

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Women in Law Enforcement**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Women within the field of law enforcement are still under-represented. Even though the role of women in policing has evolved, there remain obstacles that adversely affect the number of women entering the arena of law enforcement. There are several factors that continue to influence the number of women in policing. This paper examines the ideas that women are not as competent as men, are incapable of doing the job, and adversely affect agencies when combining career with family.

Information on this subject was gathered from a variety of sources. There has been a good deal of research and several studies completed on this topic. In addition to the research and studies, information and statistics were gathered from internet sites and articles.

As different as women are from men, so are their styles of policing. These differences can enhance the agency's ability to respond effectively to the demographics of its community. Agencies should positively utilize the diversity that females offer in policing instead of using those factors to impede them. As a way to positively impact the culture and operational efficiency of law enforcement agencies, increase the community's trust in police officers, and enhance the value of the police officer and the profession, agencies should recognize the benefits of having female police officers in law enforcement.

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of women in policing has undeniably evolved since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the beginning of the first police model, the traditional role of police officer consisted exclusively for men. Initially viewed as a role requiring large stature, strength, and brawn, policing was looked upon as a job that could only be performed by a man. Females were first introduced in non-traditional roles, such as prison and jail “matrons,” and primarily handled female and juvenile offenders in custody. By the mid 1800s, police “matrons” were a common feature for that purpose. Social and welfare work was viewed as tasks to be handled by women, and when women began working in prison and jails, matrons in cities and towns brought social services into the police stations (Schulz, 1995).

Women did not become a true part of the system of policing until the 1900s. There is some controversy as to who was considered to be the first female police officer to enter law enforcement. Most noted in the research found was Alice Stebbins Wells, who reportedly joined the Los Angeles Police Department as an appointed officer in 1910. Wells was not permitted to perform police functions out in the field and was appointed to work with women and children (Wells & Alt, 2005).

The jobs in the police profession remained limited for women until 1964, with the passing of the Civil Rights Act (Senna & Siegel, 1999). This bill was introduced by President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and after passage in both houses of Congress; it was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2, 1964. Significant to women was the provision of the bill that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race in hiring, promoting, and firing. Further support of this act was an

amendment passed in 1972 by Congress, which expanded equal opportunities for females in the areas of local, state, and federal public positions (Felkenes & Unsinger, 1992).

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the expansion of Title VII in 1972, the opportunity was created for women to be assigned to work routine patrol (Senna & Siegel, 1999). Additionally, it afforded females the ability to push for more diversified assignments and attempt to promote up the ranks. Over the past 20 years, more women have entered policing, even expanding their roles into the administrative arena (Greene, 2003). However, the number of women in law enforcement is still at a relatively low level. In the early 1970s, only a small percentage of women were police officers. In 2001, the number of women in large agencies was represented as 12.7% of all sworn law enforcement positions; in small and rural agencies, it was 8.1%; and it was 14.4% within the federal agencies (Lonsway, Moore, Harrington, Smeal, & Spillar, 2003).

Policing and the current role of the law enforcement officer are much different now than from the 1900s. Taking that into account, coupled with societal changes, policing now necessitates a different workforce. What once was a profession of force and authority is now moving to a more community and service-oriented profession. The composition of the officers of any law enforcement agency must reflect the communities in which they serve. This enables agencies to establish and maintain better relationships with the community. As a way to positively impact the culture and operational efficiency of law enforcement agencies, increase the community's trust in

police officers, and enhance the value of the police officer and the profession, agencies should recognize the benefits of having female police officers in law enforcement.

## **POSITION**

Beliefs, perceptions, and cultural views contribute to the idea that women are unable to carry out the functions of police work. The roles of women and the jobs that can be performed by them are also formed from these same beliefs and cultures. As an occupation deemed to require masculine qualities, women were not considered to possess the capabilities needed for police work (Carlin & McMullan, 2009). Results from a number of evaluations conducted suggest that men and women are equally capable of successfully performing the functions of a patrol officer (Martin & Jurik, 1996).

In 1974, a year-long comparison of the performance between men and women working patrol in Washington, D.C. “concluded that sex was not a bona fide occupational requirement for effective performance” (Felknes & Unsinger, 1992, p. 76). Women have shown that they are fully capable of carrying out the fundamental duties of law enforcement, including enforcing the law and maintaining order. With the difference in gender, women bring unique capabilities and perspectives to policing. Women bring to the profession the traits and ideals associated with community policing, which emphasizes communicating with citizens and the community, problem-solving, and building partnerships between officers and the community (Horne, 2006).

Education has been indicated to be an area where women excel over their male peers (Lonsway et al., 2003). This, along with the current success of women in law enforcement, indicates that most females are mentally and physically equipped for the

job and further support the reality that female officers are proven to be as competent as male officers. Research does show an increase in citizen support and an increase in the amount of respect for female officers (Police Research Foundation, 1990).

Female police officers are also less likely to use excessive force. Women make use of a different approach to policing, which enables them to rely less on physical force (Lonsway, Carrington, et al., 2002). The ability to remain calm along with communication and mediation skills are just a few of the many characteristics women bring to law enforcement. By making use of communications skills in order to de-escalate situations, physical force is more likely to be used as a last resort (McCamey, 2000).

Additionally, women tend to act less aggressively and are less likely to be confrontational, opting for communication over physical force. This is not to say that women are reluctant to use force, it is just that they are less likely to use excessive force. McCamey (2000) cited that no matter the gender, "The more skilled at communicating, the more effectively the police officer serves the public" (p. 51). The ability to remain calm while making use of effective verbal and mediation skills can contribute to any officer's capability in defusing violent situations.

Data comprised through research pertaining to citizen complaints illustrated that "the average male officer is two to three times more likely than the average female officer to have a citizen name him in a complaint of excessive force" (Lonsway, Wood, et al., 2002, p. 2). Women are more likely to use negotiative skills to talk someone down as an alternative to resorting to use of force options such as TASER or Oleoresin Capsicum spray. Due to this, female police officers are apt to be more effective at

defusing potentially violent situations. This offers support to the initiative of hiring more women, which could reduce issues involving excessive use of force. This is essential for any agency to take into account, particularly in relation to the high cost of lawsuits that are brought about every year. With the avoidance of excessive use of force by police officers, citizens are less likely to be abused and there is less civil liability for departments.

Statistics of reporting rates pointed out that domestic violence is one of the most underreported crimes (Horne, 2006). The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NADV) (2007) reported that when it comes to physical assault by an intimate partner, an estimated 1.3 million of the victims are women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003). Women comprise of 85% of the reported victims of domestic violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief, 2003). Believing that a male officer will side with the perpetrator or just not help can be reasons for female domestic violence victims to not call police.

Women have a highly developed interest in human relationships and display more empathy. Studies have demonstrated that females, who have a greater support for the principles of community policing, respond more effectively to cases of domestic violence (Lonsway, Wood, et al., 2002; Homant & Kennedy, 1983). From this there has been some indication by battered women that more concern and understanding was shown by female officers. An increase in the number of women handling these calls will not only encourage female victims to make the report, but can enhance the agency's ability to respond effectively to domestic violence against women. By increasing the reports of domestic violence against females, existing resources can be



made available to assist the victim in leaving the relationship. This, in turn, can help reduce the exposure to children who might witness the abuse. It is not uncommon for children who witness domestic violence to become abused as well (NCDIV, 2007). Additionally, children who learn the abusive behavior may have a higher probability of becoming an abuser themselves.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

With the image of women as being passive, weak, and unable to handle themselves in physical situations, so goes the belief that women lack the ability to physically carry out the duties involved in policing. Physical strength has traditionally been considered a necessary skill in police work. However, although certain police assignments may hold a greater possibility of danger than others, the majority of police work is non-violent. Research findings suggested that “female officers are no more likely than male officers to have violence used against them in police-citizen encounters” (Rabe-Hemp & Schuck, 2007, p. 10).

With the focus on physical strength versus physical fitness or agility, females are deemed inadequate. In the past, physical testing standards created a barrier for women wanting to enter the police profession (Gaines, Falkenberg, & Gambino, 1993). Most of these physical ability tests focused on physical strength and endurance, eliminating most female candidates. However, physical ability testing should be job-related, measuring the physical requirements considered necessary to perform the job (Gaines et al., 1993).

The lack of upper body strength is a disadvantage for most women in apprehending a subject or when physically defending one self. Defensive tactics are a

fundamental part of an officers' training but some situations will still require a reliance on strength and muscle. In lieu of relying on physical force, women who are properly trained in use of force options can utilize other resources to deal with a violent situation. The availability of batons, pepper spray, or a TASER provides a host of options to any officer when facing the need to subdue a subject.

Size has always been considered when taking into account the physical traits essential for working in law enforcement. Being small has been regarded as another disadvantage for women. However, smaller size is actually a tactical advantage. Being small allows for better use of cover and concealment. Women also tend to be more flexible, and this allows for more options during movement and cover (Grant, 2007).

The issue of equipment and uniforms no longer presents an issue pertaining to the size and physical ability of women. Uniforms and body armor are now made specifically for women. Vehicles can be purchased with height adjustable seats which is favorable for officers that are not tall. Handguns are now designed specifically to accommodate officers with medium or small hands.

With the increase in the number of women in law enforcement and many entering the field at a young age, the matter of starting a family forces the officer and agencies to contend with the issue of pregnancy in policing. Views on this matter are that pregnancy compromises police operations and places a burden on other officers. The federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978) protects women from discrimination, but it does not require an agency to offer light duty assignments. Some agencies adopt policies that provide light duty assignments only to officers injured on the job. This

forces female officers to expend all vacation and sick time during the pregnancy, possibly leaving no time left to recover after childbirth and having to be on unpaid leave.

Undoubtedly, there are job functions involved in police work that creates risks and pose hazards during pregnancy. But being pregnant does not mean an officer is no longer capable of performing some police functions. Depending on the size of the agency, there are numerous areas in which a pregnant officer could be utilized. Assignments in training, investigations, or handling citizens complaints by telephone are just some duties that officers could be assigned. A benefit to the department is that it allows able-bodied officers to continue to work and diminishes the negative impact of pregnancy.

As policing slowly moves from being a male-dominated profession, agencies must realize that when it comes to biology, officers are not equal. Providing light duty assignments to women when pregnant does not fall within the realm of illness or injury and can cause resentment. Agencies should consider light duty options for all officers with any injury or illness, but with time limits. This would give officers a set period of time and permit them to work in light duty assignments. At the end of that time, if the officer is unable to return to full duty functions, then they would be required to take leave.

In an effort to retain qualified female officers, family related issues such as pregnancy must be regarded as significant. Agencies should strongly consider putting in place a light duty policy that allows for assignments to be made during pregnancy. By doing this, an agency can create a supportive work environment in an effort to reduce the number of women who leave policing due to pregnancy.

## **CONCLUSION**

Law enforcement agencies must recognize the importance and benefits of having female police officers. As times are changing and women no longer play a secondary role to men in certain professions. Women are becoming more accepted in the law enforcement profession not only by the community but by other fellow officers. The current number of female police officers and those presently entering the profession illustrates the desire and ability of women to work in the field of law enforcement.

Instead of comparing female police officers to male police officers, the question ought to be asked whether or not the female can do the job of a police officer. Agencies should make the most of the differences and strengths women bring to this line of work and use it to their advantage. Disparity between male and female officers can hinder an agency's ability to effectively respond to the needs of the community. Although women are still under represented by law enforcement agencies, their status in law enforcement has slowly but surely increased, mainly due to the fact that women officers have demonstrated their capability in performing various police tasks.

Recent events clearly support the fact that females are as competent as males. On November 5, 2009, when a gunman opened fire on a military base in Fort Hood, Texas, Sergeant Kimberly Munley was one of the first responders on scene (Hylton, 2009). Having been trained in intensive active-shooter scenarios, she entered the building and engaged the suspect. Wounded in the exchange, her actions have been attributed to the prevention of a higher number of casualties.

Adequate equipment and training are imperative for the success of females in policing. Providing training to fit the individual rather than treating all officers the same

is essential in ensuring that women obtain the physical skills necessary to perform successfully. By doing this, agencies address not only areas of concern related to females but also address males who may have similar weaknesses, such as physical abilities and passiveness.

An implementation of a favorable light duty policy for pregnant female officers eliminates the burden that is placed on an agency as well as the officer. It would allow women to become parents without having to compromise their careers. The contributions that are provided to the law enforcement profession by females are lost when the officer is forced to choose between parenthood and the profession. Utilization of the officer in other areas promotes a supportive work environment for the pregnant officer along with the personnel in that area. In closing, agencies should strive to implement strategies to recruit, hire, and retain more female police officers.

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