Women Police Chiefs: A Self-perception of Women Officers in Law Enforcement

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In recent years, law enforcement leaders have been confronted with new challenges demanding strong critical thinking abilities to interact with their communities and workforce (Herrington & Colvin, 2015). In the United States, policing has long been seen as a male-dominated profession. Women face several obstacles, such as a lack of women police commanders and professional growth impediments (Chu, 2013). Also, police departments are highly gendered workplaces where women are harassed and discriminated against, and their abilities are often tested; even high-ranking women feel compelled to respond to tests of their abilities by working hard and proving themselves (Haar & Morash, 2013).

Furthermore, despite similar credentials, women ascend to leadership roles at a slower rate than their male colleagues (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Additionally, while some progress has been made in recent years, proven by the regression analysis that female police only received 6% more per year, which is less than 21% of their male counterparts compared with non-police in the general population, from this data, it is suggesting that women are still paid less than their male counterparts with the same qualifications (Luo et al., 2019). Lastly, a study conducted by Benson et al. (2022) found that subjective assessments of "potential" in employee evaluations contribute significantly to gender disparities in promotions and wages. Women are consistently assigned lower potential ratings compared to men, despite often receiving higher performance ratings. This discrepancy accounts for about half of the observed gender promotion gap. However, these lower potential ratings assigned to women do not align with actual outcomes, as women tend to outperform their male counterparts, who received similar potential ratings, and are less likely to leave the firm. Yet, even with these higher performances, women's potential ratings remain disproportionately low in subsequent evaluations, indicating a persistent underestimation of women's capabilities within the organizations.

Purpose of the Research

The goal of this study is to examine the benefits and drawbacks women leaders encounter in law enforcement within the United States. Law enforcement leaders' self-perception is investigated to better understand the issues that women leaders and police personnel experience daily. Understanding the attitudes of law enforcement executives regarding women officers is crucial because it may influence department decisions, policy changes, and the recruitment and retention of women officers. Additionally, gaining insight into police leaders' perspectives of women in the workforce can help assess the progress made thus far and what needs to be improved to create a more diverse and inclusive law enforcement agency.

Literature Review

Historically, women have faced multiple challenges in the workplace to achieve access and acknowledgment as equals to their male counterparts (Friedan, 2010). In the United States, men and women were placed in gender roles in which the men were the workers and providers, and the women were focused on caring for the families and the household needs (Iskra, 2007). This division of labor led to a power imbalance in which men held more institutional power than women. As a result, women have been disadvantaged and often excluded from leadership roles in the workforce (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

Women in law enforcement have increased over time, but men continue to outnumber them. In 2016, women accounted for only 16% of the full-time law enforcement workforce in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). Despite this low percentage, the number of women in law enforcement has increased steadily over the past few decades. For example, in 1987, women made up 7.6% of the law enforcement workforce (Langton, 2010). While the number of women in law enforcement has been increasing, they are still outnumbered by their male colleagues. The underrepresentation of women in law enforcement results from the barriers women face when trying to enter and advance in the field.

Challenges to Promoting Women in the Law Enforcement Field

According to Chan et al. (2010), women officers are less inclined to pursue promotions due to the biased and political nature of the promotion process. Additionally, women have different terms that describe the challenges in advancing their careers, such as *glass ceiling* and *labyrinth* (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Neugart & Zaharieva, 2018). The glass ceiling refers to the unseen barriers that prevent women and minorities from advancing in their careers (Cotter et al., 2001). In one exploratory research on the challenges women experience in federal law enforcement, 19.4% of the women acknowledged a promotion glass ceiling, while 47.9% were unaware of the chance of promotion within their agencies (Yu, 2014). During a follow-up survey on occupational hurdles in federal law enforcement, the situation worsened, with 32.7% of women recognizing a perceived glass ceiling to promotions and 23.8% unaware of the promotional chances at their agencies (Yu, 2017). Both studies revealed obstacles to the professional advancement of female officers in federal law enforcement, including prevalent negative attitudes from male coworkers, a dearth of women role models in high-ranking positions, and work-life balance concerns.

Nevertheless, although women must overcome both systemic and socio-psychological barriers to advance in their careers, many women have attained senior management and executive-level positions in federal law enforcement by

employing various strategies such as persistence, maximizing opportunities by accepting job transfers, participation in leadership/executive development programs, and mentorship/sponsorship from senior leaders to facilitate their occupational success (Yu, 2020). However, as Kurtz et al. (2012) found, informal behaviors based on gender assumptions, beliefs, and traditional images of women officers impact their social interactions and assignments. Their findings indicate that women officers are viewed as maternalistic and physically inferior to men. Therefore, women officers may receive gendered assignments, such as cases involving women and children, or they may be limited from field responsibilities. Additionally, *Labyrinth* describes the unequal road to leadership roles for women in companies (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Law enforcement is a gendered organization that values masculine traits that are required to fight crime but women often lack, such as aggressiveness, suspicion, and brutality (Miller, 1999, as cited in Yu & Rauhaus, 2019).

Advancement for women in law enforcement is further complicated by the lack of available mentors, limited female role models, and the general isolation that women can feel in a male-dominated profession (Grace & Petras, 2014). Moreover, police agencies have a dilemma in recruiting and retaining competent and skilled personnel (Axtell et al., 2022). Women face multiple challenges when finding an appropriate mentor for various reasons. For example, the scarcity of women in the organization was exacerbated by the fact that even fewer women in positions of authority and influence inside the company might serve as mentors. As a result, women are restricted to the few mentors willing to mentor a women officer. In addition, having a male mentor is difficult for women since there is a reluctance to participate in a mentoring relationship for fear that it may be perceived as a future sexual connection (Ragins & Cotton, 1991).

Research Question and Interview Questions

The study uses two interview questions to achieve the study's goal of answering the research question.

- Research Question: How do law enforcement leaders view the role of women in leadership?
- Interview Question #1: What leadership role do you see for women in the law enforcement field?
- Interview Question #2: What unique advantages or disadvantages do women face in their leadership positions in the law enforcement field?

Methodology

The research uses a qualitative theory and a phenomenological design. In qualitative research, a phenomenological approach is utilized to identify significance in human experiences that are not visible via standard observation (Sanders, 1982). The phenomenological investigation may enrich participant experiences, allowing for a more contextual approach to uncovering and analyzing the meaning behind the chosen interviewees' "story" (Greenfield & Jensen, 2010). A qualitative theory assists researchers by gathering data via direct observations and interviews, extracting the data to determine similarities and contrasts, and then developing iterative layers of abstractions (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The researcher employed purposive sampling to locate potential participants. The researcher contacted women chiefs and sheriffs throughout the United States to get insight into women's experiences in law enforcement leadership positions. The survey contacted over 200 police chiefs and sheriffs for participation. A consent form explaining the study's nature, objectives, and risks was delivered to the participants. Each participant was interviewed through Zoom, and the interviews were recorded after they signed. The audio recordings were transcribed and categorized by themes. A total of six candidates were chosen and interviewed after meeting the requirements.

Findings

Participants' responses to our first interview question revealed their perceptions of the role of women in leadership in their field. Participants' answers can be categorized in three different ways according to how they answered the interview question: the role of women in leadership is associated with 1) special soft skills, 2) positions or titles, and 3) limitations in access to leadership positions compared to men. Synthesized interviewee's response to the interview question "how do law enforcement leaders view the role of women in leadership", three primary categories were established related to women's roles in law enforcement. The first category encompasses the responses that emphasized women in leadership positions who contributed special soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution to the profession in their leadership role. Special soft skill categories were mentioned most frequently, followed by positions with particular titles, while access compared to males was noted the least. Chiefs emphasized soft qualities such as genuineness, gentleness, the capacity to de-escalate situations, influence culture via mentoring, and the desire to assist when responding to this question. The second category describes responses for specific titles or positions that women in law enforcement can or currently do hold. Women's employment titles such as sergeant, captain, colonel, chief, and partner were listed in the second category. The third category describes responses that made

a case for the limited access that women face when it comes to leadership positions in law enforcement. The category of access compared to males is low since the chiefs who did speak to it tend to agree that as long as women had the "proper credentials," there are no discrepancies in access to jobs, rights, or advantages.

Positive traits, favorable culture, and relational benefits are the three advantages. Diligence, compassion, boldness, sincerity, openness to new ideas and attention to detail are all positive traits. Interviewees also discussed how law enforcement culture has evolved throughout the country, including more inclusivity, and a push for more women executives. According to interviewees, women also have a distinct edge in gaining respect from various groups of people and the capacity to de-escalate situations, emotional intelligence, and compassionate support. These capabilities have the potential to set women apart as leaders in law enforcement.

The disadvantages are an evident lack of help with child raising, particularly restricted access to daycare, and difficulties garnering family support for entering law enforcement. According to interviewees, women in law enforcement encounter a hyper-masculine culture, which includes negative societal attitudes, overcoming the "Old Guard", internal stigmas, and a rigid male culture that is difficult to overcome. Additionally, women in law enforcement face an obvious lack of guidance, mentoring, and role models, making their route to leadership difficult. Finally, external obstacles impede women's advancement in leadership, such as a shortage of finances to promote otherwise competent women, difficulty recruiting women due to public scrutiny, and a perceived glass ceiling or restriction on career progression in law enforcement. For easier comprehension, Table 1 summarizes the information from above.

Table 1

Theme and Description of the Findings

Category	Description
Special Soft Skills Contributed by Women Leaders	Women contribute unique soft skills in leadership roles, including empathy, active listening, conflict resolution, genuineness, and the ability to de-escalate situations. These skills are crucial for effective leadership and problem-solving in high-stress environments.
Specific Positions/Titles Held by Women Leaders	Women hold various positions and titles in law enforcement, indicating their active participation and leadership in the field. Titles include sergeant, captain, colonel, chief, and partner, reflecting responsibilities and ranks within the hierarchy.

Access to Leadership Positions for Women Leaders	While women's access to leadership positions is generally less restricted with proper credentials, it is still noted as a concern. Some believe that as long as women possess the necessary qualifications, there are no significant barriers to their advancement.
Positive Traits Attributed to Women Leaders	Women leaders are often associated with a set of positive traits that enhance their leadership effectiveness. These include diligence, compassion, boldness, sincerity, openness to new ideas, and keen attention to detail, contributing to a thoughtful and inclusive leadership style.
Cultural Shift Towards Favoring Women Leaders	The culture within law enforcement is gradually shifting to become more inclusive, with a noticeable push for more women in executive roles. This cultural evolution is seen as beneficial, leading to more diverse perspectives and strategies in leadership.
Relational Benefits of Women in Leadership	Women leaders in law enforcement bring relational benefits, including gaining respect from various groups, the ability to de-escalate tense situations, emotional intelligence, and providing compassionate support, valuable in creating a positive and effective work environment.
Disadvantages Faced by Women in Leadership	Despite progress, women in law enforcement face several disadvantages, such as a lack of support in child rearing, especially restricted access to daycare, and challenges in garnering family support. They also confront a hyper-masculine culture, internal stigmas, and a lack of mentoring and role models, hindering career progression. Additionally, external factors like a shortage of resources for promotion and public scrutiny can act as barriers.

Note. This table summarizes the research findings.

Conclusion

The findings suggest multiple advantages and disadvantages to being a woman in the law enforcement field. However, the disadvantages are structural in nature and can be changed with time (Rief & Clinkinbeard, 2020). Moreover, the culture of law enforcement is evolving, becoming more inclusive and supportive of women. As such, the number of women in leadership positions will likely continue to increase in the future. Based on the findings, the law enforcement agencies should consider increasing support for women police officers. Research has confirmed U.S. police departments are complying with

the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows unpaid maternity or paternity leave (Yu, 2018; Schulze, 2011; Schulze, 2010) or increase of salary (Pettigrew & Duncan, 2020) following the birth of a child, as well as implementing other policies such as unpaid disability leave and light duty accommodation for pregnant police (Rabe-Hemp & Humiston, 2015). We recommend police departments and counties to adopt policy changes beyond these reported unpaid leaves or accommodations; for example, police officers with school-aged children can be given flexible hours (Yu, 2018) so that their schedules align with school schedules, allowing them to care for their children after school, and child care for children of police officers (Langan et al., 2018).

Women police employment has plateaued in the past because "few women apply, few get hired, or few are retained once hired" (Cordner & Cordner, 2011, p. 212). More recently, a decade later, a survey conducted by Statista reported that in 2021, the number of full-time women law enforcement officers in the U.S. was only 13.3% (Duffin, 2022). To reduce the obstacles women face due to the masculine culture in policing, we recommend increasing the number of women polices officers to offset the prevalence of men and violent tendency (Bergman et al., 2016) through measures and strategies that increase the hiring and retention of women police officers, such as improving the attractiveness of police employment through higher salary, and customized physical fitness tests specifically for women (Jordan et al., 2009).

Framing in police recruitment videos can be used to strategically attract specific people to policing (Walby & Joshua, 2021). Videos can be used to enlist women by portraying community-oriented themes and featuring female officers (Koslicki, 2021). Additionally, it would be highly advantageous if police services offered day care for the children of police personnel (Langan et al., 2018). It is important that police departments and counties consider these policies when creating an equitable working environment for women law enforcement officers.

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