IPRPD
International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN 2693-2547 (Print), 2693-2555 (Online)
Volume 07; Issue no 11: November 2026
DOI: 10.56734/ijahss.v7n11a2

THE HISTORY, CURRENT CHALLENGES, AND POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS OF WOMEN IN POLICING

Evan B. Vejvoda[1]

[1]*John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

Abstract

The history of women in policing reflects a continuing struggle for gender equality, professional recognition, and institutional inclusion within a traditionally male-dominated profession. This paper examines the historical transition of women from limited roles as police matrons in the nineteenth century to empowered police officers in the early twentieth century, highlighting the contributions of pioneers such as Lola Baldwin and Alice Wells. Despite significant progress in women's participation in law enforcement, female officers continue to encounter systemic barriers, including gender discrimination, sexual harassment, unequal promotion opportunities, and exclusionary workplace practices. Drawing on existing research, particularly studies of hypermasculine police culture, this paper explores how institutional attitudes and deeply rooted gender stereotypes undermine women's professional experiences and career advancement. It further argues that addressing these challenges requires more than individual accountability; meaningful institutional and structural reforms are necessary. Proposed measures include gender-inclusive academy and field training, independent reporting mechanisms, stronger workplace protections, greater civilian oversight, and meaningful female representation in departmental decision-making. By examining both historical developments and contemporary challenges, this paper emphasizes the importance of transforming police organizational culture and governance to establish a more equitable, accountable, and inclusive law enforcement environment.

Keywords

Women in Policing; Gender Discrimination; Police Culture; Gender Equality; Institutional Reform

The history of women in policing is a display of resilience, progress, and equality in a male-dominated field.[1] Although strides have been made to allow women to become police officers, such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Hassell et al., 2015), there is still sexism and doubt that women can effectively execute the job as a police officer. This essay will discuss the transition of women as matrons to policewomen, the biggest challenges of women in policing, and some potential solutions.

The most significant aspect of the history of women in policing was their early involvement as matrons. Women's presence in policing ascended in the nineteenth century in New York City through these roles (Hassell et al., 2015). With the creation of women-only prisons commencing, women became more present in law enforcement (Hassell et al., 2015). A matron's duties consisted of overseeing women in custody, escorting them to detention quarters, cleaning the detention quarters, looking after the physical well-being of the woman in custody, and

[1] Thank you to my mentor, Prof. Jodie G. Roure, JD, PhD, Associate Professor, Director & Project Investigator of the CUNY Black Male Initiative Research Scholars of Justice Program (RSJ), Department of Latin American and Latinx Studies (LLS) at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (JJC), for her mentorship and for creating a program that inspired me, supported my growth as a scholar, and allowed me to publish. Special recognition goes to Lorena Villavicencio, Supervisor of BMI Research Teams @ CUNY, and Parsva Shah, College Assistant for Undergraduate Research for RSJ, for their dedicated support of my undergraduate research and publication process, and to the Department of LLS for its continued support. I also recognize Research Scholars of Justice staff Anani Beane, Anna Cepeda-Mays, Arpita Edke, Brandon Mathew, Christina Mitchell-Paris, Danielle Nwosa, Isabel Schroeder, Ishani Mehta, Joanna Marie Aguilar, Jonathan Beane, Josué González-Ortiz, Maria Guadarrama Flores, Mohammad Mustafa, Nicole Martinez, and Zhen Deng for their assistance. Funding was made possible by the New York City Council through the CUNY Black Male Initiative, with special thanks to Dr. Jonathan Quash, University Director of the CUNY Black Male Initiative, for his leadership, continued support, and commitment to creating opportunities for CUNY BMI scholars.

accompanying arrestees to court (Hassell et al., 2015). As the male police officers were patrolling, only they had the power to make arrests and were considered superior to women (Hassell et al., 2015). However, policewomen, women with the power of arrest, began to emerge in the early twentieth century with Lola Baldwin and Alice Wells, the first two women to become policewomen (Hassell et al., 2015). Furthermore, outside pressures to hire women as police officers were placed on police chiefs by social reformers, members of the Progressive movement, and temperance leaders (Hassell et al., 2015). Through the pressure of these groups, Baldwin and Wells both paved the way for police reform to increase women's presence in policing (Hassell et al., 2015). Yet, even though conditions for women have improved in policing, female police officers still experience occupational challenges.

There are a number of challenges that women police officers still face while executing their duties. c One aspect of police culture is machismo and masculinity; some male officers still believe that women officers do not have the strength and ability to maintain order due to the fact that they are women (Hassell et al., 2015). Due to this belief, female officers often endure sexism, sexual harassment, and even sexual assault (Hassell et al., 2015). A study from the textbook *Survival in an all-boys club: policewomen and their fight for acceptance* displays women police officers' experiences while on the job and researchers interviewed female officers. Women from the study claimed that police academy and field training experiences acculturated hyper-masculine values and attitudes of policing, which limited women's behavior (Hassell et al., 2015). Common experiences included sexism, harassment, disrespect, discrimination, losing promotions due to being a woman, and not being promoted because they were seen as "too much of a pain in the ass" (Hassell et al., 2015). However, participants reported that they eventually earned respect from their male colleagues, but the way they earned acceptance was through violence, achieving a rank that demanded respect, or being unique from male officers (Hassell et al., 2015). Hence, this study displays how police culture requires female officers to either conform to the gender roles of the "boys' club" or to excel beyond all expectations just to feel welcome at work. However, the most apparent challenge women in policing face is police culture, which some also call the boys' club. In order for the culture of policing to include women, improvements need to be made so women are accepted by male officers.

Based on the research described above, a way to strengthen the role of women in policing is by adding training for individuals who are already police officers and those going through the academy. According to Hassell et al, (2015), women are acculturated during academy and field training, thus, to improve the role of women in policing, training should be administered that shows the positives of having a diverse department with women and minority groups, rather than a homogenous department. By doing this, current and future male officers are informed about areas in which women excel, allowing them to see women successfully perform duties in which they have been empirically shown to excel and recognize their own biases. This could help reduce the belief that women are less capable of performing the duties required of police officers and create a more inclusive police culture.

The history of women in policing is a journey of progress and resilience. Starting as matrons with limited roles in the late nineteenth century, women like Lola Baldwin and Alice Wells broke barriers in the early twentieth century, paving the way for women in law enforcement (Hassell et al., 2015). However, while progress has been made, female officers continue to face challenges (Hassell et al., 2015). Police departments are highly hierarchical institutions.

Concentrating so much authority in commanders creates conditions where discrimination can be concealed or normalized. More democratic workplace structures could give rank-and-file officers greater ability to challenge abusive practices. Police culture makes it difficult for women to move up the ranks or feel fully accepted without proving themselves (Hassell et al., 2015). From an abolitionist perspective, addressing discrimination against female officers requires examining and changing the culture and structure of police departments, rather than focusing only on individual officers. Female officers should have safe and independent ways to report discrimination without fear of retaliation. There should also be stronger protections for workers and more civilian oversight of police departments. Female officers should have meaningful representation in decisions about scheduling, assignments, promotions, workplace policies, and complaint procedures, not just representation in management. The goal should not only be to punish individual officers, but to change the conditions that allow sexism and discrimination to continue.

References

Hassell, K. D., Archbold, C. A., & Schulz, D. M. (2015). *Women and policing in Americ*a (7th ed.). Aspen Publishing.

.