the ‘bad apple’ theory of corruption adequately explains police perpetrated violence against women and girls (VAWG), this essay argues that identifiable aspects of police culture play a significant role in enabling such acts. The essay focuses on three key aspects of police culture: discretion, canteen culture, and solidarity. Discretion, a fundamental component of police work, allows officers to make choices influenced by personal gain rather than professional judgment. Thereby, it creates opportunities for officers to choose to commit corrupt acts such as VAWG. Canteen culture, which promotes traditional male values, makes policing gendered in nature and leads to discriminatory practices against women. The objectification and denigration of women contributes to a toxic culture that enables police perpetrated VAWG. Solidarity within policing, characterised by the ‘blue wall of silence’, provides a protective environment for police perpetrators of VAWG. The difficulties faced by women reporting sexual violence are amplified when the perpetrator is a police officer. Reforms are necessary to address the widespread bullying, discrimination, and institutional sexism identified by the Casey Review. A comprehensive transformation of policing is required to restore public trust and improve outcomes for women and girls.

**Keywords:** Police, police culture, misogyny, sexism, VAWG, police corruption

## **Essay**

On the 3 March 2021, Sarah Everard disappeared from a London street (Wistrich, 2022). Serving police officer, Wayne Couzens, had used his position and warrant card to entrap, rape and murder her (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023). On the day that Couzens pleaded guilty, the

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then Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, remarked that “sadly, on occasion, I have a bad 'un” (Topping, 2021). To distance themselves from allegations of corruption, police agencies routinely claim that the harm is limited to a minimal amount of corrupt officers (Newburn, 1999, p. 14). By blaming a few 'bad apples', organisational failures such as institutional sexism are left unaddressed (Newburn, 1999, p.14). This essay illustrates that the 'bad apples' theory of corruption does not sufficiently explain police perpetrated violence against women and girls (VAWG) in England and Wales. It argues that identifiable elements of police culture enable police perpetrated VAWG. As a result, police culture is becoming more toxic towards women (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023).

The conviction of Couzens, a serving police officer, of kidnap, rape and murder sparked grave public concern that undermined public trust in policing (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 26). Then Commissioner of the Met, Cressida Dick, commissioned an independent review into standards of behaviour and internal culture. The results of the Casey Review were damning, finding the Met to be 'institutionally sexist and misogynistic' (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 285).

Whilst the Casey Review refers specifically to the Met police, it would be a mistake to assume that the poison of misogyny has not infected other police forces. Across forces, 1,483 reports of police perpetrated VAWG were recorded against 1,539 officers between 1 October 2021 and 31 March 2022 alone (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023, p. 5). The true scale of instances is likely to be higher (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023, p. 5).

With 225,229 police officers and staff across England and Wales (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023, p. 5), the number of officers under investigation for VAWG is a small percentage of the overall workforce. Furthermore, data does not exist to enable an historical comparison of VAWG-related complaints against officers to identify whether they have increased or decreased over time (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023, p. 7). However, the sheer scale of recent reports prompted the National Police Chiefs' Council to review the effectiveness of police responses to complaints of police perpetrated VAWG for the first time. It found that deficiencies suggest systematic failures (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023, p. 8), which significantly harm the interests of the public (Chief Executive of the College of Policing, 2023).

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Under the Peelian principles, policing is performed by public consent (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 55). This positions British policing as unique throughout the world because it stems from co-operation rather than fear (Reith, 1956). Incidents of VAWG committed by police officers rock the foundations of policing by consent, and undermine police authority (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 58).

As direct criminal activity, police perpetrated acts of VAWG are instances of corruption (Newburn, 1999, p. 4). Police agencies generally respond to allegations of corruption by placing blame on a small number of ‘bad apples’ that are positioned as atypical of the institution of policing (Newburn, 1999, p. 14). The Met police is no different. When confronted with evidence of Met officers’ crimes, it disregarded the risks by pretending that the perpetrators were either ‘bad apples’, or not police officers at all (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 7). Blaming ‘bad apples’ attempts to distance the reputation of the wider organisation from the corrupt behaviour (Newburn, 1999, p. 14). However, ‘corrupt police are made, not born’ (Murphy, 1986, quoted in Barker and Carter, 1986, p. 10).

Despite its contemporary use as an excuse, the ‘bad apples’ theory of police corruption has been largely disproved in recent years (Newburn, 1999, p. 14). As an alternative, O’Connor proposes a ‘rotten barrel’ metaphor to reflect the group level of police misconduct (O’Connor, 1999). Punch extends this with the notion of a ‘rotten orchard’ to highlight that police misconduct may be encouraged and protected on a systematic level (Punch, 2003). Though the ‘rotten orchard’ theory encompasses the systematic failures that enable police perpetrated VAWG, it fails to appreciate that social factors such as occupational culture influence conduct. Therefore, further analysis is required.

The concept of ‘habitus’, coined by Bourdieu, provides a more robust explanation of police corruption. Taking a relational perspective, it recognises a link between individual action (micro) and social structure (macro) factors as driving corrupt behaviour (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). To analyse why police officers behave in certain (corrupt) ways, one must understand how they perceive their role in the social world around them (Reiner, 1985, p. 85). An officer’s personal disposition determines their receptiveness to corruption (Bourdieu, 1990). Their receptiveness may be triggered by social factors, such as occupational culture, leading them to choose to commit a corrupt act (Bourdieu, 1990). In order to identify and understand how police culture may trigger

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certain officers to choose to commit acts of corruption, specifically VAWG, it is useful to explore relevant elements of police culture identified in early texts (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 46).

As an integral part of police work, discretion (or selective enforcement) is a fundamental aspect of our understanding of policing (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 46). Seldom guided by legal doctrines, police work relies on officers exercising discretion in how they enforce the law (Waddington, 1999). Police officers exercise discretion whenever a lack of restrictions on their power leaves them able to make free choices to act or not act (Klockars, 1985). It encompasses all levels of the police organisation, including whether patrol officers decide to handle offences formally or informally, and whether senior officers decide to pursue or disregard certain policies (Brogden, Jefferson and Walklate, 1988).

Discretion provides an opportunity for police officers to choose to commit corrupt acts. It is a constant factor which facilitates corruption because it presents officers with the opportunity to make decisions that are influenced by personal gain, rather than professional judgement (Newburn, 1999, p. 16). Coupled with a lack of public visibility and managerial oversight, discretion enables police officers to bend and break rules (Newburn, 1999, p. 18).

Discretion is important because it allows ‘space’ for occupational culture to impact officer decision-making (Brogden, Jefferson and Walklate, 1988, p. 35). Traditionally, police culture has been identified by academics as driving discriminatory practices against women (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 52). As police culture is misogynistic (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 285), the use of discretion sometimes leads to discriminatory outcomes (Rowe, 2004).

To understand the gendered nature of police culture, one must analyse the prioritisation of masculinity and male interests and the impact this has on police treatment of women (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 61). Policing is driven by traditional male values (Silvestri and Williams, 2003). Described as a ‘cult of masculinity’, police occupational culture promotes a definition of men as physically and sexually superior (Smith and Gray, 1985). Masculinised behaviours such as dominance, strength and aggression are esteemed (Carrillo, 2021, p. 71). The prioritisation of masculinity makes policing gendered in nature. This has a detrimental impact on women as female values and qualities are treated as inferior (Fielding, 1994, cited in Newburn and Stanko, 1994).

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Exaggerated heterosexuality by male officers upholds a gendered power imbalance resulting in the denigration of women both within and outside of the force (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 64). The objectification of women by male police officers is well documented by the Casey Review. A number of officers reported that their male colleagues would openly rate women on their appearance (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 180). For example, one police officer reportedly asked his colleague ‘what do you think of her?’, ‘look at the tits on her’ and ‘from behind she’s great but don’t think much of the face’ whilst driving around on duty (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 172).

Inherent within the logic of sexism is the belief that women should conform to social rules relating to their sexuality, activities, and behaviour (Hatty, 1989, cited in Hanmer, Radford and Stanko, 1989). A noteworthy dynamic regarding police categorisation of women is the lesser status afforded to those who do not conform. For example, police persistently stereotype women (International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute, 2020) and place them into dichotomised categories of ‘wife/whore’ (Heidensohn, 1985; Brogden, 1991) and ‘rough/respectable’ (Cain, 1973). A sexist belief that women who frequent bars have a lower status may lead to them being classed as ‘police property’, and therefore open to sexual victimisation/extortion (Lee, 1981, cited in Shearing, 1981). For decades, research has suggested that this may be placing women at risk from police perpetrated sexual violence (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 64).

It is important to note that police misogyny does not arise in a vacuum. Misogynistic views and gender stereotypes rooted in social norms impact officers’ behaviour (Carrillo, 2021, p. 69). However, a higher standard of behaviour is expected of police officers (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 272).

Solidarity is a distinguishing characteristic of police culture (Punch, 1983, cited in Punch, 1983, p. 224). It informs the belief structure that underpins police officers’ relationships with their colleagues and members of the public, creating a division between the two (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 58). Manifesting in a defensiveness and distrust of outsiders (Wilson, 1968), solidarity combined with the interrelated element of social isolation fosters a ‘them’ and ‘us’ outlook between police and public (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 58).

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When the police feel threatened by public scrutiny, there is a tendency for officers’ isolation from the public to increase along with increased solidarity (Cockcroft, 2013, p. 58). The recent media attention surrounding police perpetrated VAWG is likely to have an impact here, making police culture more toxic towards women as police prioritise protecting the ‘brotherhood’ (Skolnick, 1966) over the public.

A veil of secrecy conceals police perpetrated crimes (the ‘blue wall of silence’) (Kraska and Kappeler, 1995). Officers are socialised to not cooperate with investigations into their colleagues’ misconduct (Newburn, 1999, p. 19). Furthermore, police solidarity materialises in a practice of actively ‘covering up’ colleagues’ infringements (Smith and Gray, 1985). The Casey Review identified instances in the Met where ‘friends and superiors had closed ranks around the police suspect [of VAWG] to protect them’ (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 276).

For example, Couzens was part of a WhatsApp group where he and other officers sent messages which included the use of discriminatory language, comments about raping a colleague and assaulting members of the public (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2021, p. 83). When the officers were interviewed as part of an investigation into misconduct, a pattern emerged of them excusing the messages as ‘dark humour’ (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2021, p. 57). This matches the Casey Review’s finding that offensive comments in WhatsApp groups were disregarded as ‘banter’ (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 271). One officer noted that he understood his ‘responsibilities to report inappropriate racist or sexist comments’ but that at the time he did not consider the misogynistic messages to be ‘reportable’ behaviour (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2021, p. 46). The investigation report noted that the fact that the officers felt comfortable engaging with misogynistic messaging without fear of challenge indicated a wider cultural problem (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2021, p. 83).

A ‘boys will be boys’ attitude among police supervisors and administrators materialises in a lack of institutional will to prevent or punish police perpetrated VAWG (Kraska and Kappeler, 1995, p. 89). For example, one female victim reported that her complaints were either ignored or treated with complacency (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 174). In her words, the police prioritised protecting ‘one of their own’ over her and her wellbeing (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 176).

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The difficulties faced by women reporting sexual violence are amplified when the perpetrator is a police officer (Kraska and Kappeler, 1995, p. 104). Not only is the perpetrator male (so likely a physical threat), he also has a state-sanctioned power to detain, arrest and use physical force if faced with non-compliance (Kraska and Kappeler, 1995, p. 103). The officer may be able to influence the outcome if a victim does report and use this as a threat (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p 276).

Victims of police perpetrated VAWG have little incentive to report. The Casey Review reported that rape myths, stereotypes and prejudiced assumptions are expressed openly by officers to the detriment of women (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 164). Fear of being blamed or of not being believed act as disincentives (Kraska and Kappeler, 1995, p. 92): ‘it’s your word against theirs and they [the Met] will always back each other up’ (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 162).

The Casey Review concluded that there is widespread bullying, discrimination and institutional sexism in the Met. As mentioned, the scale of reports of police perpetrated VAWG across forces suggests that a misogynistic culture is not limited to the Met but shared across policing in England and Wales. The findings are serious, and a ‘complete overhaul’ is required to restore public trust, particularly from women (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 19).

Increased public scrutiny of the police has not emerged because of the police’s desire to improve. Reverend Smallman, mother to two murdered daughters and another victim of Met officers’ crimes, said that ‘it’s come about on the backs and the tenacity of people of colour and women, and that’s not the way we are going to affect real change’ (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 8). It is not the job of the public to protect themselves from the police. It is the police’s role to protect the public. Ultimately, policing must commit to changing itself (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 8).

In conclusion, this essay illustrates that the ‘bad apples’ theory of police corruption does not sufficiently explain police perpetrated VAWG in England and Wales. Instead, Bourdieu’s theory of ‘habitus’ provides a more compelling explanation as it recognises that occupational culture influences conduct. Identifiable elements of police culture enable VAWG, specifically discretion, canteen culture, and solidarity. A background of misogynistic ‘canteen culture’ permeates officer

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decision-making when they exercise discretion (Brogden, Jefferson and Walklate, 1988, p. 35).

The ‘blue wall of silence’ serves to conceal police perpetrated crimes (Kraska and Kappeler, 1995, p. 91). As a result, police culture is becoming more toxic towards women. Recommended reforms risk being operationalised as ‘tick-box exercises’ (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p.142). Therefore, a ‘complete overhaul’ (Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB, 2023, p. 19) of policing is required to effect lasting change and secure better outcomes for women and girls.

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