

**The Bill Blackwood
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The Challenges Faced by Women Law Enforcement Officers

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ABSTRACT

The profession of Law Enforcement (LE) is struggling to redefine itself in the changing political and social climate of the 21st century. Amid the plethora of challenges facing the profession is the fight to draw representation from women to participate and advance in the profession. While all LE officers entering and advancing in the profession face challenges, women have the added obstacles of sexual harassment, lack of mentoring, being immersed in a male dominated culture, and tokenism. These identified barriers, although difficult, can be addressed through a conscious and unified effort of mentoring programs, specialized training for women and participation by LE women in professional organizations geared toward the uniqueness of their role in the profession.

Although most law enforcement leaders recognize the obvious gender imbalance in the profession, opponents argue that providing women with specialized training and mentoring may, in fact, reinforce the notion that women are not ready for a career in a field dominated by men. Questions of why portions of already slim budgets should be dedicated to such a small percentage of the work force are raised. However, future driven leaders recognize the potential cost of not addressing the barriers women face, both to LE agencies and their communities. Progressive LE agencies and communities should strive to offer a variety of programs to assist with recruitment and advancement of female law enforcement officers. These programs will benefit the women officers and the communities they serve because of the unique strengths and perspective women bring to the profession.

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INTRODUCTION

As the law enforcement profession continues to adapt and evolve, the face of most law enforcement agencies is changing to be more representative of the local communities police are sworn to protect and serve. Law enforcement (LE) careers are transitioning from “vocational” occupations to “professional” careers. This transitional change includes an increased number of minorities and women seeking participation in the law enforcement profession. However, women continue to be underrepresented in the field and even less-represented in the upper ranks of the profession. While other professions originally considered to be male dominated have made significant strides in assimilating women, law enforcement as a whole, continues to be a field dominated by men. Although women make up almost 46% of the working population, those women in law enforcement typically represent 13% of the workforce, according to the National Center for Women and Policing (National Center for Women and Policing, nd). The small representation of women in LE careers is additionally dismal for those in leadership positions, with only 1-5% (Sam Houston State University, 2010) occupying positions as executives.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that women have not found their way, proven their value, and excelled in the profession. In fact, much has been documented regarding the value of women in law enforcement. Women tend to have communications styles more in line with today’s philosophy of community oriented policing. Also, women officers are less likely to face excessive use of force complaints than male officers (Spiller, 2015), and women have the ability to deal more productively with incidents of domestic violence, which make up a great percentage of calls for

service (Bushway, 2006a). Additionally, much has been documented to dispel the myths that suggest women are not suited for careers in law enforcement. Pure physical size and strength are no longer the prerequisite due to the transformational change LE is experiencing.

This transformation includes utilizing positive communication, emotional intelligence and problem solving abilities rather than brute force or intimidation for solutions. Oliver and Lagucki stated that, "It has been suggested that the world of law enforcement has enough people to knock down doors-what is needed may be more of a different kind of officer" (2012, p. 74). The different kind of officer is one whose interpersonal skills are as tuned as their tactical skills. Progressive LE agencies recognize the value women play in all the ranks of their department, but must take an active role in identifying barriers that prevent women from achieving their aspirations. Barriers include sexual harassment issues, male dominated culture, organizational structure and tokenism (Grace, 2012). Also included in these barriers is the recognition that women lack the encouragement and mentoring needed to create an environment conducive to success and advancement. Progressive law enforcement agencies who wish to improve recruitment, retention and advancement of female police officers, should have mentoring programs and encourage participation in specialized training and professional organizations aimed at helping females tackle barriers found in the male dominated culture.

POSITION

As the law enforcement profession steadily moves towards acknowledgment as a career worthy of respect and recognition, a struggle has quietly played out hindering the

profession. This struggle is to have adequate representation from women at all ranks of the profession. The antiquated thinking pervasive until relatively recently that women are not suited for the physically demanding job requirements has been proven wrong. Although the argument that women do not possess the physical strength to effectively perform the job is a constant argument point, strength and size have not been shown to be indicative of failure or success in handling perilous situations (Woosley, 2010). The tools and training used in today's policing have helped level the playing field because training and tactics being taught are effective for both men and women (D'Arelli, 2014). Women have not only demonstrated the ability to tackle the physical aspects of the job, they are proving to have skills and characteristics unique to their gender that substantiate the advantage of their presence in the profession. D'Arelli says "A woman's ability to effectively communicate and solve problems in ways that differ from men offers an opportunity for them to make a significant contribution" (2014, p. 15-16).

Many progressive police departments advocate the idea of community oriented policing, a theory that stresses the involvement of community members in protecting their communities by establishing relationships between community members and police officers. This relationship works to identify issues and engage in problem solving techniques to alleviate the problems. Women are communicators and problem solvers. As D'Arelli said, "Possessing skills related to building better community relations also includes that women respond more effectively to incidents of violence against women and juveniles" (as cited in Comeau & Klofas, 2010). Domestic violence and calls related to relationship conflict comprise a great percentage of calls for service (Tuomey & Jolly, 2009).

The acceptance of the value of women in the profession of law enforcement has not equated to a rush of women being represented in the profession. Conversely, participation of females entering the profession, although risen slightly, has waivered in recent years. In the article, *Challenges for Women in Policing* (2010), Woosley said, "It was predicated by researchers in the late 1980's that by the turn of the 21st century, the number of women in law enforcement would reach nearly 50% of the workforce. Those predictions never materialized" (2010, p. 7). The failure of the profession to have a more equitable representation is likely the result of the barriers women must overcome, rather than the inability to do the job. Documented barriers for women in policing include sexual harassment and gender discrimination, family work life balance, fear of tokenism and lack of mentors (Baisich, 2008; Grace, 2012)

Inappropriate sexual comments, gestures and suggestions, and negative comments regarding women leading to the harassment of female officers continues to be a barrier reported by female police officers. Bushway (2006b) suggested, "The fear of being sexually harassed is believed to be a major reason why females don't pursue careers in law enforcement" (2006b, p.1). Additionally, those women in law enforcement who experience sexual harassment or negative attitudes are often reluctant to report such incidents, recognizing that such complaints can lead to extreme isolation from their peers and be a serious detriment to careers. Some women take the alternative to resign rather than face the imposed emotional and psychological punishments (Grace, 2012).

Another barrier women in law enforcement face is tokenism. The token concept can be defined as the few among many, or as described by Archbold and Schulz,

“groups as those in which there were a large preponderance of one type over another, which she defined as a ratio of approximately 85:15” (2008, p. 52). Therefore, tokenism is described as the act of doing something such as assigning a person belonging to a minority group to a position only to give the appearance that everyone is treated fairly. Obviously, tokenism is seen as a negative concept by many women in law enforcement, who want to be judged by their ability rather than their gender. The desire is so strong to fight the notion of being thought of as the token female that women officers have reject coveted positions or as Baisich says, “feel the need to prove themselves every day, regardless of their level of rank or success” (2008, p. 28). The desire to set themselves apart from stereotypical beliefs is often reinforced when newly hired female officers lack full acceptance by their male counterparts until they have proven themselves, a requirement not expected of newly hired male officers (Crooke, 2013). The fear of tokenism extends to the promotional process as well. Female officers who do not feel accepted as patrol officers may feel the lack of support will continue upon promotion (Archbold & Schulz, 2008). The lack of support and higher expectations are extended to other areas of the job, such as maintaining work and home equilibrium.

Female law enforcement officers often face a different set of expectations than their male counterparts. The double standard can cause stress and anxiety for the woman officer. As expressed by a female officer with Phoenix PD with regard to taking time off to care for her children, “And as a woman it’s expected I do it to take care of them or I am a bad mom, but then they say I can’t be counted on because I drop everything to take care of my kids” (Baisich, 2008, p. 29). It is a no win situation for women officers. Promotions or movement to coveted units or assignments are difficult

decisions because these career decisions are not conducive to family responsibilities (Baisich, 2008). Where families often accept sacrifices for career advancement for men, the opposite expectation is placed on women to sacrifice career for family.

The final barrier to be discussed is that women law enforcement officers lack mentors and role models to help navigate through the difficulties of being a few among many. Smaller departments, who typically have fewer females, may not have women in leadership positions or enough women to mentor newly hired females. Another phenomenon is that some female officers view other women as competition. Although they face similar barriers and struggles, they are unwilling to associate with other female officers. Baisich explains, "You'd think that women would band together, but in an effort to make their own name they often sabotage other female officers' careers" (2008, p. 29). A lack of camaraderie or even adversarial feeling among female officers reinforces the barrier.

To summarize, female law enforcement officers have proven their value and importance in the field but face numerous barriers hindering their growth and advancement in the profession. To combat the problems and increase the number of women entering the field and advancing to leadership positions, progressive law enforcement agencies should offer a variety of programs to assist female officers in achieving success. The results of such effort will prove beneficial to the female officer, and just as importantly, to the law enforcement agencies and communities they serve. The programs can be either formal or informal one-on-one mentoring relationships, participation in formal organizations, or attendance at conferences/training seminars designed specifically for women in the profession.

Traditional one-on-one mentoring is the first connotation that comes to mind when envisioning a mentoring program. Mentoring explained by Oliver and Lagucki as, “one with experience teaches, advises, and shares wisdom with the one who hopes to hold the same or similar position of the more experienced individual” (2012, p. 76). Having the ability to discuss obstacles and listen to the experiences, good and bad, of someone who has gone before can assist the female in navigating the challenges and pitfalls many women face when immersed in the male dominated culture.

The mentoring can take place with a formal program, described by Grace and Petras as, “designed and incorporated by leadership and management into the organization’s daily operations through administrative action” (2014, p. 43). These programs are typically very structured, include training for the mentor and mentored and supported by written policy. Grace and Petras describe informal mentoring as, “occurs by happenstance and through the development of informal friendships within the workplace” (2014, p. 43). These friendships usually lack formal goals or objectives and simply navigate towards a supportive and mutually beneficial relationship. Both formal and informal mentoring relationships have the potential for providing encouragement and direction for the female officer, but some women find there are no available mentors at their agency to serve in this capacity. Those wishing to find understanding, direction and advice may find support through professional organizations or training geared towards the challenges women face.

Several organizations geared specifically towards women in law enforcement provide education, training, support and career planning. A few of these organizations include: National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives (NAWLEE), The

International Association of Women Police (IAWP) and The National Center for Women Policing (NCWP). Woman lacking the personal one-on-one mentoring relationship can take advantage of the opportunities of being a member of these or similar organizations. Although not as personal as the one on one relationship, it creates an opportunity to find a similar relationship with other members of the organization.

Finally, the number of seminars and training opportunities geared towards women in law enforcement has grown in recent years. These opportunities vary in scope but typically focus on addressing the needs of women in the male dominated field, enabling networking opportunities, and providing leadership training and enhancement. Two such programs, Women's Leadership Institute (WLI) with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the Leadership Inventory of Female Executives (LIFE) with the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) offer intense week-long courses designed to provide women law enforcement officers the opportunities described above and a chance to spend a week not being the token or minority. Women law enforcement officers who take advantage of the training programs, professional organizations or one-on-one mentoring programs take an active role in pushing through barriers that have traditionally hindered their law enforcement careers.

COUNTER POSITION

Female-centered programs such as one-on-one mentoring programs, membership in professional organizations, and education/training highlighting growth and personal reflection are not without opposition. One could argue that programs offered exclusively for female officers reinforce biases that women officers are not cut

out for the job. Additionally, the cost of developing such programs or sending female officers to week long training can be taxing on already slim budgets. Less tangible costs for mentoring programs are high as well, including time provided by the mentor and time associated with developing and maintaining formal programs. Also, justifying such expenditures may be difficult considering not all mentoring programs are successful. As stated in an article written by Eby, Durley, Evans, and Ragins, "While typically viewed as a mutually enriching experience, there is a growing recognition that relational problems can exist in mentoring" (2008, p. 358). In fact, opponents of mentoring programs believe the financial cost of developing such programs and the possibility of negative mentoring experiences could outweigh possible benefits.

Formal mentoring requires time and money to develop programs to meet the needs of the protégé. Grace and Petras advise in a successful mentoring program, "Prospective mentors receive mentor training and are educated on the role mentoring will serve within the organization and how to serve as an effective mentor" (2014, p. 43). One would have to expect that training be mandatory to assure participants have a clear understanding of the mission and goals of the program and for mentors to understand their role in the relationship.

Not only is there monetary cost with such training, there is also an expenditure of time and energy on the mentor and the program administrator. In a financial atmosphere where police agencies and employees are expected to do more with less financial support, the question of where to spend the highly valued commodity of time must be answered. Even informal mentoring programs have to weigh the cost of time and energy on the valued employee, the mentor.

The mere suggestion of a mentoring relationship usually conjures positive notions of a mutually satisfying relationship where the protégée receives advice and encouragement from a selfless and giving mentor in order that the inexperienced person can succeed and grow. Unfortunately, the complexity of the relationship can create ethical issues that can be detrimental to the careers of both the protégée and mentor. These issues include power, access and cultural replication (Adeniji, 2012). As previously stated, the mentor/mentee relationship is complicated dyad and the very nature of the relationship creates a power differential. Adeniji said the “mentor has a responsibility to prevent potential ethical abuses of power, which is reflective in the mentor’s knowledge and experience” (as cited Darwin, 2000). The results of abuses of power can be inappropriate relationships of a personal nature, one in which there is an over dependence on the mentor or that of the using the protégée for mentor’s own needs or gains.

Next, access to mentoring is another concern in the mentoring relationship. As explained, women are underrepresented in law enforcement. The pool of potential female mentors available for the newly hired female officer or female officers aspiring to leadership roles will likely be reflective of shortage of females in the profession. Men can enter into a mentoring relationship with female officers but the cross gender differences are other obstacles to overcome. Consequently, the number and appropriateness of male officers mentoring female officers may also prove to be barriers.

A third and final ethical concern for discussion is what Darwin (2000) describes as, a “mentoring relationship is a means of ensuring that mentoree learn how to fit into

the corporate culture, thereby resulting in the maintenance of existing power structure as these hierarchical relationships perpetuate the status quo” (as cited in Adeniji, 2011, 723). In other words, sometimes in an effort to support the career advancement of women, these programs can actually reinforce the male dominance (Williams, Kilanski, & Muller, 2014). In an effort to assimilate into the culture, women go along to get along, adopting the traits and characteristics of the male dominated culture, encouraged by the mentor because it proved beneficial for her. Encouraging this assimilation, failure to proactively address the other ethical concerns of mentoring, and neglecting to plan for the expenditure of mentoring programs will assure the failure of programs designed to create a positive change in the representation of females in the law enforcement profession.

Another financial concern, besides the cost of mentoring programs, is associated with the expenditure of sending female officers to attend formal training dedicate to only a small minority population of the police force. Although training geared specifically for women to address their unique issues and experiences sounds progressive and positive in theory, it is costly. Law enforcement agencies with a limited training budget must consider the appearance of spending significant portions of the per officer training budget on a course identified for training not typically identified as police related, such as tactical training, investigative techniques and/or those courses required by state license. The benefit must be apparent and agencies must consider that just 13% (Crooke, 2013) or less of their workforce receives the benefit.

On the other hand, the negatives outlined above can be combated with a systematic approach to address the potential pitfalls, leading to successfully creating

various alternatives to improve female representation in the field. The most simplistic approach to address the concern of budgetary constraints to implementing mentoring programs, and/or encouraging female officers' participation in career planning and leadership training is a cost benefit analysis of not having such programs within law enforcement agencies. The cost of recruiting, training and potentially losing valued employees is a significant burden financially, on human resources and the amount of time it takes to replace the employee. Sending female officers to week long career and leadership training, although expensive, is not more costly than similar length law enforcement training.

Progressive law enforcement agencies understand the importance of training, and their budgets reflect the realization that training leads to a professional and educated workforce. Budgetary planning should also include the cost of training for a formal mentoring program. This cost could be reduced if current Human Resources personnel or current certified instructors within the department are used to present the training for participants.

Another consideration is beginning with informal mentoring by encouraging positive leaders to be available to newly hired females or those wishing to advance. Regardless of the type of program utilized to retain and encourage career advancement for women officers, law enforcement agencies should be cognizant that cost should not be the sole deterrant in implementing a solid program. As Grace and Petras state, "the cost of formal mentoring may actually pale in comparison to potential negative legal consequences such as sexual harassment and gender discrimination lawsuits. Professionally educated and trained mentors reduce the risks of costly lawsuits" (2014).

Therefore a careful analysis of the potential benefits of mentoring, career planning and leadership training, and/or participation in organizations that offer education, support and empowerment will show the costs in relation to the advantages are minimal.

RECOMMENDATION

Law enforcement agencies should recognize the importance the role female officers play. Research has shown that females have proven to be as effective as their male counterparts, have fewer use of force complaints, have communication styles in line with the community oriented policing philosophy, improve agency response to family violence calls, and having female officers decreases the complaints of sexual harassment and discrimination (Tuomey & Jolly, 2009). Crooke (2013) warned, "Yet, despite progressive legislation aimed at procuring gender equality in the United States, women today make up only 13 percent of the force, most significantly in larger departments" (p.1). The low percentage of women is even more dismal when considering the fact that the number has increased less than 3 percent in twenty years, since in 1998 the FBI Uniform Crime Report showed the percentage of women to be 10.5 percent (Federal Bureau of Investigation).

The number of women in leadership positions within LE agencies is far more bleak. Only 9 % of women in law enforcement are in leadership positions with just 7% of those women in top leadership positions (Women in law enforcement, nd). It is apparent, the representation of women in the LE profession does not appear to be capable making significant strides without intentionally addressing the barriers that prohibit women from successfully navigating the male dominated profession.

To encourage increased numbers of female officers and female leadership

advancement within departments, progressive law enforcement agencies should provide numerous opportunities for the female officer to make her way in the male dominated field. These opportunities include participation in mentoring programs, both formal and informal, attendance at training and career planning courses designed specially for the female law enforcement officer, and encouragement to participate in organizations designed to empower the female officer and aspiring leader. These specialized programs and training opportunities should not be thought of any differently than police officers who received specialized training for S.W.A.T., K-9, Narcotics or Supervisory positions. Rather, should be thought of as training and assistance to increase the success of the student, albeit a female student.

Mentoring programs are likely the most time and energy consuming option but also have the potential to be extremely effective. These formal mentoring programs require forethought and planning. Law enforcement agencies who wish to administer formal mentoring programs should budget for professional training for those serving as mentors (Grace & Petras, 2014). The program should include a method to select the most appropriate mentors who subscribe to the mentoring philosophy of the agency. Monitoring and evaluation of the program are also essential to assure the goals and objectives of the program are being met and to prevent negative mentoring experiences. Proper implementation and planning can prevent documented risks associated with negative mentoring experiences. Overall, Woosley advises, a positive mentoring experience can “include improved job performance, increased cohesiveness and cooperation, and improved moral of female officers” (2010, p.82).

Informal mentoring is another option but this usually occurs by chance or in a

less structured relationship. Generally, this relationship is a natural bonding between two people with shared interests or personalities. Although the mentor/mentoring relationship can be strong, there is less oversight and greater potential for blurring of professional boundaries.

Finally, participation in professional organizations for women law enforcement officers is another way for women to find encouragement and understanding to help navigate their way in a male dominated profession. For women who find themselves in agencies with few other female officers or agencies without mentoring programs, participation in such organizations can help expose her to ideas and solutions to the barriers faced.

Intentionally addressing the barriers faced by women law enforcement officers through mentoring programs, specialized training, and participation in professional organizations is not without opposition. Such programs and specialized training can be costly. There is difficulty in determining the cause of success or failure of such participation and also concluding what should be categorized as success or failure. Some opponents, even other women, reject the notion of providing specialized programs for women because it reinforces the differences in gender rather than concentrating on the similarities all law enforcement officers face, regardless of gender and/or race. However, history has proven that not addressing the lack of participation and advancement of women in the law enforcement profession only hinders growth in the numbers.

Additionally, refusing to recognize the bias and discrimination potential has cost some LE agencies large sums of money in civil suits, not to mention embarrassment,

because society as a whole has come to believe in equality for people of all genders and racial backgrounds. Women have proven their value and ability to the profession, so the profession is remiss in turning its back on the women who have stepped up, forged ahead and promised the same oath as their male counterparts. These women deserve the same opportunities and advancement as the males they work alongside. Woosley (2010) summed it by stating, "The question is no longer whether women should be in law enforcement, but when their representation will be sufficient" (p. 82).

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