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“Well Boys, Welcome to the New Law Enforcement”: Reactions to Women on Elite Specialty Units

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ABSTRACT

Elite police specialty units are almost exclusively the domains of men. While women have made strides on patrol in many agencies, elite units have not witnessed the same progress. In this study, we interviewed 32 policewomen from across the United States who defied the odds and cultural perceptions of “appropriate” roles for women by earning positions on elite specialty units (i.e., SWAT, K9, motorcycles, and bomb units). Most were the only women on their units and half were the first in their agencies’ histories to enter that space. Participants’ descriptions of department, community, and team members’ responses to their selection are analyzed. Our focus on women who have broken the most formidable gender barriers in law enforcement allows us to better understand the continued exclusion of women and offer recommendations for increasing gender diversity throughout policing.



KEYWORDS

Interviews; police; policing; qualitative; specialty units; women

INTRODUCTION

Historically, women police officers have faced barriers to acceptance and advancement. Even after five decades of integration on patrol, policing is still considered to be a job for men. The male-dominated culture is especially entrenched on elite specialty units, where dangerousness, masculinity, and exclusivity are valued and the representation of women lags behind their representation on patrol (Dodge et al., 2010; Prussel, 2001). Research documents the challenges faced by women on patrol (see Archbold & Schulz, 2012; Martin, 1980; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rabe-Hemp, 2018) and a few studies have examined the experiences of women supervisors, managers, and executives (Guajardo, 2016; Haarr & Morash, 2013; Montejo, 2007; Schulz, 2003, 2004; Snow, 2010; Wexler & Quinn, 1985). Only two studies have investigated women on SWAT teams, examining the perceptions of men regarding the fitness of women in these roles (Dodge et al., 2010, 2011). To date, no researchers have studied women assigned to these units to understand their career paths or experiences.

The current paper is the first exploration into this rare and understudied population. We analyze interviews with 32 policewomen from thirteen U.S. states who worked on SWAT ($N=9^1$), bomb (EOD; $N=2$), canine (“K9”; $N=10$), and motorcycle (“motors”) units ($N=9$), as well as 7 women who served as elite unit commanders. Using qualitative analysis, we assess responses to

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¹A few participants held assignments on more than one type of elite unit, had commanded more than one type of elite unit, or became the commander of the unit after serving as a team member for an amount of time. Thus, the descriptive statistics reported here are not mutually exclusive.

participants' selection onto these units and their advice to others aspiring to similar positions. Based on this information, we offer specific recommendations for police agencies for recruiting more women on elite units and improving their workplace experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although women in policing have made decades of progress, the profession continues to be dominated by men and the representation of women has remained stagnant at 12% for over twenty years (Cordner & Cordner, 2011; Hyland & Davis, 2019). The numbers decrease further when looking at supervisory (7.29%), management (6.96%), and chief (2.7%) positions (Shjarback & Todak, 2019). For many years policewomen said they were isolated from department culture and faced hostility and discrimination from supervisors, peers, and the public (Hunt, 1990; Martin, 1980; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Remington, 1983; Todak & Brown, 2019). These findings are consistent with organizational research, which finds that gender discrimination lawsuits are more common in male-dominated work settings (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). These barriers likely deterred many women through the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s from entering police work.

The gendered structures and culture can prevent women in policing from seeking out specialty positions and promotions (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Dodge et al., 2010; Rabe-Hemp, 2018; Robinson, 2013; Whetstone, 2001). The hyper masculine attitudes and values within policing have historically relegated women to female-friendly assignments (Garcia, 2003) and those women who sought to defy those expectations have faced hostility, isolation, harassment, and threats to their safety (Hunt, 1990; Martin, 1990; Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Rabe-Hemp, 2008b). Others have been accused of benefiting from affirmative action or special treatment following achievements such as promotions (Archbold et al., 2010; Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Martin, 1991). Structurally, many women report a lack of childcare assistance and family-friendly policies in their agencies, which, as the primary caregivers, keep them from pursuing promotions for fear of getting assigned to a difficult schedule (Charlesworth & Robertson, 2012; Todak et al., 2021; Whetstone, 2001).

Qualitative studies find women in law enforcement use specific tactics to cope with these challenges (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Martin, 1979; Morash & Haarr, 2012; Rabe-Hemp, 2009; Wertsch, 1998; Yu, 2018). Unfortunately, many continue to advocate that women need to get "tougher skin" (Rabe-Hemp, 2018, p. 97), while some believe distancing oneself from other minorities can earn them respect from the dominant group (see Todak & Brown, 2019). Newer research has found women's experiences on the job are improving, though they still feel the need to work twice as hard to prove themselves (Rabe-Hemp, 2008b, 2018). However, "despite evidence that women can and do perform equally well as male police officers, the occupation remains one of the most gendered professions in the U.S and... promotions to leadership positions and special assignments, particularly on SWAT teams, remain elusive" (Dodge et al., 2011, p. 702).

Police Specialty Units and Elite Units

Police specialty units emerged in the early twentieth century as part of a national effort to professionalize policing and more efficiently address crime by streamlining activities according to bureaucratic principles (White, 2007). Specialty units are created for many reasons, but most often to address emergent crime problems or due to public demand (Katz, 2001). Officers in specialty units have designated roles focused on an individual problem, such as improving neighborhood conditions, engaging with the homeless, or rooting out gang crime. Many units operate outside of the patrol division and do not respond to calls for service, though some do. Some units operate under different policies from patrol to accommodate a unique mission. For example, some may be excluded from the department's policy mandating body-worn cameras because it is believed

they will impede their missions (Gaub et al., 2020a). In general, departments vary on the number and type of units they operate, how they are operated, and the policies governing their activities.

Some units, such as SWAT, gang, canine (K9), crisis negotiations, or targeted offender units, respond almost exclusively to violent offenders and high-risk scenarios. These responsibilities contrast with those of patrol officers, who respond to a wide range of scenarios, interact with more diverse people, engage in proactive strategies, and use less force (Gaub et al., 2020b). The most elite units are police paramilitary units (PPUs; Kraska & Cubellis, 1997), which use an authoritarian command structure, train like elite military units, and exclusively handle high-risk calls. The most common PPU is SWAT teams, which deal with barricaded suspects, no-knock and quick-knock raids, high-risk warrants, suicide threats, and active shooters. In some departments, PPU members wear military-style clothing, including battle dress uniforms (BDUs), combat boots, and helmets, and use higher powered weaponry. Because elite units respond to high risk situations, and because team functionality and cohesion are essential to their missions, they are more selective in who they accept on the team. The application process requires candidates to pass a slew of physical and tactical tests. Once accepted, officers must complete ongoing in-service training above and beyond that required of patrol officers. Aside from Kraska's work on SWAT teams (see, e.g., Kraska & Cubellis, 1997; Kraska & Kappeler, 1997) and some other exceptions (e.g., Arnatt & Beyerlein, 2014; Katz et al., 2002), there is very little research on elite specialty units.

K9 units are an integral part of American policing and dogs are used for a variety of purposes, most commonly drug, bomb, and cadaver detection, and suspect location and apprehension (Hickey & Hoffman, 2003). Some litigation has been raised over the use of police K9s, often related to dog biting (Dobrott, 2018). The law generally recommends K9s be only used if a suspect acts violently or when a dangerous felony suspect tries to flee (Hickey & Hoffman, 2003). For apprehension K9s, it is not recommended that they be deployed during routine calls or for peacekeeping functions to reduce the overall use of dog bites (Warrell, 1999), so these handlers are usually only called out to scenes involving high-risk suspects. For this reason, and because of the training and cost requirements, a K9 position is competitive and selective. Though departments vary, fitness tests often require an officer to be able to pick up their dog, which average 66–88 pounds for German Shepherd breeds, or an equivalent sized sandbag and lift it over a tall fence.

Police motor units were implemented following a rise in public concern about traffic safety in the 1930s (Shulsky, 1976). At the time, motorcycles were faster than cars, giving police an advantage in pursuits. While it is no longer the case that motorcycles are faster than cars, motorcycles are still beneficial to police in that they are low cost, more difficult for drivers to see, and useful for maneuverability and ceremonial purposes (Goldberg, 2017; Shulsky, 1976). Most motor officers are responsible for enforcing traffic laws and taking reports on collisions. The importance of selecting proficient motorcycle drivers for these positions cannot be overstated, given that traffic accidents cause 49% of police officer deaths (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015) and are the second leading cause of injury death in the United States (Xu et al., 2018). A motorcycle increases the risk of death to the rider due to the lack of protection in the event of an accident and because it is more difficult for drivers in cars to see a motorcycle (Kariya, 2004).

According to the National Police Foundation, motor officers must have good concentration, observation, risk awareness, self-awareness, a passion for road safety, and the competence and ability to maneuver and control the motorcycle (Coyne, 1996). Many states offer rigorous motorcycle schools with certified instructors. Training requires officers to complete complex obstacle courses of cones and slaloms, master emergency braking and evasive moves, and maneuver while off-roading and at night. Officers must move an approximately 800-pound motorcycle through cones at varying speeds and close corner turns and be able to pick up a motorcycle from the downed position, get it upright, and sit back on it.

Bomb disposal (EOD) officers are responsible for investigating and diffusing suspicious incendiary devices. In addition to the necessary technical skills, EOD officers must show good physical health and capability. Under the guidelines of The National Bomb Squad Commanders Advisory Board (NBSCAB), EOD officers must be able to walk and maneuver in an 80-pound suit, carry a toolbox, and withstand extreme high temperatures (because the suit inhibits the natural cooling effects of perspiration), while dismantling an incendiary device (Brusey et al., 2009). In addition to the risks presented by the device itself, EOD officers are at risk for heat stress in the suit.

Women on Elite Specialty Units

According to Pogrebin and colleagues (2000) women have historically struggled to obtain assignments on specialty units, though Martin (1991) found affirmative action programs can improve their representation. The fact that appointments are often discretionary opens the door for individual prejudices, such as gender bias, to impact women's selection. This manifestation of gender discrimination in policing can be disappointing to women officers, given that specialty assignments are coveted and considered rewards for good performance.

The research on women in specialty units is limited and has focused on SWAT teams. It is argued that women are rare on SWAT teams for reasons associated with SWAT culture and the physical and logistical job requirements, which disproportionately exclude women. According to Kraska (e.g., Kraska, 1996; Kraska & Kappeler, 1997; Kraska & Paulsen, 1997), SWAT culture emphasizes military tactics, the dangerousness of the work, masculinity, and its corollary attributes. In most departments, SWAT teams are exclusive assignments reserved for only the most skilled, brave, and competent officers who excel in physical fitness, use of force, defense, and safety tactics. Dodge and colleagues (2010) argued men may resent the presence of women on SWAT teams because they threaten the exclusivity, camaraderie, and culture of the unit, though studies in military settings suggest women do not have these effects (Febbraro & McCann, 2003). At the same time, women may be unwilling to pursue a position on the SWAT team because they do not want to challenge the status quo and suffer the consequences of being a trailblazer (Dodge et al., 2011; Martin, 1991; Martin & Jurik, 2007; Robinson, 2013).

Women may also choose not to apply or are denied membership because of physical requirements demanding upper body strength, physical conditioning, and mental stamina (Robinson, 2013; Snow, 1996). While there are no national standards governing SWAT selection requirements, they almost always demand a higher standard than what is required of patrol officers. Physical tests include agility courses, rappelling from ropes while firing weapons, carrying heavy loads, and grappling. Since SWAT teams also deal with barricaded suspects, suicide threats, and other intense crises that could last hours or days, SWAT team members must have the mental stamina to withstand long, stressful wait periods and scenarios involving life-or-death decision making. Thus, some units require additional testing in this regard.

Dodge et al. (2010) questioned why women rarely serve on SWAT teams. They interviewed police officers—30 male SWAT operators and 31 patrol women from four Colorado departments—inquiring about the gendered aspects of these units. Both men and women said women are typically regarded with suspicion until they prove they do not threaten the safety of the team. Participants thought the physical requirements prevented women from joining SWAT teams, but that ability (rather than sex/gender) was the most important factor that dictated whether someone earned a spot. The authors concluded that men would accept women SWAT officers “but only under the right circumstances” (Dodge et al., 2010, p. 233). The women in the study reported that SWAT teams were male-dominated and excluded women, but that women SWAT operators offered unique skills that contribute to the success of the unit.

Dodge et al. (2011) surveyed 202 police officers for their opinions about women on SWAT teams. Again, participants included male SWAT operators and patrol women. Men were more

likely to think women could not meet the job requirements, while women were more likely to think the physical requirements were unfair and that women could do the job. Compared to men, women were also more likely to believe SWAT culture excluded women, while men (compared to women) were more likely to think women should not be on SWAT teams. While *most* men agreed women should be allowed on SWAT teams, the authors suggested this may have been an effort to be socially agreeable.

METHODS

While research suggests men may be unwilling to accept women on elite units, no research has investigated the experiences of women who served in these roles. The current study addresses this gap. Given that police officers and the public have varying views of what makes a police unit “elite,” we define it as a unit requiring a physical test, allowing us to compare across agencies. Women also differ consistently from men on physical ability. Consequently, units that require a physical test may have less gender diversity compared to others (Lonsway, 2003). We identified four units that consistently require physical tests—Motorcycles (Motors), Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), Explosive Ordinance Detail (EOD), and Canine (K9). Though some other units require physical exams, such as divers and helicopter units, they are rare in U.S. policing. We selected units from which we thought we could recruit enough women.

All methods were approved by the University of Alabama at Birmingham Office of the Institutional Review Board (IRB-300000784). We used snowball sampling, which is ideal for hard to reach and atypical populations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Two authors are police officers with combined 40 years experience. They used their connections to recruit participants and asked these connections to suggest others. We recruited women from the U.S. via email who had served in some capacity on SWAT, K9, EOD, or Motor units at any point in their police careers. We heard from a handful of women who commanded an elite unit and included them as well.

All prospective participants received the email, consent form, and questionnaire ahead of time. Those interested were referred to the first author to schedule an interview. Given the geographic distribution of the sample, all interviews were conducted over the phone. They lasted 20–75 min, averaging 40 min. The questionnaire was semi-structured. Participants were asked about their backgrounds, careers in law enforcement, and experiences on elite specialty units; however, the interviewer followed the paths of conversation taken by the participants. All interviews except one were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in Microsoft Word. One was not recorded by request, so notes were taken instead. These notes were analyzed in the same manner as the transcripts, but direct quotes were not used.

This research offers a first look at a never before studied population. Therefore, our analysis plan was to derive an exploratory understanding of their experiences. We focused on eliciting the social response to participants’ selection onto their elite units from members of their own police department, from the community and media, and from their team members on the unit. We began by assessing the demographic profile of the sample. The full transcripts were then reviewed for information pertaining to (1) the department, community, and media response to participants’ selection on their respective units, and (2) the response and level of acceptance from the unit team members. Relevant content was pulled from transcripts and organized according to these two categories. Next, these quotes were analyzed for emergent subthemes within the two categories (see [Figure 1](#)).

Below, we report the demographic makeup of the sample and summarize the emergent subthemes within the two categories, drawing on direct quotes to illustrate each subtheme. When possible, we quantify the prevalence of each subtheme in the sample.

Category	Subtheme	Description of Theme	Prevalence (N=32)
External responses to selection on the unit	Bad ass women on the front page	Selection was celebrated and externally promoted by the agency	10 (31%)
		Positive response from citizens on the street	4 (12%)
	Token women overwhelmed by visibility	Emphasis on difference to other officers caused anxiety and pressure to perform	7 (22%)
	Institutional backlash against women's achievements	Hostility and diminishment from male peers	12 (37%)
		Selection attributed to gender/affirmative action rather than performance	6 (19%)
		Overt harassment	5 (16%)
Navigating acceptance and respect on the unit	Old school mentality is phasing out	Generational differences in response to selection; older officers more resistant	14 (41%)
	Nothing new for a woman in policing	Harassment from team members dismissed as "part of the job" for women officers	4 (12%)
		Denied opportunities for advancement within the unit due to gender discrimination	5 (16%)
	The competence test: Second try outs	Informal probationary period with team members; respect earned through show of competence	20 (53%)
	Accepted on past performance	Accepted by team members due to patrol performance or successfully earning spot on the unit	6 (19%)
	The unit as a second family	Totally accepted as a "member of the family"	9 (28%)

Figure 1. Summary of themes.

SAMPLE PROFILE

The sample includes 32 policewomen from 13 states² and five U.S regions (see Table 1). The majority worked in municipal departments (24) on the West coast (16), consistent with the two recruiters who are municipal police officers in California. Department sizes were spread evenly, while years of service was skewed high with an average of 19 years (also consistent with the two recruiters, both ranking officers). Twenty six of the 32 participants were the only women on their units and 15 were the first in their agency's history. As shown in Table 2, ages ranged from 25 to 67, with an average of 45 years. Most had been married at least once and cared for at least one child during their police careers. All were White, and most were heterosexual (all others identified as lesbian) and had earned a college degree.

EXTERNAL RESPONSES TO WOMEN JOINING ELITE SPECIALTY UNITS

Each participant was asked about the reactions to their selection on the unit from department leadership, colleagues, the community, and the media. Responses varied widely to these questions, perhaps depending on the agency or community culture, or the decade in which this took place.

²To ensure confidentiality with a rare population, specific states are not reported.

Table 1. Sample career characteristics ($N = 32$).

Region	
Midwest	$N = 6$ (19%)
South	$N = 3$ (9%)
West	$N = 16$ (50%)
Southwest	$N = 6$ (19%)
Mid-Atlantic	$N = 1$ (3%)
Agency Type	
Municipal	$N = 24$ (75%)
Sheriff	$N = 6$ (19%)
Special	$N = 2$ (6%)
Agency Size	
1–99	$N = 5$ (16%)
100–499	$N = 9$ (28%)
500–999	$N = 6$ (19%)
1,000–4,999	$N = 7$ (22%)
5,000	$N = 4$ (12%)
Average Years of Service	19 (Range = 4–36)
Only Woman	
On unit	$N = 26$ (81%)
Ever	$N = 15$ (47%)
Retired	$N = 4$ (12%)
Military Experience	$N = 4$ (12%)

Table 2. Sample demographics ($N = 32$).

Average age	45 (Range = 25–67)
Married	
Once	$N = 19$ (59%)
Twice	$N = 8$ (25%)
Primary Caregiver	
One child	$N = 13$ (41%)
Two children	$N = 5$ (16%)
Three children	$N = 3$ (9%)
White	$N = 32$ (100%)
Hispanic	$N = 4$ (12%)
Heterosexual	$N = 22$ (69%)
Education	
Some college	$N = 5$ (16%)
Associate's	$N = 3$ (9%)
Bachelor's	$N = 13$ (41%)
Master's	$N = 7$ (22%)
Doctorate	$N = 2$ (6%)

Bad Ass Women on the Front Page

For ten women (31%), their selection on the unit was treated as a “big deal” and promoted heavily through department memos, public statements, and media reporting. One motorcycle officer said

Oh yeah it was a big deal. There [were] newspaper articles. I was on a recruiting poster. It was pretty cool. I was the only female motor in [the] county... And I was asked many times to come speak at the female recruitment events... I loved it. It was a huge ego boost of course but I loved that.

One SWAT officer acknowledged the benefits of promoting gender representation on specialized units for inspiring other girls and women in the community. While she personally did not enjoy the attention, she recognized that she could serve as a motivation to others.

A couple of news stations came out to our training a few weeks after I was on the team. They got wind of it because of our public information office. I think people just like those kinds of stories. Especially girls, they like to see that kind of stuff. You know if there is someone out there thinking ‘oh I can’t do that

because I am too weak or I am too slow,' they can see a normal woman achieve something like that. So, a few news stations came out to do a story on it and I think it made our Facebook page... I am not a huge fan of the spotlight... but if it would encourage another girl to get up and actually do something with her life then, by all means, tell my story. [SWAT]

Another participant criticized her department for failing to take advantage of the opportunity to promote her as the first woman motorcycle officer. She said she was involved in promotional activities on her own accord because she believed it was beneficial for the department and community.

You know what, they did not take advantage of it in my opinion. I mean they could have not said my name for all I cared. I did more promoting of having a female in motors then they did... if you go to our recruiting video, I'm in that and that wasn't until I think the last year I was in motors that they thought about using me for that. [Motors]

Four (12%) motorcycle officers in our sample said they received positive attention from citizens, especially women, while out riding around in their communities. They were often called "bad asses" and cheered on as they rode by. One said, "we would go to do our little maneuvers in front of the parade. You could hear these gasps of mostly women saying 'it's a girl!'" Another said "to citizens, it was more like seeing a white rhino at the zoo. Look honey, that's a female motor officer." Importantly, seeing a woman motor officer sometimes prompted conversations between cops and citizens that otherwise would not have occurred. As one officer described,

When I'm stopped at a red light on the motorcycle, you know, people will roll down their window and say 'hey, nice boots' or 'that's pretty bad ass, a chick on a bike!' And they all say 'bad ass.' Every single person uses that phrase 'bad ass'... It's a great PR tool because it gets people to talk to you that wouldn't normally talk to the police.

Token Women Overwhelmed by Heightened Visibility

Alternatively, for seven (22%) women, the attention they received for being selected on the unit and the emphasis on their difference from everybody else made them feel nervous or on display. They described feeling an overwhelming amount of pressure to perform. For example,

Yeah, it was a big deal. There was a lot of like publicity. Like, the department publicized it. There was a lot of pressure at the onset because I felt like I had to succeed because the department had made this historic turn... Honestly, I guess the best way to describe it was overwhelming because all I wanted to do was go out there and do my job. [Motors]

Heightened visibility is a noted consequence of tokenism (Belknap & Shelley, 1992; Kanter, 1977), and has been identified as particularly salient for women of color in policing who are doubly underrepresented as a result of their race, gender, and potentially by other social identities such as class and sexual orientation (Martin, 1994; Todak & Brown, 2019). The feeling of pressure often occurs as token women feel they are treated as representatives of all women officers, and that any mistakes they make will be attributed to women in general.

Institutional Backlash against Women's Achievements

While no one said they experienced negative reactions from the community, 12 women (37%) said they faced overt hostility and diminishment from police men. In most cases, these men were colleagues working in their agency. In five cases (16%), the response to the participants' selection from members of their own police department took on a harassing tone.

People were making fun of me. It would get back to me that like 'oh, there's a girl that's trying to be on the SWAT team' and then when it was announced that I got it people were still making comments and I

believe one of the officers made a joke you know it was going around like ‘oh, since when did the SWAT team get pussified.’ [SWAT]

One of these five participants described men in their department as “ruthless” when it came to tormenting women for their achievements. She deliberately avoided participating in any promotional activities when she made the SWAT team because she was all too familiar with the culture in her department and did not want to open herself up to harassment.

I did some PR in 1999 and they put me in the paper and said I am a future leader at the police department. And I got so many of those pictures of me back in my mailbox with the remarks on them because, you know, cops are ruthless that [when I made the SWAT team] I was like ‘we are not doing this’ ... they didn’t do any PR because I was like ‘nope. I’m not doing that again. That’s not happening because I’m not going to put myself through that.’ [SWAT]

For six women (19%), their selection onto the unit was attributed by members of the department to organizational efforts to diversify. These comments were used to downplay the women’s skills and performance during the try out process. Many women pointed out the hypocrisy of these claims since their selection was based on objective performance metrics.

It was soon after [a female colleague won a gender discrimination lawsuit] that I came to the SWAT team and I was the first female on a SWAT team and a lot of the people were like ‘well she is just here because of the [lawsuit]’ and I was like ‘no, I am not. I tested one of the highest scores, I am physically fit, you know. My whole career I prepared to get to this point’ ... and so it meant that even though you had gotten yourself ready and did everything to get in this position they still didn’t respect you so then you had to work three times harder than the other guys coming in with you to prove your worth. [SWAT/EOD]

Some people attribute my positions with SWAT and narcotics to me being female. Almost like it’s a statistic like ‘oh, they needed a female on the team,’ ‘oh, she got it because she was female.’ So, I have heard that a couple of times. But you are going to get that anywhere because there is always going to be those people. [SWAT]

In four cases (12%), negative reactions came from officers the women had beaten out for the position. These men believed they deserved the spot more and had been wrongly passed over by a woman.

Some of the guys I beat out for the position I guess were mad because they felt like they were physically stronger and that somehow that meant that they should have got it and I shouldn’t have, even though we had to pass the same physical test and we both had to carry the dogs the same distance and all that stuff. So, there was that backlash from people being mad that I got it and they didn’t ... I mean it was frustrating because some of the people that were saying that, I was sort of friends with. So, they would congratulate me to my face and then run around the department saying I shouldn’t have gotten it. [K9]

Seniority is revered in policing. According to traditional school of thought, officers with more years on the job should take precedence over others for coveted assignments, sometimes at the expense of performance or ability. When one participant was selected for the motor unit based on her past performance, she faced backlash for being chosen over male colleague with more seniority.

There was two of us that had applied for the assignment when I submitted my interest memo. [He] had about 18 years on and I had 18 months and so obviously seniority plays a massive role in that. I would write, I think my average number of tickets I wrote a day, even on patrol, was like 8 and they had pulled his statistics and he was not performing and so I ended up with the assignment ... that was probably the least popular decision this department had made in a very long time. I got a lot of flak for it ... it got ugly. [Motors]

Three women (9%) experienced negativity from officers from other police departments. In these cases, the harassment occurred at regional or national events, such as meetings and trainings. Two women were SWAT commanders who attended regional meetings and faced criticism from men who were opposed to seeing women at those tables.

I went to a team commander meeting... it just happened to be the topic of the day was police departments forcing diversity on tactical teams just for the sake of diversity. So, in that it definitely felt like the room was dark and there was one spotlight on me because exactly what he was talking about was me. I was the only diverse person there and I was the only one that was different, and it became very, very uncomfortable so much that the guys that were on my team were offended for me. [SWAT Commander]

It's externally when I deal with other agencies, especially some of the smaller agencies... and I typically get the snickers from the old school guys. Like the old guys. I had one of our neighboring agencies, the SWAT commander over there, he was probably in his early 60's and he has been over there for a long time and he was seriously old school... he came up to me at a training scenario and said 'oh, I hear you are going into SWAT.' I said 'yeah, I am pretty excited' and he goes 'I guess your chief decided it was time for your team to have a woman's touch.' [SWAT Commander]

Another woman described facing hostility from men when she traveled around the country to attend elite training programs associated with her assignment on the K9 unit.

I went to [a k9 school] and the guys were like big old dudes. They were really big, and they got chew rolled up in bags, and he's sticking chew in his mouth and he asks if my husband lets me work his dog. So, I said 'yeah, and I'm allowed to vote now too,' and he says 'that's the worst mistake men ever made.' And then I was only 2 of 15 who passed the training. [K9]

The Old School Mentality is Phasing out

Fourteen women (41%) acknowledged generational differences in the social response to women on police specialty units. They felt that "old school cops" in their departments were the biggest problems when it came to harassing women (see also Rabe-Hemp, 2008b), and that the experiences of women on specialty units today were most likely better than those who had begun their careers in earlier decades (i.e., the 1970s–1990s). One motorcycle officer we spoke to was the first to ever serve in the position in her region of the country. She reported a negative experience with a law enforcement officer from a neighboring jurisdiction.

This was in 2000. So, it was 18 years ago. So, there wasn't really any females around on motors. I got pulled over on my motorcycle – the police motorcycle in full uniform with my shotgun, had the police department black and white motorcycle – and I got pulled over in my area on my way home by [highway patrol] and one of the things he said was it was for excessive speed, which they teach you at motor school to go in front of the traffic because you see how people act to police cars. It's even more dangerous when they abruptly change lanes when you are on a motorcycle, so you have to stay in front of or behind traffic. And the second thing he said he pulled me over for [was] possibly impersonating a police officer. [Motors]

Incensed by this harassment, this woman said she learned how to do a "wheelie" on her bike so she could show off next time a highway patrol officer tried to jam her up. Another motors officer in our sample was selected for her agency's unit in the 1970s—the earliest in our sample. She said that, due to the times she worked in and the novelty of her position as a woman motorcycle officer, she received a lot of negative attention, even from the community.

You better believe it. It was a huge deal. As a matter of fact, when I went to motorcycle school every morning there was a radio talk show and the host on the radio talk show – 'well let's see if she is wearing her garter today' and they made fun of me every morning. You know, it was kind of humorous. A girl on a Harley in the south in the 70's. [Motors]

In sum, external reactions to women being selected onto police specialty units varied widely in our sample. While many said they received positive feedback from the community and members of their departments, others were criticized and demeaned or accused of benefitting from gendered favoritism or quotas. Nevertheless, most participants said that the treatment of women on elite units was better today compared to earlier times, describing the old school mentality as phasing out to the benefit of the newer generations of women in law enforcement. Next, we review participants' experiences with the members of their own teams.

NAVIGATING ACCEPTANCE AND RESPECT FROM UNIT TEAM MEMBERS

Participants were asked whether they felt respected by members of their specialty units and to describe the process by which they navigated this respect, or lack thereof.

Nothing New for a Woman in Policing

Compared to the social response from sources external to the unit, fewer women in our sample reported facing overt criticism or harassment from team members following their selection. In the four cases (12%) involving overtly hostile or harassing behaviors from team members, participants described facing resistance and incivilities from a select few people, but dismissed this as a normal aspect of being a woman in policing (see Haarr, 1997; Hunt, 1990; Martin, 1980; Rabe-Hemp, 2008b). For example,

Yeah, I had to get around the naysayers. A lot of people didn't think a woman could do it. There was a lot of jokes... basically they wanted to make sure I could do the job and there was a lot of people watching to see if a female could do it so like I said there is a lot of, not degrading, but a lot of jokes that were female oriented. [SWAT]

Overt harassment often occurred at the very beginning of each participants' tenure on the elite unit and was characterized by many participants as "hazing."

As far as being a female when I first became a motor cop, I feel like there was sort of a testing period where they were testing me to see if I could put up with their shit, to see if I could ride like them and be able to listen to them and all - meaning the men. They talk a little bit raunchier than your average woman does but, you know, sailor talk. So I feel like there was sort of a test period for that and there were times I got hazed and there were times I would come home crying and wondering why are they treating me like this? Why are they doing this? And as it turned out there were just a couple of guys who didn't like me. [Motors]

Two women were told by team members that they only made the team because they were women. One officer who passed the test to join the SWAT team on the first try was accused of only making the team because of the scrutiny the agency was facing in the midst of a federal consent decree. Adding to that, she was also the first woman to ever pass the test to join the SWAT team in the history of that department. Thus, a few members of the team were unhappy that her selection would alter the gender dynamics of the unit and used the consent decree as an excuse to demean her accomplishment.

The people that knew me knew that I was a good athlete. They knew that I was a hard worker. The people that didn't know me, the automatic assumption kind of was like 'oh, you got it because you were a female'... and the attitude was 'well boys, welcome to the new law enforcement.' [SWAT]

Possibly the most problematic finding is that five women (16%) in the sample believed they were denied promotions or assignments within their specialty units based on their gender, some despite being the most senior members of their teams. In the following example, a K9 officer believed the unit commander did not promote her because he did not view the leadership position as a suitable role for a woman.

I had to work double hard to prove myself. The supervisor in charge, it's kind of weird because as time went on, he knew I was dedicated, I worked late, I came in early just to do K9 but when it came to picking second in charge of K9 he would always pick one of the guys. Like after seven years of being on there he would pick one of the guys that had been there less than me. [K9]

Thus, while several women experienced directed hostility from members of their team, these were frequently characterized as accepted realities of policework, especially for women who aspire to assignments considered to be for men, like elite specialty units (Hunt, 1990; Martin, 1990). For women who are successful enough to earn positions on elite specialty units, their work

experiences up to that point have taught them to accept and deal with the cultural environment within their department, which frequently includes gender-based hazing and jokes targeted at them as a result of their outsider status (Martin, 1979; Rief, 2020; Rief & Clinkinbeard, 2020). Unfortunately, this mindset may contribute to the preservation of the status quo in policing and enable the harassment of nontraditional officers to persist (Todak et al., 2022).

The Competence Test: Second Try Outs

Twenty women (53%) said that while they expected or initially experienced a negative response from team members, they ended up earning their respect through shows of competence during a critical incident or particularly stressful time period. Thus, despite having successfully passed the formal testing procedures ascribed by the agency for getting onto the unit, the women were put through an additional, *informal* probationary period before earning the acceptance and respect of the team. The competence test is a common theme within the broader literature on women in policing, as incoming women officers are typically regarded as potential risks until they demonstrate their internalization of the violence and aggression values of police work and their ability to back up fellow officers in a dangerous situation (Rabe-Hemp, 2008b).

A few women explained that they came onto their units during a stressful or tumultuous time period. The urgency of these situations superseded any concerns the men had about a woman joining the team. These situations presented the woman with an opportunity to showcase her competence almost immediately upon joining the team.

We were really busy last year from a call out perspective. We had three shootings, three officer-involved shootings with my team. I had an officer that was shot last October. So, we hit the ground running and it didn't take any time at all for these guys to feel like 'yup, she's got it. She knows what she is doing.' So, internally I haven't had any problems. [SWAT Commander]

Similarly, after an officer suffered a motorcycle accident, one of our participants found herself in charge of the unit. During this situation, she was able to demonstrate her leadership abilities in a time of crisis and earn respect quickly:

There was a time when one of our captains was involved in an off-duty motorcycle accident and he was out of state with my traffic sergeant and so my traffic sergeant ended up staying with him for quite a few weeks and so during that time I was the primary officer running the division... so I think that after I had that, they realized that I could do it and I got numerous contacts and emails saying we appreciate you and we are pleasantly surprised with what you are doing. [Motors]

In this SWAT Commander's case, tragic circumstances forced the team to come together and perform effectively soon after she was selected to lead the unit.

The perfect storm happened. We had the two officers get shot and killed, I get picked, and we only have one person on the team with prior military experience, so we all learned together... as a team we solidified easier because nobody with any degree of expertise was there. There was one person trying to be the know it all... So I had some advantages that other commanders didn't. I think it was easier for me. I think it would have been more difficult for me to come into an existing team as a female commander. I think I would have been met with more resistance but because we started from scratch and everybody was starting from ground zero there was none of that "oh, who are you and who do you think you are going to try and lead us." I didn't have that overcome. [SWAT Commander]

Thus, while most participants said they were subjected by team members to an informal try out process to test their competence on the unit, a few women were able to bypass an extended probationary period given circumstances that allowed them to immediately showcase their abilities.

Accepted on past Performance

Fewer women said they felt respected by members of their teams immediately upon arrival, without needing to showcase their competence. Four women (12%) said they had built positive reputations for themselves as patrol officers and while serving in other positions within their agencies. By laying this groundwork, they had gained the respect of the team even before they began working with them. A few women even described being recruited by the team because of their reputations.

There was actually several guys that were already on the team that I knew from either working with them on the streets or just training with them on various things and they were really supportive and one of them I even went to and I was like I'm just not going to do it again, I failed and I don't want to fail twice and he was like "girl, there's guys on this team that have been on it for 10, 15 years that had to try out 3 or 4 times. You're not the first one to ever fail and no one thinks you failed because you are a girl. That's not what it is. Get back out there and train because we want you. We all were really upset when you didn't make it because we really wanted you. So, you need to come back or you are going to really disappoint some people on the team." [SWAT]

I worked really hard at patrol. I tried to build a reputation of being a hard worker and I show up for work. I have a good attitude as much as I can. I mean everyone has bad days but I try to have a good attitude most of the time and do things the right way so I had already built somewhat of a reputation and that's why they said they wanted me. They liked what they heard about me and they knew who I was without even knowing who I was. [SWAT]

For two women (6%), the fact that they had successfully completed the selection process was taken as evidence that she was deserving of the spot.

We have a squad of 19 techs, including sergeants and commanders... out of those people I don't feel like anybody has given me anything as a woman. They all have accepted me. They know what I have gone through because the training is very rigorous so if I can pass that like I was able to, then they know I am able to do the job. Now previously they had told me that there were technicians, male technicians, that did retire that did give the other female a lot of crap. She wasn't very respected by them only because they were older and didn't feel like women should be doing this job. But I honestly haven't experienced any of that. [Bomb]

No, you know I really don't think I remember any [challenges associated with my gender] because once I made it through motor school and was able to keep up with the pack, I think we were all kind of just, I think I was just one of the guys. (Motors)

Thus, a select few women in our sample were accepted as respected members of their teams based on past performance and successful completion of the requirements to join the unit. Unfortunately, the norm appears to be initial resistance, despite successful completion of the try out process.

The Elite Unit as a Second Family

Nine women (28%) described being so well respected by their team members that they viewed the unit as their second family. The dynamics of these units were described as one of a group of siblings who "fight like cats and dogs at times because we are together so often to where it is like a brother-sister relationship. We rip each other apart and then the next day everybody is fine" [Motors]. These women felt completely accepted as a member of the team and did not feel they were treated differently because of their sex/gender.

I worked with a lot of them for a long time because when you get into the K9 unit your career in K9 is usually a minimum of six years and, you know, longer depending on how many dogs you work. So, a lot of my male partners I have worked with have become pretty much family. We are all family with each other, and our kids have grown up together. (K9)

In sum, in the process of navigating respect and acceptance from members, many women faced scrutiny, and some hostility, upon joining the unit. However, the majority felt they became

respected as members of the team over time. In most cases, respect was gained following a show of competence, serving as a second, informal try out process for these new members. Some participants even described developing family-like bonds with their team members over time, showing that some elite police women become completely accepted and integrated into their specialty unit. We discuss the implications of these findings in the final section below.

DISCUSSION

In their seminal study of women on SWAT teams, Dodge and colleagues described these units as “the last bastion of male privilege in contemporary American policing” (2010, p. 219). Over a decade later, their argument remains true, rendering the experiences of the select few women who do attain positions on these units of empirical and social importance. Accordingly, we investigated social reactions to women joining elite units from a variety of sources, as reported by a sample of elite police women. Our study is the first to examine this population from their own perspectives, moving beyond research examining the perspectives of police men *about* them (Dodge et al., 2010, 2011). We also incorporate three additional elite units into our analysis—K9, motorcycles, and bomb diffusion—adding to the previous focus on SWAT teams.

We found, first, that most women in our sample were the only ones on their teams (81%). Many were also the first in their agencies’ histories (47%). While acknowledging our use of a convenience snowball sample, our findings suggest that women on K9, motorcycle, bomb, and SWAT/tactical units remain the exceptions rather than the rules in many police agencies today. To our knowledge, there is no existing research examining the impact of gender diversity, or diversity in general, on the behaviors and effectiveness of elite police specialty units. However, given the burgeoning body of evidence highlighting the positive impact of women in policing (e.g., Barnes et al., 2018; Black & Kari, 2010; Bolger, 2015; Lonsway, 2000; Lonsway et al., 2002; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006; Rabe-Hemp, 2008a; Schuck, 2018; Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2005), the possibility that women officers improve outcomes for citizens and communities served by elite units is certainly a worthwhile topic of study.

The primary focus of our study was on the response to women selected on elite units. We divided our focus between sources external to the unit and unit members themselves. We generally found that women faced more resistance from external sources compared to members of their own teams. Nevertheless, resistance from team members emerged in the form of a second try out process where women were forced to prove their competence before earning their respect. The remainder of this section discusses these findings in more depth.

One-third of our sample felt they were positively received by sources external to their unit. For instance, several motorcycle officers said their uniqueness prompted positive reactions and conversations with community members who were excited to see a police woman on a bike. During a time when police legitimacy in the United States appears relatively low, the benefits of positive interactions between police and citizens cannot be overstated. Other participants believed in the recruitment benefits of positive press about women in policing. They thought news reports celebrating a woman on an elite unit could help with recruiting and inspire young women to seek out careers in law enforcement that they may have otherwise felt were not for them. In light of the nationwide police staffing crisis (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019), positive press drawing interest among groups who are not traditionally the target of recruiters is an obvious benefit.

Nevertheless, 22% of the sample said that while they received positive feedback and attention, they did not fully appreciate it. In these cases, the negative effects of heightened visibility, an aspect of Kanter’s (1977) tokenism theory, made the women feel as though they were in a position of representing all women in policing (see also Belknap & Shelley, 1992). Their token status made them nervous to fail and damage department and community views about the group as a

whole. This is likely more problematic in agencies where women are especially underrepresented, not well respected, or believed to be unsuitable for elite units. In particular, research shows that black women feel especially ‘on display’ as they are representative of a very small subset of police officers and doubly marginalized by both gender and race (Martin, 1994; Todak & Brown, 2019). To offset the negative impact of tokenism in policing, departments should make concerted efforts to increase their representation throughout all spaces, and especially in coveted positions like elite units and leadership. Importantly, departments must also ensure their organizational cultures and policies function in ways that support women officers to ensure turnover is not a problem. There are ample resources available to police agencies for assessing and improving the state of their organization, its culture, and impact on women (e.g., <https://30x30initiative.org/>).

Just over a third of the sample received negative responses from men in their departments after being selected for an elite unit. These included harassing comments about the units being “pussified” or getting “a woman’s touch,” accusations of affirmative action (despite passing the required tests), and accusations that they “stole” positions from “more deserving” men. Thus, while the experiences of women on patrol in many agencies seem to be improving (Rabe-Hemp, 2018 described them as thriving in an all boys club), the same is not true for women on elite specialty units. Elite police women who traveled (e.g., SWAT commanders going to regional meetings and conferences; K9 officers going to trainings) were also treated negatively by men from other agencies, underscoring that the resistance to the entrance of women into the last exclusively male-dominated spaces in law enforcement is a feature of the larger institutional culture. It appears that, for some men, there ought to be one last “boys club” in policing. According to participants, this perspective was most common among older officers who still had the “old school mentality,” which they described as slowly phasing out.

Though resistance from team members was depicted by participants as minimal, most participants said they were forced to participate in a second, informal “try out process” to prove their competency and earn respect. Moreover, a few described facing overt resistance and hazing from team members. When describing these experiences, participants dismissed them as being nothing new for women in policing, as concentrated among only a select few or older officers, or as being necessary given the high-risk environment in which elite units operate. Adopting a “tough skin” is noted as an important survival skill for women operating in the hypermasculine environment of policing. For example, Prokos and Padavic (2002) explained that women in the police academy were forced to either accept the abuse targeted at them because they were women or risk being seen as a troublemaker or disrupter of the status quo. This is likely especially true on elite specialty units, which prioritize unity and teamwork over everything else. However, these mindsets can have harmful consequences, the most evident of which is the preservation of the status quo in policing that resists outsiders and the enabling of harassment toward women officers to continue.

Our study is not without limitations. Most evident is the use of snowball sampling, which produced a convenience sample with unknown representativeness. In particular, our sample is noticeably homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity (i.e., all White, four Hispanic). However, noting that only about 5% of the U.S. police force consists of women of color (Todak & Brown, 2019), and that elite specialty units are almost exclusively male, the lack of racial/ethnic diversity is certainly characteristic of the study population to some extent. Nevertheless, the absence of voices from the few women of color who serve in these positions should be noted and addressed in future research. Future research should more broadly pay closer attention to specialty units, a significantly understudied topic given the primary focus on patrol in the policing literature, but perhaps even more critical given their heightened propensity for engaging in potentially violent encounters and using force (Gaub et al., 2020b). This research should work to draw on more diverse samples and male comparison groups and examine the potential benefits of increased diversity on specialty units. Certainly, researchers should continue to explore external and

internal reactions to women on elite specialty units as they become more commonplace, as the potential impact of gender diversity for police legitimacy is an important and understudied topic.

Our study offers several important policy implications. Our findings confirm, first, that women continue to be severely underrepresented on these units. As a result, police agencies are missing out on the benefits of diversity for the behaviors, impacts, and community perceptions of these units, and for their organizations as a whole. The negative impacts of tokenism and cultural resistance of men to women making these incredible advancements were also evident, but often justified by participants as normal aspects of policing or as necessary for the effectiveness and safety of the unit. By allowing exclusively male spaces and their resistance to women to persist, organizations are effectively neutralizing the diverse perspectives and skills of women as they face significant pressure to conform to the status quo of the group. They are also, of course, enabling the harassment, career sabotage, and other negative workplace experiences of women as they attempt to advance in their careers and pursue their dreams. We therefore conclude by calling on police departments to comprehensively assess the demographic makeup of all spaces within their organizations, to diversify these units so that all officers are accepted, to examine how their organizational cultures may differentially impact nontraditional officers, and to take any other concerted steps to increase their representation and improve their workplace experiences.

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