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Gender Differences: Male Officers' Perception Toward Women's Occupational Barriers in Federal Law Enforcement



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Synonyms

Federal law enforcement; Gender differences;
Gender inequality; Occupational barriers

Definitions

Gender differences in public administration are gendered norms and practices that make clear distinctions between agentic (i.e., masculine) and communal (i.e., feminine) attributes in the workplace. Examples include both organizational and occupational elements such as employee representation, organizational culture, social rules and structure, gender bias and stereotypes, gender roles, and physical and mental differences. Occupational barriers are impediments that negatively impact women's recruitment, retention, and promotion in the workplace.

Introduction

Since the passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, the changes in employee demographics continue to make gender an important issue in public administration. For example, women's labor force participation increased from 43.9% in 1972 to 57.0% in 2017, and overall, women account for 46.9% of all working Americans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). However, not all occupations have seen an increase in women's participation. Federal law enforcement is one of those occupations. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, women account for just 15.5% of all full-time federal law enforcement officers authorized to carry firearms and make arrests (Reaves 2012). Although women have worked in federal law enforcement for almost 50 years, the scholarship on their experiences – aside from local and state local law enforcement – has only grown in recent years. This chapter focuses on women's occupational barriers in federal law enforcement and highlights gender differences, specifically male officers' perceptions, to those challenges women face in the workplace.

Background

Gendered Norms and Practices in Law Enforcement

Although women have made great progress in policing, the public continues to view law enforcement as a heavily male profession, creating gender stereotypes of occupational roles that are not useful for women in policing (Wells and Alt 2005). For example, women tend not to possess agentic (i.e., masculine) traits that are valued in policing such as objectivity, aggressiveness, bravery, suspicion, and strength required to fight crime and apprehend individuals (Miller 1999), but rather communal (i.e., feminine) traits that are disregarded but perhaps better suited for today's law enforcement such as communication and conflict resolution (Swan 2016). While judicial and legislative efforts to diversify law enforcement agencies have had some success, sex-based discrimination to include sexual harassment and exclusion from certain tasks associated with masculinity is part of the daily lives of women in law enforcement (Tougas et al. 2005). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that many male officers continue to believe that women cannot handle the job physically, and they tend to view their female colleagues as emotional, untrustworthy, and in some instances, resentful toward women for advancing in the organization, highlighting the continual gender roles and stereotypes that are seen in organizations that are traditionally male dominated (Hale 1999; Martin and Jurik 2006; Rabe-Hemp 2008). This places artificial occupational barriers, both deliberate and through unconscious bias, that negatively impact the recruitment, retention, promotion, and evaluation of women in law enforcement.

Gender Differences to Women's Occupational Barriers in Federal Law Enforcement

Decades of research have shown that men and women experience workplace matters and interactions, as well as gender issues differently. Since law enforcement is a male-dominated occupation, the perceptions presumed by male federal officers provide a majority viewpoint that emphasizes stereotyping and gender roles, adversely

impacting women's value and acceptance in federal policing. To illustrate, in their study on perceptions to women's occupational barriers in federal law enforcement, Yu and Rauhaus (2019) found that gender differences exist between the experiences encountered by female officers and the perception of male officers to those experiences for all occupational barriers.

First, the perception of federal law enforcement as an inclusive organization varied widely among gender (Yu and Rauhaus 2019). An overwhelming majority of male officers (92.3%) perceived an organizational culture of gender equity, whereas only 59.3% of female officers felt the same. These perceptions can be interpreted in two ways. While 40.7% of female officers perceived an unsupportive culture, lending credibility to prior research on the continued existence of the masculine culture in law enforcement (Dick and Jankowicz 2001; Franklin 2005; Hughes 2011; Paoline 2003), the latter suggests that the organizational culture in federal law enforcement is changing – albeit slowly – to reflect the diversity of modern law enforcement agencies and the communities they represent. Although federal law enforcement does not display the extreme gender prejudices as noted in many state and local law enforcement organizations (Martin and Jurik 2006; Rabe-Hemp 2008), mild traces are still visible.

Second, perceptions of negative attitudes from male colleagues and sex-based discrimination to include sexual harassment also varied widely among gender (Yu and Rauhaus 2019). Over a quarter (28.6%) of the female officers perceived experiencing pervasive negative attitudes from their male colleagues, whereas less than a fifth (18.2%) of the male officers perceived women experiencing workplace resentments by male colleagues. While the overwhelming majority (75.6%) of male officers appears supportive of their female colleagues, remnants of an organizational culture that celebrates masculine values and the belief that women cannot handle the job physically or emotionally still exist (Hale 1999; Martin and Jurik 2006; Rabe-Hemp 2008). In addition, the federal government's efforts with eliminating sexual harassment appear to be working (e.g.,

Notification and Federal Employee Anti-discrimination and Retaliation Act of 2002). Despite the gender disparity – 12.2% of the female officers reported experiencing sexual harassment, whereas only 3.2% of the male officers' perceived women experiencing sexual harassment – the overall trends are positive. The percentages were much higher in previous studies on women in federal law enforcement (Schulz 2009; Yu 2017). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for sex-based discrimination. Almost a third (29.3%) of the female officers reported experiencing sexual discrimination in regards to job assignments, training opportunities, or promotions, whereas only 4.2% of the male officers perceived women experiencing sexual discrimination. As mentioned previously, this is consistent with male officers' belief that federal law enforcement is an inclusive organization (92.3%) that promotes gender equity. As a male-dominated occupation, the disparity is not surprising since gender differences in perception are based on personal and workplace reality. Women often perceive greater sex-based discrimination in masculine agencies, and occupational barriers are often invisible to most men, since they are not exposed to them in the same manner as women (Kerr et al. 2002).

Third, a perceived glass ceiling to promotions and lack of female role models also varied widely by gender (Yu and Rauhaus 2019). Almost a third (29.8%) of the female officers perceived a glass ceiling to promotions, whereas only 19.4% of the male officers perceived a glass ceiling to promotions exist for women in federal law enforcement. The disparity is interesting because far more male officers (54.5%) had supervisory experience than the female officers (35.2%) in their study, despite both having near identical tenure at their current agency. Likewise, an overwhelming majority (75.9%) of the female officers perceived a lack of high-ranking female role models in federal law enforcement, whereas only half (51.8%) of the male officers perceived the same. The disparity is again particularly interesting because there are actually more male officers (17.8%) occupying higher grades (GS-14 and higher) than female officers (13.5%) in their study. In addition, there

was not one single female in the Senior Executive Service at this organization, a recurring complaint among female officers. However, unlike the other occupational barriers discussed in this chapter, the masculine culture of law enforcement likely contributed to male officers believing there are too many female leaders due to perceived preferential or affirmative treatment.

Lastly, perceived presence of work-life balance initiatives was notable among gender (Yu and Rauhaus 2019). Almost a third (30.2%) of the female officers perceived their agency had adopted family-friendly policies in the workplace, whereas over half (51.6%) of the male officers perceived the same. The disparity is again interesting and likely as a result of those who actually utilize these types of policies and programs. Although work-life balance initiatives are available to both male and female officers, women tend to take advantage of these policies far more than men, and would notice if certain programs are offered or not (Feeny and Stritch 2017).

Occupational barriers will continue to be factor for recruiting, retaining, and promoting more women in federal law enforcement; however, recognizing the marginalization of women's occupational barriers by male colleagues should be helpful for organizations facing a similar problem propel leaders to move beyond awareness to action. Recent national and international developments have brought renewed attention on gender equality in the workforce. For example, the United Nations campaign identified as *HeForShe* believes that gender equality is not a women's issue but a human rights issue that requires equal participation and commitment from men. The campaign incites high-ranking men to accelerate the achievement of gender equality by advocating for the removal of workplace barriers that prevent women from achieving their potential. Until then, organizations cannot create the systematic and sustainable change needed to achieve gender equality. This is especially important for male-dominated occupations such as law enforcement, as men are more likely to hold executive-level management positions and can implement change. All leaders must advocate zero tolerance in regards to sex-based discrimination to include

sexual harassment, as well as the old boys club mentality that adversely impact women at work and promotion boards. Eliminating even one barrier is a step toward gender equality in the workplace.

Conclusion

Gender differences will continue to exist in federal law enforcement as long as policing is seen as a masculine occupation. However, any effort for increasing the presence of women in federal law enforcement should take the perceptions of male officers into account to gain insight into women's mistreatment in this nontraditional occupation. Although federal law enforcement does not exhibit the extreme gender prejudices noted in many state and local law enforcement organizations (Martin and Jurik 2006; Rabe-Hemp 2008), mild remnants of a masculine culture are still visible. And since organizational cultures develop over time, creating a new culture is often met with great resistance; however, existing research suggests that the culture in federal law enforcement is changing – albeit slowly – to reflect the needs of a modern law enforcement agency and the communities they represent.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Bureaucracy and Gender](#)
- ▶ [Gender Representation in the Public Sector](#)
- ▶ [Public Administration and Gender Issues](#)
- ▶ [Women and Work-Life Balance in Federal Law Enforcement](#)

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