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"A Panel of Good ol' Boys": Women Navigating the Police Promotions Process

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Abstract
Women are significantly underrepresented among police supervisors, middle managers, and leaders in the United States. To investigate this problem, the current study examines challenges faced by women officers as they pursue promotions. Narrative data from 226 women who earned promotions in U.S. policing are analyzed using a content analysis of responses to an open-ended survey question. Emergent themes reflected gender bias within the promotions process and, more broadly, in the organizational culture of participants' agencies that impact promotions. Findings support the characterization of policing as a gendered occupation with a culture that views and supports men as more competent leaders.

Keywords Policing · Gender · Promotions · Qualitative · Women · Police · Culture

"The primary barrier to women's advancement in policing lies in the attitudes of their male coworkers." – Wertsch, 1998, pg. 24

Introduction

Policing suffers from a prominent glass ceiling, as women are significantly underrepresented in all ranking positions (Guajardo, 2016; Shelley et al., 2011; Silvestri, 2018). According to the 2013 Law Enforcement Management and Statistics survey data, for example, women comprised only 12% of U.S. police officers, 7.29% of frontline supervisors, 6.96% of middle managers, and 2.7% of executive leaders at

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that time (Shjarback & Todak, 2019). The more recent 2016 survey shows these numbers have stayed virtually the same over the past few years (Hyland & Davis, 2019).

The stagnant lack of gender diversity up the ranks is problematic given the benefits of women in policing generally, and specifically in ranking positions where they can impact culture, policy, and practice. According to a body of empirical research, women can benefit police agencies and communities through increased citizen trust in police (Barnes et al., 2018; Córdova & Kras, 2020), the use of less coercive force (Ba et al., 2021; Rabe-Hemp, 2008a), fewer instances of brutality and misconduct (Lonsway et al., 2002; Spillar et al., 2000; Timmins & Hainsworth, 1989), fewer citizen complaints against the police (Hickman et al., 2000; Lonsway et al., 2002; Porter & Prenzler, 2017; Waugh et al., 1998), improved attitudes and treatment of victims (Brown & King, 1998; Lockwood & Prohaska, 2015; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006), and increased efficiency in organizational processes (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2016). Unfortunately, there is limited research testing the impact of women in positions of rank. Considering the significant lack of women in these positions, it is understandably a difficult question to answer. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that promoting more women could lead to reductions in hegemonic and toxic masculinity in police organizational culture (Guajardo, 2016), more women police officers in police organizations overall (Warner et al., 1989), improved working conditions and career advancement opportunities for women officers (Schuck, 2014), and greater motivation among women in the community to apply for police jobs (Martin, 1991; Todak, 2017).

A handful of studies have explored reasons for women's exclusion from police leadership, and research has only scratched the surface of the problem. Certainly, the underrepresentation of women in policing shrinks the pool of women who are eligible to promote (Cordner & Cordner, 2011). Accordingly, executives often blame the underrepresentation of women in leadership on the lack of women in policing and promotional interest among them (IACP, 1998). Studies examining women's decisions to pursue promotions have found that many self-select out of the process, but often because of caregiving responsibilities or lack of confidence (Archbold et al., 2010; Archbold & Hassell, 2009; Drew & Saunders, 2020; Gau et al., 2013; Schulze, 2011; Todak et al., 2021; Wertsch, 1998; Whetstone, 2001; Whetstone & Wilson, 1999). Others find the hypermasculine police culture fosters a view that women are less competent officers (Bloch & Anderson, 1974; Hunt, 1990; Martin, 1980, 1999; Paoline, 2003; Rabe-Hemp, 2008b, 2009). Moreover, gendered structures in departments, including the composition of the promotional process, could preference men's career advancement over women's (Huff & Todak, online first; Silvestri, 2006; Silvestri et al., 2013). Each of these factors could influence encouragement of women to apply for promotion, women's decisions to apply, test scores (especially in subjective components), promotional board decision making, and ultimately the selection of applicants for promotion.

Limited research has investigated women's experiences as they navigate the police promotions process (see Morabito and Shelley, 2018 for an exception). Understanding the existence of gendered barriers to promotion inherent within the process itself, and unpacking the nature of these barriers, could inform queries about the underrepresentation of women up the ranks of law enforcement and identify areas for reform.

Accordingly, this study draws on responses ($N=226$) to one open-ended survey question written by women officers across the United States who promoted at least once during their careers. Results describe both gendered and non-gendered challenges experienced by women officers in their pursuits for promotion.

Policing and Gender

Occupational depictions of police culture characterize the profession as secretive, authoritarian, encouraging of aggressive tactics, prioritizing physical strength, cynical, mistrusting of outsiders, and resistant to change (Guyot, 1979; Paoline & Terrill, 2014). These characteristics are regarded as coping strategies developed in response to occupational stressors unique to the working conditions of policing, including preoccupations with danger, outside scrutiny, and inconsistent management and discipline (Brown & Sargent, 1995; Franklin, 2005; Manning, 1978; Paoline & Terrill, 2014). Research investigating police officer cultural attitudes has found significant individual differences (Cordner, 2017; Paoline et al., 2000; Wood et al., 2004), with those espousing more traditional values displaying more harmful behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Blumenstein et al., 2012; Paoline and Terrill, 2005; Silver et al., 2017; Terrill et al., 2003; Wolfe and Piquero, 2011).

Given the focus in policing on traditionally masculine traits, the "ideal" police officer is typically thought of as a man, both within policing and externally among the general public (Dick & Jankowicz, 2001). For this reason, women have faced difficulties assimilating into the profession (Belknap & Shelley, 1992; Felkenes et al., 1993; Garcia, 2003; IACP, 1998, p. 2018; Kringen, 2014; Martin, 1980; Rabe-Hemp, 2008b; Sims et al., 2003; Texeira, 2002). Historically, women's entrance into patrol positions was accompanied by fierce resistance and concerns over their abilities to safely and competently do the job (Haarr, 1997; Hunt, 1990; Martin, 1980; Rabe-Hemp, 2008b). In response to institutional resistance, women officers face a choice between emphasizing their police identities (and risking being labeled as butch or dykes) and their feminine identities (inviting criticism of their compentence; Miller, 1999; Pike, 1985). As Rabe Hemp (2008b) noted, in both cases women are not regarded as real police officers (see also Martin, 1990; Remmington, 1983).

According to recent research, contemporary women police officers believe their experiences are significantly improved compared to women who entered law enforcement in previous decades (Rabe-Hemp, 2008b, 2018). However, present-day women officers also report the need to conform to the values and behaviors of the majority group in order to survive in this male-dominated profession and become accepted as "one of the guys" (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Todak et al., 2022, online first). This conformity can negate the impact of gender diversity when women downplay the unique skills they bring to the profession. Women also report distancing themselves from other women in their departments to gain respect from men, reinforcing negative attitudes towards and isolation of women in policing (Todak & Brown, 2019).

Police departments are also gendered organizations, with policies and structures that facilitate men's successes over women's (Heidensohn, 1992). By neutralizing the benefits of gender diversity, reinforcing inequalities between men and women,

and fostering a cultural environment that is unwelcoming to non-traditional officers, policing has succeeded in maintaining the status quo with respect to the dominant position of men (see, e.g., Dodge et al., 2011; Rabe-Hemp, 2008b; Rief and Clinkinbeard, 2020; Todak et al., 2022). Agencies do this by failing to target women for recruitment (Aiello, 2019; Asquith, 2016; Cordner and Cordner, 2011; Kringen, 2014; Perry, 2019; Schumaker, 2020), utilizing hiring and academy standards that are not based on bona fide job requirements (NIJ, 2019), failing to provide women officers with suitable opportunities for mentorship and role modeling (Lavender & Todak, online first), and failing to address poor retention rates for women in their ranks (Doerner, 1995; IACP, 1998; National Center for Women in Policing, 1999; Perry, 2019; Schumaker, 2020).

Police Women and Promotions

The gendered nature of policing is also evident through its prominent glass ceiling, which prevents those who do not meet the "ideal" masculine archetype from climbing the ladder into supervision, management, and leadership. Research investigating the reasons for the glass ceiling in law enforcement is still evolving. Several studies have found women may be less interested in and less likely to pursue promotions (Archbold et al., 2010; Gau et al., 2013). Compared to men, women are more likely to report issues related to tokenism as reason to not promote (Drew & Saunders, 2020; Whetstone & Wilson, 1999). Archbold and Schulz (2008) found women were less interested in promoting when they were specifically encouraged to because they felt the agency just wanted to make them a "poster child." Women officers typically distain affirmative action policies because they invite hostility from colleagues and downplay their individual experience and achievements (Archbold & Hassell, 2009; Drew & Saunders, 2020; Todak et al., 2021).

Research also shows women are disproportionately affected by work-life balance concerns in their promotional considerations. For many women on patrol, the predictability and familiarity of their position is preferable to a new assignment that may negatively affect their parenting schedules or relationships with spouses (Archbold & Hassell, 2009; Drew & Saunders, 2020; Holdaway & Parker, 1998; Morabito & Shelley, 2018; Sahgal, 2007; Todak et al., 2021; Wertsch, 1998; Whetstone & Wilson, 1999). One prevalent concern is that incoming supervisors lose their seniority at the new rank and are relegated to the least desirable assignments and shifts (Morabito & Shelley, 2018; Todak et al., 2021).

Another potential factor influencing women's likelihood of promoting relates to gender differences in assignments to coveted specialty units, such as SWAT teams (Corsianos, 2009). Because women are regarded as weaker, less proficient with firearms, and threatening to the cohesive cultures of all-men units, women are less inclined to seek out and attain these positions (Dodge et al., 2010, 2011). Additionally, women officers report being stuck in assignments considered more appropriate for women, such as domestic violence units and work with children (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Garcia, 2003; Haake, 2018; Wertsch, 1998). As a result, the representation of women on elite specialty units is very low. In Todak and colleague's (online

first) study of women on elite units, the vast majority of participants were the only women on their units and half were the first in their agency's histories. The underrepresentation of women on coveted specialty units contributes to their underrepresentation in higher ranking positions through perceived lack of experience.

There is limited research testing whether organizational structures and policies in policing can produce and maintain gender disparities in promotion. Factors linked to the underrepresentation of women in leadership include promotional requirements only available to men (Martin, 1989), discretionary promotional decision making practices (Martin, 1989), CALEA accreditation and other organizational factors (Shjarback & Todak, 2019), civil service commissions (Kringen, 2016), a lack of childcare and family friendly scheduling practices (Archbold & Hassell, 2009), nepotism policies preventing spouses from working together (Archbold & Hassell, 2009), and promotional exam components (Huff & Todak, online first).

In perhaps the only study to examine women's experiences navigating the promotions process, Morabito and Shelley (2018) described strategies used by women officers to earn promotions, offering a unique look at how many women have overcome barriers to career advancement. Strategies used by participants included gaining familial support for a career change, acquiring trainers and mentors (both men and women), furthering education, and filing lawsuits against their departments. They concluded that "internal reforms are needed within police agencies [e.g., mentorship, equal access to training and special assignments, etc.] in tandem with external reforms in society [e.g., gender roles in parenting] to ensure that the conditions and opportunities that lead to [promoting women] can emerge" (Morabito & Shelley, 2018, p. 305). Additional research from Lavender and Todak (online first) similarly indicates there are promotional benefits to mentorship, specifically from other women officers. Additional research investigating the challenges of women pursuing promotions is needed.

Methods

This study is part of a larger project exploring the reasons for women's exclusion from police supervision and leadership. The full study included 924 online Qualtrics surveys completed by women officers of all ranks who have worked or are working in the United States. Prospective participants were recruited through direct contact, email, Twitter, and (with leadership approval) email blasts to the members of the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing (ASEBP), the National Institute of Justice's Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Program, the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives (NAWLEE), and the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE). All methods were approved by the Office of the Institutional Review Board at the author's university.

A content analysis of responses to one open-ended survey prompt was performed. Only the 452 police leaders who said "yes" to having promoted received the prompt (49% of the sample). Participants were prompted as follows: "Describe any challenges you faced during the promotion process. What were your biggest issues or

frustrations during this process?" Inductive coding was used for an exploratory content analysis. All narratives were read and those irrelevant to the topic were excluded (e.g., those discussing challenges related to serving in a leadership position, rather than challenges related to navigating the promotions process). This produced 226 narratives (24% of the total sample and 50% of the subsample who had promoted).

The included responses were next reread and inductively coded. This process generated seven codes related to gendered challenges with promotion, which could be categorized into two broader themes – gender bias in the promotions process and gender bias in the agency culture that affects experiences with the promotions process. Moreover, a portion of the sample indicated their agency's promotions process was either generally fair (i.e., they faced no significant challenges) or posed challenges that equally affected men and women (e.g., non-gendered challenges). Each of these is reviewed below, with exemplary quotes provided for illustration.

Professionally, three quarters of the sample worked for a municipal or city agency, while most remaining participants worked for a state or county. Agency size varied, with over one-third working for an agency of over 1,000 sworn officers, a quarter working for agencies with 50–249 officers, and one fifth working for agencies with between 500 and 999 officers. Average years of service was 20 years (SD = 6.474). When asked about the makeup of their agency's promotional exam process, almost 90% reported having a written exam, 65% had an assessment center, 60% reported in-person interviews, and 40% had a career portfolio. Very few reported a field training component. Participants were also asked to indicate all rank levels they had served in. Most served as Sergeants (174; 77%), 80 (35%) as Lieutenants, 37 (16%) as Captains, 12 (5%) as Commanders, 3 (1%) as Assistant or Deputy Chiefs, and 14 (6%) as Chiefs. Note that rank levels and structures vary considerably across departments, so agencies may not have all rank levels reported here. Promotional exam components and ranks are not mutually exclusive.

In terms of demographics, most of the sample was between 35 and 54 years old. 85% was White, 7% Black, 2% Asian, 2% American Indian, one Pacific Islander, and 5% other. 13% was Hispanic. Almost half had earned a Bachelor's degree as their highest level of education, with 18.5% below and 35% above this level. All but 32 participants were married at least once, and 60% were responsible for at least one dependent child during their police careers.

The characteristics of this sample are comparable to those of the full sample, except that promoted individuals are more educated and more likely to be White (see Lavender & Todak, online first for the full sample demographics). Specifically, 25% of the full sample has a graduate degree compared to 35% of the current sample, 25% of the full sample had less than a Bachelor's degree compared to 18% of this sample, and 70% of subjects in the full sample were White compared to 85% here. This is somewhat consistent with the small (yet growing) literature testing individual-level predictors of promotion among women police officers. Lavender and Todak (online first) found education was positively related to promotion for women officers (along with years of service and having a woman mentor), although race was not significant. Looking at a subset of the same sample who indicated they had taken a promotional exam at least once, Huff and Todak (online first) also found education was a significant predictor of promotion.

Women's Experiences with the Police Promotions Process

Participants were questioned about challenges they experienced while navigating the police promotions process. Responses to the presence and nature of the challenges varied, with some denying any challenges and others minimizing the gendered nature of the challenges. Thirty-six participants (16%) said they did not experience any challenges during the process. These women typically provided short responses with no explanation ("no challenges" [Participant 41]; "I promoted each time I applied" [Participant 51]; etc.). Further, 17 women (8%) said the process was fair across genders and did not discriminate against women.

Sixty-four (28%) participants identified non-gendered challenges they encountered when trying to promote. These challenges included the poor design of the exam, the amount of time and energy required to study, not being proficient on certain areas of the exam (e.g., "I'm not a good test taker" [Participant 98]), complications involved in taking the exam (e.g., the length of the process), and being out of the loop on policies and procedures due to extended time off patrol. Note that some participants in this group also reported gendered challenges, so these groups are not mutually exclusive. The remainder of the sample discussed gendered challenges encountered while navigating the promotion process. Overall, the women discussed two forms of gendered barriers to promotion: (1) biases inherent within the promotions process and (2) biases espoused by the organizational culture that affect women's experiences pursuing promotions.

Gendered Structures in the Promotions Process

According to participants, gender bias in the promotions process took on three forms: preferences given to men due to a buddy system that favored those who were friendly with evaluators, gender biases held by evaluators (who were most often all men), and difficulties experienced by mothers attempting to balance work, studying for the exam, and childcare. Each of these represents a gendered structural component inherent within the process that lends itself to men being selected for promotion over women.

Gender bias Among the Decision Makers

The most common challenge that emerged in the data was the belief that people on promotions boards were biased against women candidates. Fifty-six participants (25%) said the men on their promotions board held gendered opinions towards the qualities of good leaders, with masculine traits being prioritized over qualities women bring to the table. For instance, Participant 95 was told she was not considered a viable candidate because she was too nice and social – both traditionally feminine qualities. Participant 121 was told she would not be selected because people thought she was a "bitch." Such gender biases held by board members influenced who was perceived as an effective leader and ultimately who was selected for promotion, disproportionately affecting women.

For participants in agencies where decisions about promotion were discretionary, 14 (6%) women believed gender biases about effective leadership led them to be passed over, despite a superior test performance. Participant 170 said she scored the highest but was passed over by "a male who failed the written test," while participant 68 said she was passed over because her department thought there was already enough women in leadership: "Twice I was passed over for promotion to assistant chief and lesser qualified men were promoted ahead of me (one was later reassigned back to captain). The reason: senior staff already had 2 females, so the chief at the time waited until both were gone before he promoted me." Another said, "The women received high marks [on the essay portion] and the men did not - the essays were thrown out of consideration and that resulted in the men scoring higher" (Participant 89). This problem was considered especially frustrating when department leadership could offer no explanation for their decisions.

Another manifestation of gender bias was the belief that women are judged on their appearance, while men are graded on performance. Participant 125 said, "I have to worry about what clothes I wore, how my hair and makeup look (not to be too 'done up' or 'sexy', but not looking 'butch' either)." Another said she "felt I had to put a lot of thought into my appearance. Am I too dressy, too much make up, not enough, do I look too feminine or too masculine? For men, they put on a suit, brush their hair and they are ready to go" (Participant 124). As men did not need to worry about appearance, it was said they faced less pressure and could focus on their performance.

Cronyism and the Good ol' Boy's Club

Participants also believed cronyism influenced who was selected for promotions, benefitting applicants who had personal relationships with those making decisions. Thirty women (13%) said selection for promotion in their department was based on "who you know" (Participant 202) and, specifically, "who is friends with the people making the decisions" (Participant 135). Cronyism is inherently discriminatory against women in male-dominated organizations, as men are more often included in social networks and bonding activities (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; NIJ, 2019; Wertsch, 1998; Wexler & Logan, 1983). Supporting this claim, twenty participants described their agency's promotions process as a "Good ol' Boys Club" *verbatim*, with promotions boards comprising men who were often buddies with male applicants.

Work-life Balance and Finding time to Study

Finally, some participants considered the promotions process unfair given the disproportionate burden faced by mothers who struggle to find enough time to prepare. Twenty-three participants (10%) listed work-life balance concerns (most related to parenting), as impediments to promotion. Promotions exams involve rigorous written tests that require diligent studying, in addition to career portfolios, interviews, presentations, assessment centers, and probation/field training (Huff & Todak, online first). Some exams also involve physical, psychological, and background components. For this reason, "the test is designed for folks who can put everything aside and study like crazy" (Participant 45). These participants relayed the difficulties of managing

their jobs with parenting and home responsibilities, while simultaneously finding the time to study (e.g., "attempting to study enough as a single mother while continuing to work hard" [Participant 175]). Some believed men were advantaged because they had wives who carried these burdens for them: "I did not score as high as my male counter parts who would delight in bragging about their wives doing everything at home. All they had to do was come home and eat dinner with the family, then retire to their office to study for as long as they wanted…This was not an option for me with two children" (Participant 138). Thus, participants thought the time and energy required to study was less available for women who carry a disproportionate share of home responsibilities (see, e.g., Yavorsky et al., 2015).

Gender Bias in Police Culture Spills into Promotions Decisions

Existing research on the occupational culture of policing suggests that masculine traits, including aggression and authoritarian leadership styles, are regarded as evidence of good police work and strong potential for leadership (Dick & Jankowicz, 2001). For these reasons, women are typically regarded as less competent officers and less respected within their respective agencies until they prove otherwise. Participants described how the values and beliefs inherent in their organization's culture can lead to doubt in the leadership abilities of women, hostility towards women who aspire to promote, accusations of gendered favoritism, and a lack of mentorship and assistance offered to women, leaving them to prepare for promotion on their own. These challenges highlight how elements of the larger culture in policing spill over into the promotions process and result in fewer women aspiring to promote and receiving promotions.

Women Work Twice as Hard to Overcome Doubt in Their Abilities

Participants explained that, within the police profession, women must significantly outperform men and "go above and beyond" (Participant 125) their counterparts to earn respect (35 participants; 15%). When it came to promotions, "doing all you can do and not feeling like it's enough, especially when you know you have more experience than others" (Participant 135) can diminish women's career aspirations. Some said they were criticized for going up for promotion too early, while men at the same career stages did not receive that critique. According to Participant 134, "There is an implicit bias that women haven't had enough time in patrol (even if you have the same amount of time as the men), and it is held against the women but not the men." Others emphasized the doubt men had in their abilities and even the validity of their scores: "When I finished #1 there were statements made that I must have been given the answers" (Participant 195). Another believed there were higher promotional standards for women compared to men: "Other male Sergeants are given promotions without any education. I had to earn a Master's Degree in order to advance" (Participant 226). Thus, some participants believed there was a double standard where women felt it was necessary to accumulate more accolades and experience to be considered competitive with the men.

Twenty-eight women (12%) said they faced open hostility from coworkers, mostly men who did not want to see women in policing or leadership positions. One participant had a "supervisor who inexplicably was on 6 out of 7 promotional interview boards for positions I applied for. This particular supervisor threatened me very early in my career saying he would do everything in his power to see that I went nowhere in the agency" (Participant 217). Another said she "had one [lieutenant] that … felt [women] shouldn't have been on the job since his wife didn't work" (Participant 144). A third said her "[chief of police] was a misogynist and did not want me to promote and verbally indicated to me his intent" (Participant 225). Participants believed some of this hostility stemmed from jealousy of men who were outperformed or not selected for the promotion: I was the "only female who passed the exam. Youngest of group to pass. Finished second on the test and received negative attitudes from some of the males I finished ahead of" (Participant 23). According to Participant 207, "My partner was angry with me because I scored higher than him on the test. He stopped riding with me." Thus, women felt it was common for men to hold negative attitudes towards the existence of women in policing, which in some cases resulted in deliberate attempts to impede their efforts to promote.

Women are Accused of Benefiting from Gender Quotas

Seventeen women (8%) said they were accused of only being promoted because they were women and not due to merit, while others were told that if they were to promote, it would be because of gendered favoritism. This belief was especially hard on women who outperformed all other applicants on the exam and yet were still accused of not earning their promotion: "After the written test (first task), I had the top score. I then heard talk that I would get selected just because I was female, regardless [of] if I was the best candidate" (Participant 53). Similarly, "EVERYONE said I was only promoted because I was a woman. It made it seem like all the things I had accomplished in my career were worth nothing" (Participant 224). Participant 107 was accused of being promoted because she performed "sexual favors." As such, many women went into the process already disheartened because coworkers said they were guaranteed the job. Some clarified they were personally against gender quotas because they preferred to be "picked because I'm the right person" (Participant 150). In each case, the accomplishments of women were downplayed as men accused women of stealing spots from men because they received a position without earning it.

Men are Groomed for Promotions

Finally, 19 participants (8%) believed men receive more assistance in preparing for promotional exams compared to women, either through mentorship, trainings, assistance with studying, and networking opportunities such as invitations to men's only off duty outings. For instance, "the boys have study classes for the assessment centers so that those the executive staff choose make it thru promotion. If you are not in the clique then you have to figure it out, pay for and practice on your own without mentorship and guidance" (Participant 35). Additionally, it was believed that men are "groomed" by more experienced officers from the start of their careers through

selection for special assignments and other experiences that are considered essential before one can promote (Participant 120). Participant 119 said the promotional exam components in her case were deliberately selected to favor the skills of a preferred male applicant, the only other person competing for the position. This issue is directly related to the problem of cronyism, as officers who are more closely connected to social networks receive more assistance and have increased opportunities for mentorship. The disproportionate opportunities granted to men in preparing for promotions underscores a belief that men have a greater potential to be effective leaders, while the same amount of time and attention is not invested in women because they are not considered worthy of the investment.

Discussion

This study addressed three objectives: understand the unique challenges women face while navigating the police promotions process; identify factors that contribute to women's exclusion from police supervision, middle management, and leadership; and offer recommendations for increasing the representation of women in the upper ranks of law enforcement. Narrative responses from one open-ended survey question were analyzed for emergent themes related to challenges participants faced during the process. Seven gendered barriers were identified, which were categorized into two broader themes: gender bias inherent in the promotions process and gender bias within police culture that affects promotions. There are three main takeaways from these findings.

First, the study suggests that some U.S. police agencies may have well designed and objective promotions processes in place, as reported by women who have gone through them. For example, 8% of the sample described the process in their agency as fair and showing no gender bias. Further, 16% said they faced no challenges while navigating the process and another 28% described non-gendered challenges that were faced by all applicants. Thus, some agencies in the U.S. may have objective promotional processes already in place. In efforts to increase the representation of women in leadership, such agencies should be identified, emulated, and evaluated. Looking to agencies with higher than average numbers of women in upper ranks would also be a good place to start.

Second, before change can be realized, the study findings make clear that elements of the occupational culture of policing, as well as the organizational cultures within individual agencies, spill into the promotions process and negatively affect women's efforts to promote. For this reason, emergent themes from this study corresponded directly with existing research on the experiences of women working patrol. Challenges reported by participants in this study echoed previous research finding gender bias among police personnel (e.g., Belknap and Shelley, 1992; Gossett and Williams, 1998; Martin, 1989), work-life balance concerns (e.g., Wertsch, 1998; Whetstone, 2001), a lack of mentorship for women officers (e.g., IACP, 1998; Lavender & Todak, online first), the need to work twice as hard to earn the same respect as men (e.g., Rabe-Hemp, 2008b), and accusations of gender favoritism for achievements (e.g., Drew and Saunders, 2020; Gossett and Williams, 1998).

Thus, before promotions processes themselves can be reformed, agencies must come to terms with their organizational cultures, which may foster doubt in women's abilities, generate open hostility towards women, and prioritize the advancement of men's careers. With diligent self-evaluation, agencies can begin to understand how certain elements of their cultures may detract from women's career pursuits and advantage men over women in all areas, including promotions. Such a realization, however, will not come easily to all police officers and leaders. First, many of these processes may not seem overtly biased against women, although some are (e.g., open hostility). Moreover, police culture has historically been resistant to accusations that their practices and policies are biased. This resistance includes assertions that women face discrimination that limits their career opportunities. Indeed, many participants said they were accused of favoritism that benefits women (i.e., reverse sexism). These accusations can dissuade women from seeking promotions for fear of being perceived as not earning them. Thus, agencies should perform thorough internal evaluations into the experiences and challenges of their women officers at all stages of their careers. Meanwhile, researchers and activists should work to get evidence of the benefits of gender diversity into the hands of police leaders.

Third, agencies looking to diversify leadership must prioritize and pursue an objective promotions process. Agencies can use the current study findings to reform their practices, ensuring women have equal opportunities for promotion and, ultimately, achieving more gender diversity in the upper ranks. Table 1 lists the findings from the current study and offers recommendations for improvement derived from each.

There are several limitations to this study. First, although generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, it is worth noting that this is a non-probability sample of 226 individuals who opted to respond to one survey question. Therefore, the exploratory findings reported here cannot be generalized to all women officers in the U.S, or to the 452 women presented with this question in the current study. Second, the reported prevalence of each code and theme may be underestimated given the open-ended nature and wording of the question (i.e., What were your biggest issues or frustrations during this process?). Women may have reported only the most pressing issues they faced rather than an exhaustive list of challenges. Third, an exploratory analysis of written responses to an online survey question precludes a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the issues facing women during the police promotions process. A more thorough investigation could be performed using an unstructured interview method that allows for follow up questions. Fourth, relationships between relevant individual and agency-level factors and promotional outcomes cannot be ascertained in the current study, given the limitations reported above. Nevertheless, this is an important line of inquiry for future research. Finally, the sample only included women who had successfully promoted. It is unknown how the experiences of women who were unsuccessful in their pursuits of promotions may be different.

In conclusion, this study identified barriers to promotion for women police officers, which contribute to the underrepresentation of women in police leadership in the U.S. These gendered challenges should be taken seriously by police agencies who are seeking to increase gender diversity in their upper ranks. To overcome them, agencies must recognize gendered barriers inherent within their promotions processes, strive for objectivity in the promotions process, and emulate agencies who

Table 1 Implications for Police Agencies

Finding	Recommendation
Gendered Structures in the Promotions Process	
Gender bias among the decision makers. Cronyism and the good ol' boys club.	Eliminate subjectivity in the decision process. Officers who place high on the list should not be passed over for individuals who score below them. Establish diverse hiring boards to ensure applicants are not evaluated by homogenous (e.g., all men) panels.
Work-life balance and finding time to study.	Provide paid on-duty time for promotional test preparation.
Gender Bias in Police Culture Spills into Promotions Decisions	
Women work twice as hard to overcome doubt in their abilities.	Raise awareness of gender bias through training on gender stereotypes and effective leadership, particularly for promotional exam evaluators.
Women are accused of benefitting from gendered quotes.	Eliminate practices that reserve a "women's spot" in each rank or unit. Develop clearly written, objective promotional standards and promote based on test performance. Interrogate agency culture to ensure women are confident they will be supported when going up for promotions.
Men are groomed for promotions.	Provide formal training and mentorship opportunities to all officers interested in promotions.

have demonstrated above average success at promoting women. Achieving these goals will require meaningful interrogation into the organizational cultures that exist within departments, in depth conversations with women officers who have navigated the process or aspire to promote, and evaluations of the impact of the promotions process on women and their careers.

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