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## Women in police: Evolving role and challenges

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### Abstract

Women have been participating in various kinds of vocations for so long. They have proved their mantle in all types of vocations including the law enforcement. Although policing is considered prominently a male dominated profession and so many factors such as social perception, physical requirements of the job, high pressure working conditions and the prejudice have created more hurdles for women in this vocation. But despite all this, women have proved time and time again their value and importance in law enforcement. After being in the hind side for so long, they have fully embraced the challenges of this profession and made a significant place for themselves.

**Keywords:** atrocities, assault, conflict, diversity, desk jobs, gender, law enforcement, personnel, para-military, reservation, self-efficacy, subordinate

### Introduction

Women are excelling in all kind of careers. They have proved their mantle in all vocations. Still law enforcement and military are one of the few careers that are yet to be fully explored by half of the world's population. That being said things have certainly changed and improved, for better, in these vocations as well. Women in India entered the police force as early as 1938. But the progress in integrating them is slow but steady.

Policing is seen as a male dominated profession. It is modeled heavily around a specific gender which leaves a very narrow space for others to thrive and survive in. The general sentiment is that women are not 'man' enough to be a part of the force. Women personnel are usually constrained to dealing with women and juveniles and are used to deal with the lighter and more "human" aspect of the profession. There still a notion that categorizes the law enforcement into two groups namely 'us' versus 'them'. The social perception regarding this profession and the participation of women in it also effects the representation and opportunities they have while choosing it as a career.

A vast number of Indian population still believe that women are not fit for policing as it requires physical strength, aggressive behavior and has inflexible working hours. Policing also requires dealing with high intensity crimes and cases which might not be suitable for women. Certain preconceived notions affect women while choosing law enforcement as a vocation.

The Indian woman ever since has come a long way in being part of the active workforce and has possibly broken all barriers in most professional fields, including that of donning the uniform of the police and the para-military. Women bring their own set of skills to a traditionally male-dominated culture, and that has proven to be helpful for the police department.

In India, the need for women police was first felt during the labor strike, which took place in Kanpur, in the year 1938. The State of Travancore also experimented with the appointment of women in as Special Police Constables in the year 1933, where one women head constable and twelve women police constables were appointed. Due to the partition and all the after effects of it, a number of women organizations cropped up which needed women police. Due to riots, atrocities on women, kidnapping, abduction and other sex offenses, an immediate need for women officers in the law enforcement was felt. The Delhi Police force was the first to recruit police women on a regularly basis in 1948.

### Advantages of women in law enforcement

Women in law enforcement bring a lot to the job, including offering different ways of dealing with conflict. Attributes such as bravery, creativity, and verbal skills make them ideal for the job.

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Many male police officers could learn a lot from their female counterparts. A 2015-16 survey by the National Family Health Survey revealed that 99% of sexual assault cases go unreported. An increase in the number of female officers has been linked to a decline in the rate of intimate partner abuse and intimate partner crime.

Women officers are less likely to use excessive force or pull their weapon. This is especially important during a period when police use of force is under increased scrutiny, often causing heightened tensions between police and the communities they serve.

One of the most critical areas where women in law enforcement can make a difference is in addressing violence against women and sex crimes. It is absolutely critical to have women working in criminal justice. With sexual assault cases, the victim might want to talk to a woman. But that can't always happen because there aren't enough females in the department and it ends up affecting the mission.

Women officers can help in improving police-community relations. Women's aptitude for communication and restraint in using force is a vital reason for that. Female officers are less authoritarian in their approach to policing, less reliant on physical force and are more effective communicators. Most importantly, female officers are better at defusing potentially violent confrontations before those encounters turn deadly.

#### **Problems faced by women in police organization**

If women have such a positive impact on the profession, why aren't there more women working in law enforcement agencies today. That is a very concerning topic. Along with the growing awareness of their potential to make a positive impact, more needs to be done to encourage women to enter the field of law enforcement. Besides recruitment campaigns aimed at women, encouraging young girls and offering mentorship is another way to bring more females into the field.

Women police officers face a toxic work environment. Feeling unsafe at the workplace is also an overwhelming issue among the women police officers. This may occur in two forms- facing sexual abuse and assault during working hours from senior officers who have the power to get away with it and performing duty in a public place.

Gender roles and the pressure to conform to these roles for women vary across regions, religions, societies and households. Gender roles sometimes inhibit women while choosing a vocation. As policing requires flexible working hours and often puts officers into high pressure situations, this is rarely considered a suitable vocation for women.

Often women are not supported by society or by the organisation when they choose a male-oriented profession. Society's expectation from females to fulfill their 'feminine' duties never stopped. As a society we rarely accept women in authoritarian positions and uniform based vocations. This is one of the reasons many women never even take promotional exams, giving first priority to family or personal relationships.

The police organisation sometimes lacks resources, such as washrooms or sanitary products supporting women. Moreover, women-specific provisions such as marital leaves are generally not welcomed by their male colleagues. It can increase strain and exaggerate the effects of other environmental or external barriers.

Self-efficacy, low outcome expectations, and self-esteem consist of psychological factors that affect the performance of a task. In the police departments, where the work of women is constantly scrutinized and criticized, the women develop a low self-efficacy. Low outcome expectations are also a cause of the poor work environment, where males and females doing the same work with the same resources and efficiency many times do not receive the same outcome. It results in low outcome expectations among women. These factors further lead to self-esteem issues. Kiran Bedi, India's first female IPS officer retired voluntarily in 2007 as she was superseded by her male junior for the post of Delhi Police Commissioner. While women in the IPS may still benefit from a relatively 'integrated model', women in subordinate positions have to go through a gendered model of policing.

Policing and armed forces are a few male-dominated institutions, where women have to go extra miles to get respect. In this organization, women are generally not given any mainstream police tasks and are typically relegated to desk jobs that shield them from frontline policing. Women generally perform tasks like escorting female prisoners, helping male police in the investigation that concerns female victims or watches duty of female suspects. Tasks like these are undoubtedly performed better by women, but this way they are only confined to specific jobs such as these and are never exposed to the full potential of their jobs.

Bias on the part of male police personnel most often undermine the capabilities of female police personnel and do not accept them as equal professional colleagues even when they have the same work profile and responsibility. It is considered that females lack the physical stamina or mental skills to deal with a high pressure situation. Well-experienced and qualified women also face the same prejudices. Moreover, the male subordinates in a female-led team do not coordinate and often neglect the instructions given to them.

It is often seen that despite reservations and advertisements of vacancies for women constables, they go unfilled because they do not apply for the position. This phenomenon is rampant in Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Assam. The reason is the gender bias and discrimination they face in the workplace, or that they believe they cannot strike a balance between their professional and personal life.

#### **Conclusion: A way forward**

The inclusion of women officers in the police organization led to diversity. With their ability to work in a group and communicate better, there has been an increase in harmony among the colleagues. Their ability to handle sensitive issues revolving around women and children, created a specific department where only women officers are required. It has been reported that there is an increase in the reporting of domestic violence and sexual harassment cases when women are handling the case.

Although women have managed to gain entry into the police services, they continue to face numerous forms of challenges. They have to tolerate various obstacles, which their male counterparts never undergo. Thus, it is pivotal to develop a wholesome police system for all genders and appreciate the role of females in creating it, which will help towards the betterment of society.

Family-friendly policies must be formulated to help female police officers balance their personal and professional life.

Those policies may incorporate paid marital leave, child-care and medical insurances. Further, sanitary products in the workplace are also a great initiative.

There needs to be a collective change of policies and work culture within the department in order to make sure things improve for women in law enforcement. It is going to be a long term and difficult undertaking. Making women more integral and integrated in policing culture will help law enforcement executives and agencies develop effective policies to support this shift. Merely increasing the number of women in the department will not be enough. An inclusive and un-gendered system will help the institution to be more gender-responsive and gender-sensitive.

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