

Research

'We're always handed the children': women finding belonging in policing

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Abstract

The purpose of the research was to examine whether policewomen have carved out their place and developed a sense of belonging in the profession, or whether they are faced with disrespect, self-doubt, and pressure to adopt constructed gender roles. The study employed in-depth, qualitative interviews with sixteen women police officers in the U.S. Emergent themes suggested that overt discrimination and harassment is uncommon, but women do report the continued need to prove themselves. While all have carved out a place for themselves in the profession and most reported acceptance and belonging, several expressed concerns that they are relegated to roles based on their gender. With nationwide challenges to recruit more women into policing, this study provides insights into ways women have integrated and the barriers they may still face.

Keywords Police · Gender · Women · Law enforcement

The aim of this study was to investigate, through in-depth interviews, the lived experiences of policewomen within American law enforcement agencies to uncover possible challenges in working within a male-dominated profession. Have they faced discrimination and pressures to prove their belonging, or have they carved out a place for themselves in law enforcement? Such insights could inform policy changes and organizational practices that foster gender equality and contribute to attracting more women recruits. The 30 × 30 Initiative seeks pledges from agencies across North America that 30% of all recruits will be women by the year 2030, arguing that women in policing receive fewer complaints, are well-regarded in the community, are effective in providing support to crime victims, use less force, and make fewer discretionary arrests [1]. The U.S. Department of Justice reported on the current state of women in policing, questioning why, despite efforts to increase recruitment of women, representation has remained stagnant [2]. The report emerged from discussions with law enforcement officers and researchers at the Research Summit on Women in Policing held in December 2018. Women receive fewer complaints, potentially saving departments from litigation. The report further explained that while existing evidence is limited, women may improve interactions within diverse communities. With increasing recognition that women are assets in law enforcement, many agencies are attempting to recruit a more representative force.

Differences between men and women officers based upon skills and characteristics, and how these differences impact policing styles, is highlighted in the literature. Spillar [3] suggested that a clear response to addressing police violence in the U.S. is to recruit a more diverse force that represents the gender and racial diversity of the communities served. Spillar contended that “women officers are less authoritarian in their approach to policing, rely less on physical force than men

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do, possess better communication skills and increase police response to violence against women." Furthermore, women have de-escalated hostile situations, saving lives in return. [3, p. 187].

Martin argued that American police officers, regardless of gender, need skills to both "control volatile situations" and "actively listen and talk to people" [4, p. 124] but communication skills are often undervalued. Officers are judged on how they respond to dangerous situations. Emotional supportiveness and service tasks are seen as feminine and physical strength and crime fighting is rewarded. Hostile situations can be intensified without skills that defuse. Seklecki and Paynich [5] surveyed 531 women officers working in American agencies to determine what motivated them to pursue the career and to understand their perceptions of treatment by male colleagues. These officers generally reported equal abilities in the quantity and quality of performed duties. The only duty that a small percentage (16.2%) felt men performed better was use of force; however, women expressed that they "were more or far more capable in their ability to apply reason and interpersonal skills" when "dealing with hostile citizens" [5, p. 25]. Upon interviewing 42 American college students pursuing law enforcement careers, Todak [6] found that both the men and women believed women have special skills, particularly in communication, that benefit the profession. Respondents stated women had exceptional skills in connecting with community members and easing tense situations, whereas men could be seen as intimidating.

These communication skills, however, may inadvertently relegate women into certain roles. Women police officers are often assigned gendered tasks such as providing counsel and care for women and children; they face greater scrutiny and less encouragement from male colleagues. Hill et al. [7] surveyed women in law enforcement in the U.S. and found that women are not highly represented in police special units, especially those units that are traditionally male dominated. When women are in special units, these units tend to conform to gender stereotypes; thus, women often serve as detectives, crisis negotiators, civil disturbance officers, etc.

Gendered skills and characteristic differences between men and women officers are also considered in the literature when examining police-citizen interactions and community policing efforts. Rabe-Hemp [8] utilized data on police interactions in Indianapolis, Indiana and St. Petersburg, Florida gathered for the Project on Policing Neighborhoods. Rabe-Hemp found that policewomen were 27 percent less likely to engage in extreme controlling behaviors and suggested that women may not be driven to assert authority in a situation and/or they utilize "communication strategies [that] may minimize the need for escalating the continuum of aggressive police behaviors" [8, p. 432]. Similarly, Lichtenberg [9] analyzed victimization data and concluded that women officers in the U.S. are subjected to less lethal force than male officers; one explanation was that women officers may have superior abilities to deescalate situations. Bloom and Labovich posited that "Women officers may use policing tactics that emphasize communication, rather than force. Thus, one possible incremental reform for U.S. law enforcement is recruiting more women, who could be less likely to use force than male officers" [10, pp. 962–963].

Carrington et al., citing the creation of women-led police stations in Latin America that address incidents of domestic violence, offered a reimagined, women-led system that engaged teams of law enforcement officers, social workers, psychologists, and lawyers to support survivors of violence, thereby "enhancing police legitimacy" [11, p. 16]. Recruiting more women with abilities to support victims of crime and build relationships with communities may earn back trust in policing. Similarly, Friedman offered a reimagined system of first responders that minimizes "the harms of policing" [12, p. 926] by reducing criminalization, providing support for victims, and employing mediation and social work skills. Women came into policing "through a social work door" [12, p. 984] and have historically benefitted their communities by providing social support. While women are clearly an asset to the profession, recruitment of more women is slow and even stalled in some areas of the U.S., and many question how to attract more diverse cohorts of applicants.

1 Recruiting women officers

Attracting more women into policing may require combating imagery and preconceived notions that imply a lack of belonging. Silvestri [13] argued that attributing the "cult of masculinity" in policing to the underrepresentation of women is an oversimplification. This argument suggests that police "culture" is pejorative, lacks diversity, and has not evolved. However, the constructed image of the hyper-masculine crime fighter being the most competent fosters the notion that women are unsuitable for the profession. As we develop our understanding of gender and police culture, "gender symbols, patterns and beliefs about 'real' police work and 'ideal' workers are being redrawn and repositioned across an increasingly complex policing landscape" [13, p. 298].

Clinkinbeard et al. [14] argued that if policing continues to be seen as a masculine endeavor, recruiting women may remain a challenge. The online survey that involved a convenience sample of students ($n = 672$) in two Midwestern U.S.

universities revealed that both men and women respondents who rated themselves as more masculine, were more likely to consider policing as a profession. Lord and Friday [15] distributed surveys to both policing applicants and to high school juniors in the same southern large city in the U.S. Policing tasks were of greater interest to female high school students than the males, but when directly asked if they would consider policing as a future profession, females were less interested. In order to recruit more women, Lord and Friday suggested improved messaging that women can be successful and that “the abilities to think, analyze, listen, and communicate are all skills that women understand and are likely to feel competent utilizing” [15, p. 76]. Cambareri and Kuhns [16] surveyed American college students enrolled in introductory criminal justice courses in an urban southeastern university. They found that female respondents were less inclined to pursue policing as a career and were more likely to report that a career in law enforcement would not be personally fulfilling or a sign of success, and that they would not be respected by the community and fellow officers. Recruiters need to emphasize the multiple roles in policing and begin sharing that message in high schools and colleges if they are going to attract more women.

Todak [6] interviewed 42 college students planning to pursue policing careers after graduation. Questions focused on motivations, expectations, and preparation for the career. Female college students were “uniquely motivated to prove themselves as capable police officers” [6, p. 257]. Female respondents anticipated facing greater risk than males, particularly as the only officer responding to certain types of calls. Women further expressed concerns of being taken seriously within their community, facing greater disadvantage because they were smaller in size than their male counterparts would be, and being able to balance family and work responsibilities. Women in the sample made serious efforts to prepare for the career. While the men were more likely to own firearms and serve in the military than women, women were more likely to have attended informational sessions, developed skills in martial arts and self-defense, and worked in policing as interns, volunteers and employees.

If the physically powerful officer is promoted as the most effective, women may lack the confidence to attempt to meet that constructed standard. Schuck [17] examined data from over 4000 policing agencies in the U.S. and questioned whether individual women choose not to pursue the career or whether structural barriers stand in the way of this pursuit. Schuck found that departments with strict physical fitness requirements are less likely to have strong representation of women, despite the lack of empirical evidence that these tests predict successful performance or organizational outcomes. The U.S. Department of Justice [2] argued that women are disadvantaged by physical fitness standards, especially those that require upper body strength, and little evidence exists to show that the requirements are associated with successful job performance. While strict physical requirements may discourage some women, Schuck [17] found that requirements for higher education resulted in greater representation of women.

Gibbs [18] argued that mentorship from female leadership is essential in attracting women to the profession, but women in leadership roles in the U.S. are often viewed as unlikable. There is a need to move away from defining effective leadership by whether or not they conform to masculine norms. Applicant attrition is high due to the length of the vetting process. Gibbs suggested that in order to increase diversity in policing, the application process should be shortened, and exceptional candidates need mentorship.

While it is essential to examine what discourages women from pursuing policing, it is equally essential to examine what attracts them to the career. Gibbs [19] utilized telephone interviews with women and minority applicants to a large U.S. agency to assess motivations for becoming police officers and found the desire to help others and the pursuit of a childhood dream to be common motivators. Knowing motivators can help recruiters target their messaging and outreach. Raganella and White [20] surveyed 278 NYPD academy recruits to assess motivation for pursuing the profession and found that the “opportunity to help people” was significantly higher for women. Women also had higher mean scores for the motivating factor of “opportunities for career advancement.” After surveying officers in two large, Midwestern police departments, Clinkinbeard et al. [21] found that women ranked serving and protecting the community and legacy (e.g., being a role model) motivations higher than men but were more concerned with issues of acceptance on the job. They contended that positive mentorships and networking, improvements to recruitment imagery, and addressing existing inequalities are essential to foster inclusive recruiting.

Recruitment and retention of qualified women requires a workplace culture that is supportive of work-life balance. The U.S. National Institute of Justice [2] provided evidence that shift work disadvantages women, especially those with families. Family friendly policies such as paid maternity and paternity leave and quality day care provisions may also entice women to the profession. To recruit women, the military has instituted family-friendly programs, offered sabbaticals and paid parental leave to raise children, updated gear to fit women, addressed harassment, and conducted climate surveys—such measures could be adopted in policing [2, p. 18]. Corder and Corder [22] argued that the reason the numbers of women in policing has stagnated in the U.S. may be due in

part to recruitment practices and training academies that are not woman-friendly. Without family-friendly policies, reevaluating physical standards, challenging male dominated academies and cultures, and more opportunities for advancement, recruiting and retaining women may continue to be a challenge.

Will creating a policing culture that is more inclusive of women dismantle existing inequalities? Balkin examined existing evidence largely collected in North America and argued that despite the fact that women have proven themselves beneficial in policing, “policemen have learned traditional values and held on to them, making them very unreceptive to women in policing” [23, p. 35] and male officers “collectively reinforce their distorted views” [23, p. 36]. Franklin posited that the male peer groups that exist in policing foster an “antiwoman ideology” and this culture, in turn, “functions to degrade, subordinate, and oppress female police officers” [24, p. 20].

Garcia [25] historically analyzed women’s entrance into policing, and found that while gendered norms of service to women and children helped women enter policing, continued fostering of gendered norms has resulted in inequality and a lack of women’s advancement. Zempi [26] recruited officers who had experienced internal bias in an English police force to participate in qualitative interviews. Zempi found that the women “described an atmosphere of all-consuming sexism and misogyny. They often felt targeted because of the intersectionality of their identities, particularly in relation to their gender, race, age and physical appearance” [26, p. 39]. Women reported that existing racism and sexism prevented job mobility. Burke and Mikkelsen [27] analyzed responses to a questionnaire distributed to police officers in Norway and found that women perceived greater discrimination than men, and women reported significantly higher incidents of sexual harassment.

1.1 Theoretical framework: doing gender in policing

American sociologists West and Zimmerman [28] challenged the traditional view of gender as innate, suggesting that gender is a dynamic process that individuals perform in everyday interactions. Gender is constructed and reinforced through social interactions. They argued people are judged based on how well they conform to gendered expectations, and individuals actively negotiate these roles in institutions, such as the workplace. West and Zimmerman argued “that the ‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” [28, p. 126]. They posited that gender should be viewed as an “accomplishment” driven via interaction within institutions; thus, “reconceptualizing gender...as an integral dynamic of social orders implies a new perspective on the entire network of gender relations” [28, p. 147]. At its essence, gender is created by the humans within institutions, and social orders within which men are “doing dominance” reinforce “hierarchical arrangements” [28, p. 146]. Chan et al. argued this framework is successful in explaining “how gender is accomplished through interactions,” but the framework needs expanding to “highlight contestations and challenges to gender hierarchy” [29, p. 441]. Batton and Wright [30] utilized the “doing gender” framework to examine how the patriarchal structure impacts social roles within the criminal justice system. They argued that efforts to recruit more women may be initially successful “but will have little effect in the long term if steps are not taken to address the culture women encounter in training and the work environment that is not only masculine in orientation, but is also hostile toward women” [30, p. 22].

Do women thus need to adjust their gendered performance in order to find acceptance in policing? Paolillio [31] conducted a phenomenological study that involved interviewing 13 women in an urban police department in the Northeastern U.S. to assess their perceptions of gender bias on the job. Paolillio reported that these participants found their gender to be a liability in being respected and treated as an equal. To make their lives easier, the participants worked harder or adopted behavioral strategies to appear more masculine. Lonsway [32] examined the stagnation in the numbers of women police officers and the slow pace of progress in law enforcement by surveying sworn officers in a large agency. While progress toward inclusivity was noted, many women still reported having to “‘prove themselves’ or outperform their male colleagues to be seen as equally competent” [32, p.42]. Nonetheless, many women responded that they experienced no career barriers.

1.2 Toward greater inclusivity

If traditional constructs persist and women experience overt discrimination or perceive inequality, the recruitment of more women will be a difficult undertaking. Archbold and Schulz examined the history of women in policing in the U.S. and argued differences between male and female officers “may become less pronounced as more women enter this

traditionally male-dominated profession" [33, p. 702]. The traditional emphasis on crime fighting is being challenged with the growing focus on community policing that requires "gender-neutral" roles of collaboration and communication.

Some studies suggest an evolution of police culture that is more inclusive. White et al. [34] conducted survey analysis on New York City police officers, asking what motivated them to join the force and their job satisfaction six years on the job. They found that White male officers had the lowest job satisfaction when compared to female and minority officers. They explained this may be due to a lessening of control with the "breakdown of the traditional police subculture" [34, p. 527] as a greater influx of minority officers are hired. They thus dispelled the notion that women would likely become disenchanting and leave the profession.

Rief and Clinkinbeard [35] conducted survey research to examine the perceptions of women police officers in two Midwestern U.S. departments on fitting in with the job and compared how these perceptions aligned with those of male counterparts. They concluded that progress has been made and gender may now have little influence over organizational structures and the policing career, but it can still impact a workgroup if women experience disrespect in their immediate environment.

Rabe-Hemp [36] conducted qualitative interviews with 24 policewomen in a Midwestern U.S. state in order to explore obstacles faced and coping mechanisms used to overcome them. Rabe-Hemp reported that the women had experiences with harassment and discrimination, but almost all reported finding acceptance within an improved organizational culture. They "reported the evolution of the police culture in their respective departments including more 'enlightened' men, and the weakened 'boys club' attitude" [36, p. 263].

1.3 Purpose of the study

By exploring women's perceptions of sexism, acceptance, effectiveness, and belonging in policing, we sought to determine whether women continue to face active resistance or whether they have found their place in the male-dominated profession. If recruitment of more women in policing is a priority, breaking down perceived barriers or celebrating perceived acculturation will aid in attracting applicants.

2 Methods

This study consisted of in-depth, virtual interviews with 16 women in policing. The interviews were preceded by a demographic questionnaire and an informed consent form. The research proposal was approved, in its entirety, by the Institutional Review Board (Permit number 2021092802).

2.1 Participants

The 16 respondents were all sworn officers, working in U.S. agencies, mostly in the Northeast (75%) for an average of 12.6 years. Most were in their thirties or forties (68.8%), and the majority were White (68.8%) but five (31.2% identified as either Black or Hispanic. All participants had at least some college and over 80% had a bachelor's or graduate degree. Most were either married (43.8%) or never married (43.8%) and 56.3% had children in their home.

2.2 Data collection

Rabe-Hemp stated that one of the most difficult challenges in studying women in policing is "finding them and making initial contact" [36, p. 256]; we faced similar challenges. Initial attempts to contact supervisors at urban police departments for assistance with recruiting failed to generate participants. A few known officers welcomed the opportunity to participate. We also reached out to organizers of two U.S.-based agencies promoting the recruitment of women to policing, namely the 30×30 Initiative and TacMobility. These agencies assisted in securing a handful of additional participants. These women encouraged other women to participate, so that the sample of 16 was partially acquired via snowball sampling.

Participants were given a link to provide their informed consent before responding to a survey of demographic questions (i.e., age, race, education level, marital status, number of children, years in law enforcement, and type of shift). Once informed consent was secured, participants were emailed to request a virtual interview.

Conducting research that utilizes virtual platforms has become commonplace, and we made every effort to protect confidentiality when using Zoom videoconferencing for interviews. The virtual platform allowed interviews with police-women across the U.S. for limited cost, and we determined that Zoom videoconferencing provided security measures needed to ensure confidentiality. Archibald et al. [37] examined practitioners' perceptions of the use of Zoom for qualitative research and found while some reported connectivity and call quality issues, the benefits of convenience, user-friendliness, and the ability to establish rapport outweighed minor technical glitches. Each respondent was provided a private meeting code and password rather than a meeting code that may have been previously shared. "Waiting Rooms" were turned on to ensure control over admittance to the meeting. Participants were told that the meeting would be recorded, and that audio recordings would be saved until transcriptions were verified for accuracy. Prior to recording, participants were invited to turn off their camera and remove any names/identifiers on the screen. The "live transcription" feature was utilized in Zoom. Once the interview was complete, the audio-only recording was saved under each respondent's unique 5-digit code until the transcript could be reviewed and any errors corrected; the recordings were then deleted. Any unsolicited identifiers (e.g., names of colleagues, departments, etc.) were redacted from transcriptions.

The interview script consisted of three sets of open-ended questions that explored perceived challenges as women in policing, perceptions on the ways the profession benefits by having women, and personal paths that led them to the profession. Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 60 min. Both authors were present for every interview; if the participant was known by either of the authors, the other would conduct the interview.

2.3 Analysis

Themes emerged as the interviews were occurring and saturation was achieved. Once transcriptions were verified for accuracy, they were analyzed by two separate reviewers. Consensus agreement was established for the major themes: perceptions on overt harassment/discrimination; perceptions on performance expectations; gendered perceptions of colleagues and leaders; and perceptions on belonging in the profession. Once themes were delineated, four research questions were formulated. Finally, relevant, illustrative passages were organized under those themes with the intent to answer the questions posed.

The research questions established are:

RQ₁: How do these women describe harassment and discrimination in a male-dominated profession?

RQ₂: How do these women express confidence and/or self-doubt and pressure to "prove themselves" in order to be respected?

RQ₃: How do these women describe their place in policing?

RQ₄: In describing effective or counter-productive traits of fellow officers and leaders, in what ways are these women challenging and/or confirming gendered constructs and stereotypes?

3 Results

The findings are presented as four themes, each of which attempt to answer the posed research questions: perceptions on overt harassment/discrimination; perceptions on performance expectations; perceptions on belonging in the profession; and gendered perceptions of colleagues and leaders.

3.1 Declining harassment for newer recruits

Reports of direct harassment and unequal treatment were not as prevalent as those detailed in previous research [23–27]. Incidents of harassment and discrimination were reported more frequently by older participants, and stories of disrespect were most often set in the past. Younger participants reported instances of discrimination and harassment to a lesser extent, with two participants stating that they had never felt as though they were treated differently due to their gender. Of note, several participants reported instances of harassment and discrimination which took place during police academy training and toward the beginning of their careers.

R6: This starts from the Academy... There were people making comments about how this is a man's job and we don't belong here, and we shouldn't be able to have our own physical standards and we shouldn't be able to... stand neck and neck with someone at the range or... have the opportunity to wear the same uniform... and graduate with them because our physical standards are set differently.

Several participants relayed stories about specific academy instructors and supervisors who expressed outdated notions of women's purpose in law enforcement. One participant shared a specific account of an academy instructor, stating he would not choose a woman colleague in a dangerous situation:

R1: So in the academy we had a couple of instructors who were very clear that they did not think women belonged in police work. [Academy instructor:] "You're the weaker sex... If I have to go in and do badass things and I have to pick people, look around this room and tell me who you're taking. You're not it." We had a couple instructors say that. We had one instructor who [said], "women belong... barefoot in the kitchen."... All the women were [asked], "Why would I pick you? Why would I take you through a door? Why would I let you come with me?" And we were made in front of our classmates to answer that question and to state why.

Descriptions of harassment within assigned departments post-academy were also almost exclusively set in the past.

R3: I've been working for 15 years and... the mentality when I first started, it was really hard... There [were] some officers that felt female law enforcement were good and then there were some that were still in the old school mentality that we shouldn't be officers... I did consider leaving once. Several years ago. And that was mostly due to a lot of that "good old boy" network sticking around and being very frustrated with feelings like, no matter how hard I worked, no matter how much I did, I was never good enough. Especially according to the male counterparts that were making decisions back then. A lot of that has changed, which is what kind of made me stick around.

R14: They [male officers] did not bring me into their group at all. Like I was a permanent outsider. I spent the entire year by myself at work and by myself on calls. They wouldn't back me up because they just didn't like me. And so that hurt because I didn't know why they didn't like me. I still don't know why.

When the women were asked whether they had experienced challenges with being accepted by fellow officers because of their sex, a couple of the officers reported that they had not.

R5: I've been pretty lucky... I have... almost 15 years on and... I have been really lucky about the people that I work with and the stations I've worked at that I've never felt that way.

R9: I would probably say within my 16 years of experience, no. I am sure it exists. Me personally, I would have to say no. I had the good fortune of working with decent individuals who... saw my work ethic and appreciated that.

Somewhat surprisingly, more women reported experiencing harassment from community members than from colleagues.

R2: I would say some of the greatest challenges are dealing with some men of other cultures where you know they are typically the end all be all. They don't respect women a whole lot... So trying to get through... interviews... whether they're victims or suspects, can be challenging.

R3: Sometimes I get... "Oh, hey sweetie! Hi baby." And I'm like, "I'm not your sweetie or your baby. Like, would you call one of the male officers that?"

3.2 Reported self-doubt and need to prove belonging

While the officers did not report experiencing harassment in their current positions, similar to Lonsway's [32] findings, almost all reported experiencing self-doubt at times or needing to prove themselves in this male-dominated profession. What was not clear is whether these feelings were self-imposed and influenced by gender constructs within the institution into which they had been socialized, or whether colleagues demanded evidence of belonging. Further, this self-doubt led to questioning whether they belonged in the field.

R1: I was always given the impression that because I was a female, I had to earn my way. I had to prove that I deserved to be there. So it always felt like I had to constantly prove that I could keep up and prove that I could fight... I think one of the biggest challenges is thinking that I belong here. I doubted myself a lot, and I questioned

whether I belonged here and that caused me to look weak on the streets for a while. It caused me to look weak to my partners and people were like, 'oh man, can she actually hang?'

R4: Having in the back of my head...to not be perceived as inferior or weak is still there.

R7: Once you've proven yourself...they never treated you really any differently, but it does take a long time to prove yourself--more so than being a male officer.

R10: You have to prove yourself pretty much to people constantly, and when I started my new job I had to do it all over again.

R12: I think there's always the question of whether or not you can do the job. And just proving that you're there and you can do the job at the same level. And you are equal to your male counterparts or whoever else is on the job with you.

Participants also reported feeling as though they are held to higher standards than their male counterparts.

R11: Women in policing, their performance needs to be higher than a man's performance in order for them to have any amount of respect, and one mistake can basically tarnish their reputation...But you can have a male law enforcement [officer] that really doesn't do much, and that's just acceptable...I always feel like the women are held to a higher standard.

R14: When I see new men coming into the field, [and] how differently they're treated compared to how differently I was treated...the first thing I think of is how hard it was for me to...win everybody over and be treated just as my [male] coworkers were on day one.

R15: You have to be like these very specific headstrong, amazing women and it was like, 'Alright. That's my goal!' But the guys didn't have to do that. So yes, there were challenges for sure. You definitely have to prove yourself.

R16: You have to think smarter, think faster, think quicker, and you kind of have to do twice the amount of work to be able to be taken seriously.

3.3 Women benefit the profession

Participants were asked to share their feelings on the need for women in the profession and to comment on whether they perceived remaining in their career long-term. When asked if there is a need for women in policing, the officers unanimously and enthusiastically responded in the affirmative: "Yes!" "Absolutely!" "One hundred percent!" They all recognized what women offer the profession and the public. Most respondents reported that women have communication skills that assist in interacting with the public, including victims and those who are in crisis, similar to findings in previous research [8–10]. They explain that women and children who have been victimized, especially when the perpetrators were men, are far more comfortable speaking with women.

R6: There's been times where I've met people in their brightest moments and their darkest moments...I've been the one to be pulled to a lot of domestics...because they think that I have the patience over a male...every time there's a rape or every time there's something to do with a child. And, matter of fact, every time there was a death notification, I was the one that had to do it because they didn't have the guts to talk to parents, cry with them, hug them, console them.

R8: I wouldn't say we are more respectful but [we] are more open to listening...Sometimes it's beneficial to have a female with a female victim, because a lot of times the female victim might not want to talk to a guy, or the [male officer] might not know how to talk to a female victim because they can't relate as well...Naturally, I feel like we're more compassionate...females are necessary in policing because it's such a male dominated career, and it doesn't have to be.

R10: I actually was just dealing with a rape case...She was 15 years old and...I was there to help her...The mom was very nice to me. She said some stuff to me that actually [made me] feel really good inside...When dealing with, I guess, women that have been assaulted or children, I feel like we're better.

R11: I feel like during domestic situations, we would strategically always separate two parties and I would usually go with a female...and deal with children. I feel like...some of these male officers are enormous...tall and stocky so we're probably a little bit less intimidating to children.

R12: We have rape victim advocates and...sex crime advocates...And we have men that do it but it's predominantly women. And, you know, they're interviewing children who are victims of sex crimes...and I think they're just a little bit softer around the edges when talking to people and that's why there's more women that do it.

R15: One of the women that I talked off the bridge last year. She was abused by her husband, and there was a male negotiator talking to her and she was on the other side of the rail and hanging off. She was literally hanging off the rail...She told me, "If you didn't show up or a woman didn't show up, I would have been gone because I had no trust in men. I have no faith in men."

According to the respondents, these communication skills, which two officers referred to as "verbal judo," give them the ability to deescalate highly charged and tense situations.

R2: Our communication is able to get us to a point where I'm not actually challenged as often as some of the male officers are. I'm not perceived a threat...

R4: We're more apt to listen and try and communicate rather than jump to conclusions... sometimes men can be quick to judge and short, and they want to establish their dominance on a scene or in a situation, and that's not always a benefit to calls. You want to come in level and maintain that level headedness. If you start off high, you know people aren't going to easily come back down.

R7: I think the de-escalation techniques are better among female police officers. We have a gentler way of communicating things when tasked with it.

R10: Those times where...suspects want to fight. I feel like sometimes...as women we are able to talk to them and...they calm down a little bit. I had a domestic incident a little while ago where the dad came over to the scene and he was coming in hot and my partner was ready...I was like, "Listen, you know, we're trying to figure out what's going on." ...Eventually...me talking to him, calmed him down which was really good. I was like, "Oh, thank God."

R15: I feel like I may show up and I may be the second car on scene...I felt at times I brought a sense of calm. So there's two men with egos going back and forth, and then I'll show up and I'll go, "Hey, buddy" like, you know, with the soft, gentler voice...just me being there sometimes calmed people down.

R16: For some reason they just come down for me. They do. But I also don't go into a situation at a 10. I go in at one, because if you're down here you can go up, but if you're up here, you cannot go down.

The ability to bring calm to a scene may have the added benefit of encouraging male colleagues to maintain composure.

R1: And [my male partner] just doesn't have the tolerance, and it's actually really cool because he's told me that I've taught him to have the tolerance. He's learned to just shut up for five minutes and let me talk to people. And we don't have to fight as many of them if he'll just shut up for a minute. But his mouth will get us in trouble if he doesn't shut up.

R2: Sometimes you see officers that you know kind of lose their head because they think that they need to be... the heavy and...the alpha on the scene. That doesn't always work on every call.

R14: I tend to have to de-escalate more with the male counterpart than I do with my female counterpart. I tend to have to be like, "Whoa, Nelly" a little more with him.

Several women spoke of the need for more women in policing because they serve as role models to young girls who may see the potential of future service. Their messages to women considering the profession often mentioned the need for role models and mentors as Clinkinbeard et al. [21] and Gibbs [18] suggested.

R3: It'll be hard and there'll be days you wonder why. And there's no guarantee that you'll get in a good department...But you just have to push past because there's a little girl somewhere watching us who wants to be a police officer.

R8: Sometimes, the people won't take you seriously, but other times, people are always shocked, like "Wow, I can't believe you're a woman who's a police officer!" Or they think it's super cool, like the little girl. We sometimes walk around schools, and the little girls think it's so cool.

R12: I went and did my neighbor's granddaughter's brownie meeting the other night, and I got to meet all these little kids and give them trooper stickers. I'm like, now they're gonna see me when I drive by their school, and be like "Hey!" ...I love that stuff, so that part is fulfilling for me. I like putting a positive face to it because I think my biggest fear is that a little kid is scared of us and won't ask for help.

Several also report that the community is beginning to recognize the importance of women in policing.

R4: I've also had people that I've arrested, and have flat out told me that...they were more respectful towards me because I'm a female.

R10: And the town...People out there that are very kind to me that thank me for the service. That matters to me honestly.

Participants highlighted that, although the career is male-dominated, more women are coming into the field and taking on more leadership positions. Several women also report not only feeling a sense of belonging in the profession, but also a desire to advance into specialty or supervisory roles and to make a difference.

R1: I do intend to go into leadership and lead police officers. And I want to make a difference for our officers.

All of these women saw their place in policing and discussed ways in which their talents benefitted criminal investigations, child and juvenile work, advocacy for victims of domestic violence, serving death notifications, and deescalating and negotiating crises. Several mentioned that some of these tasks may result in career pigeonholes, but all agreed that women better the profession.

3.4 Challenging or confirming gender constructs

Part of the research examined whether participants were challenging or reaffirming gendered constructs by the ways they described effective or counter-productive traits of fellow officers and leaders. Must these women shed constructs of femininity to find acceptance, or are they able to celebrate their femininity in an evolving profession? Responses indicated they were sometimes challenged to "do gender" and had to navigate gender constructs [28].

R7: Because everything that they taught me was about not being a girl. Don't be a girl! Don't show emotion!...I would tell the women coming into this profession that they can be girls and still do this job well

The officers juggled between taking pride in achieving constructs of masculinity and defending the needed role of women and feminine constructs. They challenged the image of the crime-fighting, militaristic hero by arguing for the need to serve and advocate for the community, while also celebrating the ability to keep up with men physically. They, at times, judged women for weaknesses and, at other times, embraced more nurturing roles in leadership. They argued for their place in a male-dominated profession, challenging gender constructs, while simultaneously seeking respect for and taking pride in effectively performing these masculine roles.

Some women celebrated their performance of constructed roles of toughness when describing the physical nature of the job.

R1: It is a physical job. There are fights. There is a demand for a certain masculinity... You have to really earn the right to stay where I am [in a high-crime area]. So we, the only women we have, me and my Sergeant, come up pretty hard and pretty rough... there's not girly girls ... like, we just don't have them.

R15: I could put him in the same arm bar that the guy could.

However, some of these officers critiqued "tough" women in leadership roles, questioning if they were trying to prove something.

R7: I got along much easier with my male supervisors than I did my female supervisors, and I felt like it was because the female supervisors had to prove that they were harder so people wouldn't perceive them as soft.

R9: I actually find females to be maybe a bit tougher. I'm not really sure why. It could be more of a mentor thing where they want to push you because you're female and they want you to be the best to represent the gender, or it's just a female thing that they have something to prove because they're females.

R13: On occasion, I have found that some female bosses tend to... micromanage because they might feel a need to prove something, but I've never had a problem.

Still others found value in women leaders who were more willing to listen and more empathetic.

R4: She pretty much turned the entire department around, and it was just a warm place to be...She would have lunch with the squad...[and] always had an open-door policy...I have worked under a couple of different chiefs... it was all male command staff and they would all, for the most part, micromanage.

R8: But the female leadership, you can tell that they're more like emotion-based and are more open to communicating about things.

R11: I've worked with a female supervisor who was...very respectful...very nurturing...we didn't normally get from a male leader that nurturing aspect...She was very good at talking [and] not berating you, not talking down to you, not being condescending...she trusted you with a gun and a badge.

R12: Females do a better job talking to you...I think they do a better job of addressing the problem, kind of, keeping it isolated as to like, "Hey, here's what's going on..." and talking to you a little bit more...male bosses you more [often get] the nasty email [that] will kind of address everyone...instead of like, just talk to me if you have a problem with what's going on.

Similarly, when asked if partners performed differently based on sex, respondents wrestled with determining effectiveness based on gendered constructs and valuing the socio-emotional nature of women. For example, at times, respondents critiqued fellow women officers and partners for lacking assertiveness while male counterparts were critiqued for being too assertive.

R5: It's like the women can be a little bit more reserved and less...wanting to go out there and really get into things. The guys that I've worked with...they're like go-getters.

R6: The female partners I've had have been a little timid and they've been a little scared to do things like speak up for themselves or take control of the scene...the male partners seem to be more comfortable because it is a male environment most of the time

R8: Sometimes the guys will try to like prove something. Prove they're the alpha.

Critiquing the assertiveness of men was especially apparent when these officers spoke of the value of women's communication styles and empathy.

R3: I also think it's part of being a female officer. We have a better ability to communicate most of the time, so our communication is able to get us to a point where I'm not actually challenged as often as some of the male officers are. I am not perceived as a threat.

R6: It's actually been rewarding being a female in this job because the empathy and the emotions actually go a long way when there's a high stress situation, versus too much testosterone or too much ego.

R10: Females I feel like they're more like, "Okay, let's talk and figure things out and not get hurt." ...I mean you want to come home to your family...I think...men are more hands on and females are more like, "Okay, let's talk. Let's figure things out."

R1: So is it masculine or feminine? ...Females do tend towards the empathic. Females do tend toward the ability to talk and listen better...

What also emerged was the recognition and frustration with gendered constructs that were perhaps more difficult to challenge because they were so engrained in the culture.

R3: My male counterparts always feel like they have to protect me a little bit more. And I think that's more of just the fact that I'm a female not because the type of person I am. [They'll] say, "Well, we know you can handle [it on] your own." But at the end of the day they do kind of, I think, protect me a little bit more than they would each other.

R8: When people first meet you, like the other male officers...they don't trust you as much to do your own thing. And it's pretty obvious when they question things that you do or the choices that you're going to make on a call.

R15: I'm a vocal person...If I go against anything that someone says, it becomes, "Oh, here she goes with her attitude," or, "...She's PMS-ing or she's emotional." I put them in their place but it's difficult sometimes to have to constantly do that...My partner, I call him the king of oppositional defiance, and he is like the dissenting voice on everything and it's just like, "Oh, that's just how he is." But the moment I do it it's like, "Oh, she has a bad attitude."

Some women expressed concern that these gender constructs often result in getting assigned tasks that provide compassionate social services, thereby limiting specialized opportunities and promotions. Participants explained that more women are in crisis negotiations, investigations of sexual assaults, and serving death notices.

R1: A lot of women tend toward detective work. Sexual assault—places where you need to do good interviews, where you need to be able to sit and be patient with someone's pain...I struggle because I don't like that women get stuck in these little places.

One woman summed up the pigeonholing concern simply:

R7: We're always handed the children.

4 Discussion

With growing determination to increase women's representation in law enforcement, it is essential to examine progress made and barriers that prevent full assimilation into the profession. The purpose of this study was to examine whether these women faced discrimination and pressures to prove their belonging, or if they have carved out a place for themselves in the male-dominated career. In-depth, qualitative interviews with sixteen women revealed that progress has been made in policing, but perceptions of needing to "prove" themselves and adopt role constructs persist.

When asked about challenges with finding acceptance because of their sex, no respondent reported being the victim of overt harassment or discrimination from work colleagues in their current departments. Two officers reported never having experienced mistreatment, and the few stories of harassment that were relayed were almost exclusively set in the past. Rabe-Hemp similarly reported that among the women she interviewed, serious obstacles faced also "occurred early in their careers" [36, p. 265]. Several in the current study did report incidents of harassment from community members; however, their own departments seemed mostly accepting. Whether this signals evolving inclusivity is unclear, especially when these women do express the continuing need to "prove themselves."

Most of the women described initial periods of having to prove they belonged in the profession, and several officers experienced self-doubt. Lonsway [32] similarly noted that women in law enforcement report no career barriers while the ongoing need for women to prove themselves persists. This "proof" and self-doubt was most often related to perceived physical ability, especially due to their reported smaller statures. What is unclear is whether the demands to prove themselves are self-imposed and a product of constructed images of police as powerful crime fighters, or whether these demands are imposed by colleagues and supervisors as a product of covert or overt sexism. When respondents were asked what advice they would give women, the overriding theme was to focus on physical fitness so they "can keep up with the guys physically" (*R12*). Diaz and Nuno [38] surveyed undergraduate criminal justice majors in a university in Southern California to examine the likelihood of pursuing policing as a career. While over half of the female respondents expressed interest in the career, those who felt the most physically capable were the most likely to want to pursue the career. Despite the fact that physical fitness standards do not predict successful job performance [2, 17], if the message to prospective women applicants is they need to prove themselves by "preparing their bodies" (*R4*), they may be discouraged.

All of these police officers affirmed that they have carved out their place in policing, and strongly argued for the need for more women. They celebrated empathetic and calming communication styles that benefit people in crisis and help de-escalate highly charged situations. They recognized the importance of serving as role models for children, especially girls. Many of the women seek advancement and argue, as Garcia [25] did, that a greater representation of women is needed in leadership, and most see themselves remaining in law enforcement until retirement. Raganella and White [20] recognized that those who see the potential for advancement may be more inclined to pursue the career.

Finding belonging in the profession is not without challenges, as these women demonstrated the struggles with adopting traditional gender constructs. Perhaps the reconceptualization of gender is occurring via interaction between men and women in policing as gendered hierarchies are being challenged [28]. Some women took pride in role performance that "kept up with" or outperformed men. Most women highlighted advanced communication skills, greater empathy, and support for community policing efforts that both address and prevent the need for crime fighting. Many expressed that the aggression of male officers is often counter-productive, perhaps in the act of "undoing gender" [39].

A contradiction emerged when some viewed the assertiveness of women, especially leaders, as detrimental and attempts to "prove something," while more timid and nurturing women colleagues, especially fellow officers, were seen as weak. Women in policing, especially those seeking leadership, may be challenged to find that balance, not appearing too tough or too weak, in order to get respect. Garcia argued, "If a woman acts too feminine, she is criticized for not being suitable for the job. However, if she acts too masculine, she is criticized for not acting like a woman...they are damned if they do and damned if they don't" [25, p. 341]. Thus, while it appears that these women continue to navigate their gender performance, they do express belonging in the profession and a need for greater representation.

These findings are not without limitations. The experiences of 16 officers in mostly large, urban departments may not reflect the larger population. Women in smaller departments may face greater pressures and unique challenges.

Furthermore, the sample included women who successfully assimilated into the profession; while we achieved saturation of themes, without interviewing women who left the profession, we cannot assume these experiences are true for all women who enter policing. Extensive efforts were made to protect confidentiality, but self-reported data remains subjective. The personal accounts were, nonetheless, compelling and offer evidence that greater representation of women is needed, and greater inclusivity is being realized.

There is an increasing need and commitment to recruit more women in policing. These women expressed a growing sense of belonging in a profession that is dominated by men. Their skillsets are valued, and while they may feel challenged to prove themselves to male counterparts, evidence of overt harassment is minimal. The present police reform climate champions new officer skillsets which challenge the traditional imagery of the police officer role, yet parallels the self-perceived skills and abilities of women in this study and in similar studies. Recruitment efforts (e.g., career fairs, marketing plans, and mentorships) should include the voices of women to offer true accounts of both challenges and advancements toward greater inclusivity. Tailoring recruitment efforts and sharing the voices of women who have found belonging can attract more women, ultimately benefitting police agencies in a multitude of ways, including bolstering police-community relationships, improving service outcomes, and advancing the profession in positive directions.

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Appendix

Interview transcript

The first few questions ask about your perceived challenges as a woman in policing.

Have you experienced challenges with being accepted by fellow officers because of your sex?

Do you feel at greater risk when dealing with those suspected of a crime because of your sex?

Are you treated differently by the public you serve because of your sex?

What are the greatest challenges in being a woman in this profession?

Have you worked with both male and female leadership? If so, what were the differences in their styles?

Have you worked with both male and female partners? If so, what were the differences in their styles?

Will you remain in law enforcement and retire as a police officer?

What could happen that would make you consider leaving the profession?

Have recent events made you reconsider your career path?

The second set of questions ask you to share your perceptions on the ways that the profession benefits by having female officers.

Is there a need for women in policing? Explain.

How do women best contribute to the profession?

In your opinion, are there aspects of policing that women, in general, are better suited for?

Do you think that you are sent to specific types of calls based on your gender?

Can you suggest any strategies for navigating turbulent times in policing?

The final questions ask you to share your own experience in policing.

How did you get into policing? Was it a long-term aspiration or a stumble?

How does policing benefit you personally?

What would you tell other women who may be considering a career in policing?

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