Women in Policing: 
Gender Discrimination in Yet Another 
Occupation 

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Abstract
Gender discrimination is prevalent in the police force and is able to persist due to (but not limited to) factors of systemic exclusion, emotional labour, problems with the recruitment and retention of women, and socially constructed discourse. Systemic exclusion will be discussed through the lenses of patriarchy, organizational norms, and structural exclusion. Emotional labour will be explained through job stratification and gendered frameworks. Socially constructed discourse lends insight to the working practices and formation of identity in the police system. Consequently, gender discrimination is apparent throughout the police system and is maintained by the structure of policing. Because patriarchy and structural challenges remain prevalent, women do not yet have enough of a presence to make changes to the predisposition of policing that favours men. Although tied to a history of gendered labour, the occupation of policing is slowly changing and women are breaking down barriers and pursuing more equal representation.

Literature about gender differences is abundant in presenting the idea that women have segregated and differentiated types of work. Social conceptions of masculinity and femininity have a great influence on what kind of work is deemed appropriate for males and females to engage in. Although it is commonly believed that North American society is liberal and progressive, it is apparent that stereotypes inform gender scripts and that these scripts have a heavy influence on what is thought to be appropriate roles for men and women in society. Most of the research discussed in this paper has been conducted in America and the UK, thus, the information used cannot be generalized to all cases. In addition, gender discrimination in the police force could be a result of factors other than those mentioned in this paper. The research surrounding gender discrimination is not conclusive; however, it does show an overwhelming challenge for women in policing for a number of reasons. Because of the stereotypes that surround gender, discrimination is born and is particularly visible within certain occupations that are seen as particularly gendered, like policing. Discrimination is pervasive and informs much of this particular
profession. The police force has had a history of being a predominantly male-dominated job, and seems to be continuing in this vein.

The solidarity of this rather homogenous and predominantly male group is not easy to penetrate. However, this is slowly changing and the police force is gaining women. Regulations are now in place to remove sex discrimination. Yet despite this shift in focus, equality is not apparent. Why does gender discrimination persist in the police force? Policing is an occupation that is engrained in the stereotypical nature of gender roles and appropriated by social constructs due to the perceived masculine nature of the job. This paper will argue that gender discrimination persists within the police force due to systemic exclusion, emotional labour, problems surrounding recruitment and retention, and socially constructed discourse.

Firstly, systemic exclusion will be discussed through its perpetuation of gender discrimination due to the patriarchal structure of the police force, the organizational norms surrounding the police force, and the effect of shift work on the exclusionary structure of policing. Secondly, I will discuss the problems surrounding recruitment and retention of women police officers. Next, emotional labour will be explained through the lenses of job stratification, and organizational norms based on the influence of a gendered framework. Lastly, the effects of socially constructed discourse will be examined through the lenses of working practices, and identity.

I will begin with a brief outline of the history of the relationship between gender and policing, and namely the impact that it has had on women. This relationship has been arguably antagonistic due to clashes in conceptualization. Gender stereotypes dictate masculine and feminine roles in society. This concept bleeds heavily into the workforce. Historically, work has been defined and associated by social conceptions of gender. Women are type-casted to be primarily human service workers.¹ This has led to exclusion in many cases due to these perceived notions of what is appropriate for women and men. In many areas of work, this is still prevalent, for example, the profession of nursing.² This distinction of work began a movement of socialist feminism, which focused on the social construction of masculine and feminine character types.³ These constructions were primarily a result of social practices. Thus, women’s liberation movements were born and strong ideas about breaking down the idea of ‘femininity’ emerged, with application for gendered divisions of labour. However, in order for

¹ Venessa García, “‘Difference’ in the police department: women, policing and ‘doing gender’,” Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 19, no. 3 (2003): 332.
changes to occur, there must be some amount of accompanied resistance. In the case of women and policing, there was a great deal of resistance, and a large portion of it came from male officers. 4

For women who enter typically male-dominated occupations, they encounter resistance everywhere: from coworkers, supervisors, and even the public. Often the case stands that women get funnelled into tasks that are designated to be for women. 5 In the 1880s, women's movements started to gain prevalence, and among them, a movement for women police was propagated. 6 Women were called "workers" or "operatives" instead of "policewomen." 7 The first appointed "patrolman" was in 1893, Marie Owens. Her job was different from the men, putting her in a position of a court assistant for cases involving women and children. 8 Her work was largely based on her sex as it was more in line with socialized conceptions of femininity. The second appointment was Lola Baldwin, in 1905, who was given duties dealing with problems involving girls and women who were in threatening positions with poor social conditions. 9 She was not formally considered a policewoman, but was allowed to perform in the police service. 10 The work delegated to her, like Owens, was in a field for which she was deemed capable solely because of her sex. As Susan Ehrlich Martin and Nancy Jurik explain, 11 "jobs and tasks are assigned according to the worker's sex category." Along with these women are many others who have contributed a great deal to the world of policing. Notably, there was Alice Stebbins Wells of Los Angeles. Wells circulated a petition to request the city mayor for her appointment as a police officer. This was granted, and in 1910, she became the first official "policewoman." 12 Many of the efforts of the first policewomen were that of preventing juvenile delinquency. 13 This speaks to the stereotype that women are nurturers by nature and thus are better set to deal with youth. Duties that were not always associated directly with police work required most of their attention. This refers to any matters involving children and women under the policing scope. 14


7 Higgins, "Historical" 823.

8 Higgins, "Historical," 824.

9 Ibid., 823.

10 Ibid.


12 Higgins, "Historical," 824.


14 Higgins, "Historical," 826.
The extent of this movement widened after the initial lag of five years between Lola Baldwin and Alice Wells. By the early 1900s, the movement had spread to thirty cities in America. It became less about eradicating femininity; policing for women became about incorporating traditional ideals. Mary E. Hamilton, the first policewoman in New York City, described her role as a policewoman as prevention and protection. The idea of women in policing was not to allow women to do what was considered a man’s job, rather, it was to “aid and assist them, quietly and unassumingly.” In the 1960s and 70s, the women’s movement emphasized the importance of challenging gender stereotypes and procured a new social climate within police departments. By 1960 there were 5617 policewomen. As women gained freedom economically and socially, this expansion was heightened. This was situated at a time when there were “manpower” shortages due to low salaries and retirement of WWII veterans. Currently, women are still facing underrepresentation in the police force, and policing remains a gendered occupation.

Systemic Exclusion

Systemic exclusion is not a recent phenomenon or one that strictly addresses gender. It refers to the structure of a system having fundamental roots in processes of exclusion of specific groups. It is a multi-faceted concept and can represent varied levels of exclusion regarding many different groups. For the purpose of this paper, however, systemic exclusion will refer solely to differences between women and men in the police force. Sufficient evidence notes that women and men are treated differently within the police force. This pattern is slowly experiencing changes, but changes are difficult, due in part, to the structure of the police force: a long history of the patriarchal nature of policing, organizational norms, and shift work that inform the system of policing.

Patriarchal Structure of the Police Force

Patriarchy is a socially constructed ideology of male domination. This ideology has persisted in many societies, and despite being acknowledged as pivotal in defining societies through means of

17 Ibid.
18 Martin and Jurik, “Justice.”
20 Martin and Jurik, “Justice.”
21 Ibid.
oppression, it continues to persist today. Within the world of policing, patriarchy has played an important role in informing systemic exclusion. Historically, policing has been considered men’s work because of its close association with danger, crime, and coercion. In addition, law enforcement is typically associated with aggression and strength. This emphasizes a requirement of masculinity within the police force. Rabe-Hemp describes this profession as an “all boys club.” This has enabled the male dominated structure of the police force to persist today, and to favour men in ways such as inclusion, the subculture, and the ‘brotherhood’ that surrounds policing. Most importantly, it propagates a linear way of thinking about what the job of policing entails and its limitations. As a result of male authority, men have defined what being a police officer means. Thus, it follows that in order for women to break into this specific profession, they may not have the opportunity to redefine or expand the scope of policing, but rather, they too must be able to do what men are able to do.

This provides an avenue of exclusion because it does not recognize the differences between men and women, or the differences in their contributions. Studies have concluded that men and women are equally capable of fulfilling the role of police. However, despite these studies, women have faced – and continue to face – external and internal barriers in gaining equality within the realm of policing. This is due to the patriarchal structure that dominates policing. As Garcia explains, “women’s orientation has been placed on them by the patriarchal form of society, which has worked to create and maintain women’s subordination.” In this way, much of the disparity lies in terms of access. Women who enter the police force are faced with the task of challenging the male dominated structure that dictates inequality in access. Due to the patriarchal structure of the police force, it is apparent that gender discrimination is maintained. Men have defined the nature of policing, thus, the structure itself disallows women to create their own place within it. Because of this, it is very difficult for women to penetrate this male-dominated system.

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24 Martin and Jurik, “Justice.”
26 Ibid., 263.
Organizational Norms

Confidence in the policing system is very important. It is closely related to the legitimacy of a police force. Because of this, the way that the system is organized must be efficient. Organizational norms dictate the way that an organization acts through formal and informal rules. Formal rules are things such as work qualifications which “have been developed based on notions of masculine competence, which now frame the assessments of working women.” This norm forces female police officers to create their organizational reality within the limits of a male-dominated profession. In this way, women experience gender discrimination through formal organizational norms which inform the structure of policing. Informal rules are often constructed through mediums such as verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as dress and demeanour.

Shift Work

Women are primarily the caregivers for their children and the home. This lifestyle is not conducive to policing. Policing relies heavily on shift work, which can be especially difficult for women who are looking after children. The structure of policing that exists purposely oppresses policewomen. The nature of policing celebrates masculine ideas which effectively limit women’s participation. Pregnancy and childcare reaffirm masculine structures. The private sector has surpassed police agencies in implementing policies that are family-friendly such as maternity/paternity leave, flex time, and in-house day care options. The structure of the system creates challenges for women, and in many cases makes it difficult to retain women in policing. Even if a woman is in a desk job, there is no guarantee of her shift ending on time. In these ways, the shift work is derived from masculine work and familial roles and thus enables gender discrimination through its very structure.

33 Martin and Jurik, “Justice,” 45.
35 Martin and Jurik, “Justice.”
37 Ibid., 264.
Emotional Labour

Emotional labour is the concept of managing emotions in work performance. This includes regulating emotions at times when workers are expected to, as well as displaying certain emotions as dictated by the job. This tends to promote goals that the organization sees fit by actively creating an image in order to mould perceptions. Policing is an occupation that requires varying amount of emotional labour.\(^{39}\) Despite this, however, other aspects of the job usually go unaccounted for because policing is considered to be a masculine occupation, due to its close connection with crime fighting. Males have authoritatively defined ideas of policing, thus shaping perceptions of policing and masculinity. Because policing has a high degree of emotional labour involved, it requires officers to suppress feelings in order to maintain a level of outward calmness to evoke a "proper state of mind in others".\(^{40}\) 

This refers to the idea that the management of emotions can influence others to act in a certain way. For police, this is an important skill to have as they are constantly in contact with the public. Emotional labour enables gender discrimination in the police force due to the fact that it encourages job stratification, and it requires the maintenance of organizational norms.

Job Stratification based on aspects of Emotional Labour

Policing encompasses varying degrees of emotional labour, but because it is presented as a masculine profession, much of this emotional labour is not recognized. Emotional labour is deemed feminine, due to its emphasis on emotions and the stereotype that women are generally associated with being emotional.\(^{41}\) Consequently, this has shed light on the emergence of job stratification. It would be irresponsible, as well as overly simplistic to assume that female officers exhibit stereotypically feminine emotional attributes in policing.\(^{42}\) While this may not be the case, job stratification is based primarily on these stereotypical traits. It has originated from a history of workplace segregation. Because police work has been defined as that of law enforcement and attributed to men – and policewoman’s work has been defined as that of crime prevention by way of moral guidance – stratification is bound to emerge.\(^{43}\)

This ideology begins with the belief that women and men bring different attributes to policing. These notions have been perpetuated and voiced by the media, and also has a presence in academia. Sufficient literature suggests that police women are indeed often guided

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40 Martin, "Police," 112.
41 Rabe-Hemp, "Female," 430.
42 *Ibid*.
to positions that require a higher degree of emotional labour.\textsuperscript{44} It is not uncommon for the work of policewomen to be described as something similar to that of social workers.\textsuperscript{45} Women are often put on duties which centre on matters stereotypically understood to be “better handled by women.”\textsuperscript{46} These duties include children’s issues, female victims of sexual offences, criminals who are women, missing persons, and clerical work.\textsuperscript{47} Because of the gender discrimination present in the police force, there has been a continued practice of “segregating women into stigmatized assignments or specialities.”\textsuperscript{48} As policing is such a male-dominated field, men have decided what real policing consists of: “men define ‘real’ law enforcement as ‘doing doors’ rather than ‘doing paperwork’”.\textsuperscript{49} Because of this, an image of real police work has come about and exhibits mainly typical masculine traits. Contrasting these traits are typically associated feminine traits which involve working indoors and using interpersonal skills, more closely associated with emotional labour.\textsuperscript{50} Due to these perceptions of male and female police work, it can be said that job segregation enables gender discrimination to persist within policing.

\textit{Organizational norms}

Organizational norms are rules that manage situations within a workplace. In the case of emotional labour, “organizational norms govern both the appropriate expression and the suppression or management of emotions.”\textsuperscript{51} These norms determine what emotions should be experienced and be visible in workers. In essence, organizational norms governing emotions dictate which emotions should be observable and which should not. This is relevant for maintaining order within the organization, as well as for providing a variety of services to the public.\textsuperscript{52} Organizational norms perpetuate gender discrimination in the police workplace. Often it is the case that the actual content of the work itself is obscured by gender stereotypical ideas of what the job entails.\textsuperscript{53} This means that norms can influence a job itself, and due to emotional labour’s close association with femininity, has the power to direct women into certain positions. These norms in the police department dictate that officers should limit the

\textsuperscript{44} Garcia, “Difference,” 337; Martin, “Police,” 111-124; Martin and Jurik, “Justice”;
Rabe-Hemp, “Female,” 430.
\textsuperscript{45} Garcia, “Difference,” 331.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, 335.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, 337.
\textsuperscript{50} Martin, “Police,” 115.
\textsuperscript{51} Martin, “Police,” 113.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, 121-123.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}. 
expression of their emotions.\textsuperscript{54} This is because police officers are to be seen as rational and level headed in their positions of authority.

Because policing norms have been decided by males, dualistic thinking with regard to the oppositions of femininity and masculinity has resulted.\textsuperscript{55} This duality has led to tangible implications: "organizational symbols, occupational themes, and work activities."\textsuperscript{56} These organizational norms contrast crime fighting and service work, yet each require the management of emotions. The difference is in the kind of emotions procured by the kind of work. Rabe-Hemp's findings showed that female officers spent more time engaging in emotional labour overall.\textsuperscript{57} On a broader scale, organizational norms within policing reinforce societal norms that men must act fearless and strong, while women have a wider range of self-expression.\textsuperscript{58} In this way, organizational norms are not limited to the organization which they control; rather, they have widespread influence.

\textbf{Recruitment and Retention}

An organization flourishes by sustaining membership. In order to do this, the organization must recruit people to join. For this to be successful, the methods of recruitment that are employed are important. Policing has generally been a profession where continued membership has not been unpredictable; however, there are certain groups of people who are underrepresented in the police force, namely, women and minorities. As women began to gain positions in the police force, there became more of an effort to target them in recruitment strategies for employment opportunities. In 1981, verbal commitments to recruiting women were incredibly high.\textsuperscript{59} However, the result was not congruent with actual employment for women as it was intended.\textsuperscript{60} The recruitment of women was slow and was characterized by an undulating pattern averaging at an increase of 4.5 percent per decade.\textsuperscript{61} This kind of increase is relatively significant as there was much resistance for women entering the police force. However, according to Rabe-Hemp,\textsuperscript{62} in order for a group to make changes within an organization, that group must consist of more than fifteen percent; otherwise, they will be perceived as "in but not of the organization".

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{55} Martin, "Police," 116.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Rabe-Hemp, "Female," 432-433.
\textsuperscript{58} Martin, "Police," 122.
\textsuperscript{60} Steel and Lovrich, "Equality," 56.
\textsuperscript{61} Garcia, "Difference," 336; Poteyeva and Sun, "Gender," 512.
Regarding women in the police force, retention is a problem due to the nature of the job, and the working practices of policing.

Recruitment

People are recruited to jobs in a number of ways, and for a number of reasons. In the police force, research suggests that people who offer certain traits are sought. Police standards are designed to exclude people who do not display the “macho traits of toughness, confidence, bravery, emotional detachment, and aggressiveness.”63 Gender norms play a vital role in the lack of recruitment of women and in the failure to retain women due to their dictation of what is socially appropriate for men and women. In this way, a certain kind of person is wanted. Because the central discourse surrounding policing is male dominated, the recruitment patterns and potential candidates are based on these requirements. This results in an exclusion of women, not entirely, but to a large extent. If these traits – which are understood as typically female – are sought after, then the method of recruitment employed perpetuates gender discrimination in the police force. Despite the fact that particular traits are sought after, certain police departments discriminate without accountability. For example, rural and urban departments operate quite differently. If police organizations employed less than fifty employees (usually small rural police departments), they were not held accountable to the Crime Control Act of 1973, enacted to ban sex discrimination in America.64 Literature suggests that women police have proportionately lower advancements than policemen, in any case.65 In these ways, it is apparent that gender discrimination is maintained through methods of recruitment.

Retention

Women are overrepresented in some divisions of policing, but extremely underrepresented overall. Women consisted of about 7% of police officers in Canada in 1991.66 This is intensified by the difficulty that police forces experience in retention of women. Because the nature of policing relies heavily on the shift system, women with children are often deterred from applying – or returning – to police work.67 As well, it is not uncommon for officers to believe that women will leave the

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65 Ibid.
police force in order to get married and have a baby. Holdaway and Parker’s study of a Northern police department of the UK showed that most men in the police force believed this to be true. The study also found that about one third of women also believed this to be the case. As the literature suggests, this results in problems of retention of women in the police force. In this vein, police departments have become increasingly concerned due to fairly large numbers of female officers resigning. Due to the high rates of resignation among women, there is pressure from forces to encourage women into part-time work after the birth of their children. However, researchers have pointed out problems with the current operation of front-line policing, primarily the fact that it operates incongruently with part-time work. Front-line policing presents a distinct path to follow, in which a new recruit goes through stages in order to obtain a specialist role or a promotion. This is the time that women are most likely to resign and have children, and cannot be accommodated in positions that allow them reduced hours. Statistics and studies show that women continue to be challenging supervisors to retain their positions. An important reason for this is believed to be the inaccessibility of police work practices for women. Hence, these are ways in which gender discrimination is enabled in the police work force.

Socially Constructed Discourse

Discourse is a form of communication that is used to construct ideas and paradigms. It is an important tool for forming and maintaining power structures as those who create the discourse have the power. Although an abstract concept, discourse manifests itself in the construction social norms. In policing, discourse is a significant tool for constructions of what police work means. The discourse is arguably oppressive to women in this field, yet policewomen often ‘consent’ to the dominant constructions. It may be considered oppressive due to the fact that this male dominated profession has defined the discourse and thus, has the power. For women to change this discourse there must be a large enough percentage of women in the police force. This representation however, is a challenging task, as the rate of female officers is not increasing quickly. Gender discrimination is mainly

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69 Holdaway and Parker, “Policing,” 40-64.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 54.
73 Ibid., 67.
75 Poteyeva and Sun, “Gender,” 512-513.
based on socially constructed discourse surrounding working practices, and conceptions of identity.

**Working Practices**

Gender discrimination is perpetuated through the discourse surrounding the police force. Assertions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' influence perceptions of what the reality of policing is. This hinging distinction poses many problems if, in fact, policing is not as conflictual and demanding as is frequently portrayed. It would bring into question the "working practices that currently operate to exclude some women". In this way, discourse of what policing actually means is skewed in favour of men and the masculine roles they have assigned to police work. Even after women gained a larger prominence in the police force, the notions of what 'real' police work is have remained. Men's authority and power to control situations give them accorded respect. Women are accorded work that is seen to compliment their nurturing nature and propensity towards emotional labour. Yet, research demonstrates that female officers are not in fact more empathetic, altruistic, or helpful than male officers in their contact with citizens. However, because the discourse of working practices dictates conceptions of masculinity and femininity, the challenge would be changing what working practices are and what the reality of police work is. As well, the kind of language used to talk about women and their appearance "treats them as invisible, devalues them, and affects their ability to perform effectively". This makes integration in police work a challenge for women.

**Identity**

Discourse plays a large role in the construction of identity. Women and men are often equally subject to internalizing dominant discourse to form perceptions of self. Gender scripts are the expected dynamics for socializing based on acting out roles defined by gender norms. For policing, this means that women and men are supposed to act differently based on their gender. As discussed by Rabe-Hemp, "women, by their gender identification, often fail to meet these macho expectations associated with the image of a 'crime-fighter'". In this way, personal constructions of identity can inhibit roles based on expectations. For women, identity is a tricky concept. Martin discusses women who identify as 'police' first and 'women' second, and vice versa.

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77 Rabe-Hemp, "Female," 430.
78 Martin and Jurik, "Justice," 124.
79 Ibid.
versa.\textsuperscript{81} This influences a woman’s outlook on policing as it dictates her perspective and what she values. Women must defend their identities as police officers.\textsuperscript{82} In these ways, it is difficult for women to form an identity due to discourse surrounding the police force.

**Conclusion**

The male-dominated police force has continued to exhibit discrimination. It was a challenge for women to first enter the police force due to the solidarity of the male police fraternity. Women were met with much resistance to their presence in policing, yet the numbers were on a slow rise. Still, women do not have enough of a presence to make changes to the structure of policing. Gender discrimination is apparent throughout the police system and is enabled by the structure of policing. This is founded on the patriarchy that is integral to current policing ideas and practices. Conceptions of emotional labour limit women’s work and perpetuate gender discrimination due to the belief that women are channelled into certain jobs based on what their sex prescribes. Difficulties regarding recruitment and retention of women also pose a problem of gender discrimination based on how they are set up. Recruitment often requires a certain set of standards that are predisposed to favour men. Retention of women is difficult due to the incongruence experienced with the job as well as caring for children. Lastly, the discourse surrounding policing maintains gender discrimination through conceived working practices, and the formation of identity. Gender discrimination in the police force continues to exist – and is allowed to persist – due, in part, to these factors. Literature suggests that change is happening as our societal gender norms are changing, and with increasing support of women in policing, barriers will continue to be broken down and women will be more equally represented in the police force.


\textsuperscript{82} Dick and Cassell. “Position,” 68.
Works Cited


FOOTNOTES


