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Women in Law Enforcement: The American Experience

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Abstract
Throughout history, the role that women have played in the criminal justice system has been one that has been significantly different than has been experienced by men. Societal expectations of women have shaped the views of the public regarding what is appropriate for females. This has been true whether the women were employed within a prison or jail capacity, whether law enforcement oriented, or if the female was an offender. It is safe to say that women have often had restrictions placed upon them by expectations of what is gender-appropriate. These perspectives, for the most part, have been generated by a system that has normally been led and governed by men.

Keywords: Women in Policing; Equal Employment Opportunity; USA; "Glass Ceiling"

Women in the Criminal Justice Field

Through most of modern history, professions within the criminal justice field have tended to be male-dominated. In early United States history, women who worked in law enforcement usually did so in positions that dealt with social service functions, clerical work, juvenile work, or vice investigations (Martin and Jurik, 1996). In the field of corrections, women usually held the position of matron, responsible for looking over women who had been incarcerated (Rafter, 1985).

The role of women in the criminal justice field has seen more change during the 1970's than during any other period. In part, this was due to the passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Act in 1972. This legislation prohibited discrimination in hiring on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. This meant that selection procedures, criteria, and standards were modified so that they had to be related to the job functions in order to be considered. This law was instrumental to opening up positions within the field of law enforcement to females. The use of affirmative action processes as well as court injunctions helped to ensure that women were included in all ranks and divisions.

Women in Law Enforcement

The first woman reportedly employed in the law enforcement field was Alice Stebbin Wells, born in 1873. Alice Wells began her career with the Los

Pakistan Journal of Criminology Volume 5, No.1, Jan-Jun,2013,pp. 97–104

Angeles Police Department, but her eventual acceptance as a police officer with full powers of arrest did not come easy. Ms. Wells was initially a religious minister in Kansas and eventually desired a change of careers. In order to be considered for police work, she had to petition the Mayor, the Police Commissioner, and the City Council of Los Angeles. Alice Wells joined the Los Angeles police department on September 12th, 1910. She eventually became the first president of the International Association of Police Women (now known as the International Association of Women Police), a major lobbying group for female officers.

Prior to 1890, police agencies had normally employed women only for the care of female prisoners. After Wells successfully petitioned for a place in the LAPD, she was equipped with a telephone call box, a police rule book and first aid book, and Policewoman's badge number 1. Wells was assigned to work with the LAPD juvenile division, and was quickly subject of an order issued by the force that ruled that adolescent females could only be questioned by women police officers. Wells continued her career supervising the security at skating rinks and dance halls, as well as interacting with female members of the public. Two years after Wells joined the force, two other female officers were sworn in. Later sixteen other cities had hired police officers as a direct result of Policewomen Well's activities

During the early years of females employed in the police profession, there was a need for the police to work with juveniles and this led to women being assigned to these responsibilities. Indeed, the first women in policing were frequently assigned to juvenile divisions. This was due to stereotypes that held women as maternal and therefore better able to deal with children and adolescents than male police officer might have been (Comeau & Klofas, 2010). These women were usually referred to as police matrons and were given different duties from male police officers. Often, these women would perform clerical duties, enforce minor city ordinance rules (such as parking tickets), or other similar tasks when they were not working with youth.

During World War I (1911-1915), women came into policing to fill the positions of male officers as they would twenty years later in World War II (Price & Gavin, 1981). These new female officers operated as auxiliary police and were tasked with war-related duties, such as ensuring prostitutes were not in or around military camps. They also served as general supervision within army camps (Price & Gavin, 1981). By 1920, women were employed as police officers in over 200 cities in the United States (Price & Gavin, 1981).

Pakistan Journal of Criminology Volume 5, No.1, Jan-Jun,2013,pp. 97–104

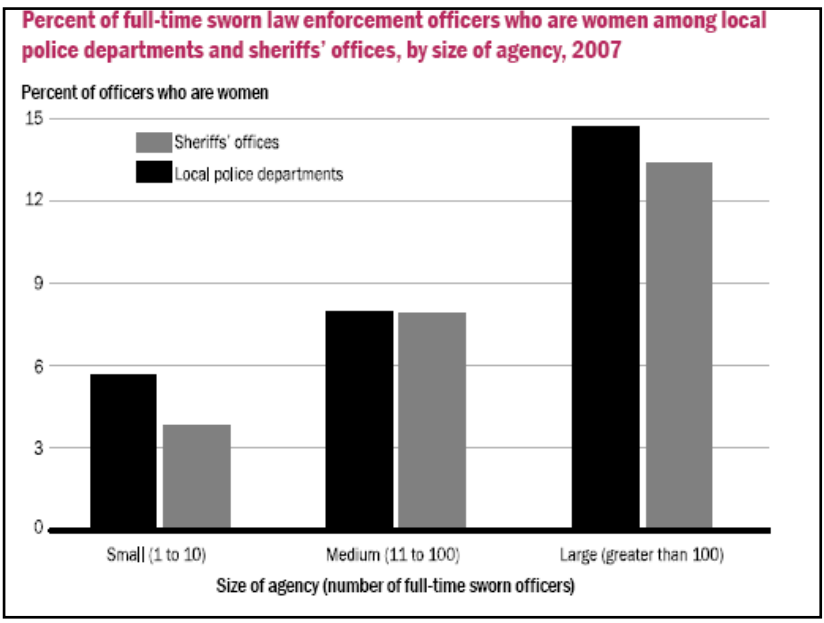
During the 1940's, both prior to and during World War II, women were again actively recruited and employed in tasks traditionally held by men, including policing. For the duration of the war, women acted as auxiliary officers (Price & Gavin, 1981). After World War II, many women went back to home life, often against their own wishes (Price & Gavin, 1981). At times, women were considered for the law enforcement positions as long as they were not overly feminine or masculine (Garcia, 2003). The 1940s saw the rise of women in traffic control and parking enforcement among Southern US police departments. This was in part due to personnel shortages caused by low wages; female traffic enforcers proved so successful that they began to be hired in this capacity throughout the United States (Grennan, 2000).

During the 1950s there was an influx of women into different professions, including policing. In this decade over twenty-five hundred women were employed as law enforcement officers. Of interest is that in order to he hired, job requirements included being attractive, empathetic, selfless, well-adjusted, dignified, tactful, and sensible (Garcia, 2003). However, as in prior decades, these females were police officers in name only and performed only as specialized social workers. Their gender was inextricably seen as being tied to their ability to perform as officers. Many departments believed that females could only successfully perform their work if they behaved in a stereotypically feminine manner (Garcia, 2003). Despite normally having higher qualifications than their male counterparts, female officers were made well aware of the fact that they were in no way replacing men, but rather aiding and assisting them to the best of their feminine capacity (Garcia, 2003).

At the start of the 1960s, there were more than 5,000 female officers serving across the USA (Garcia, 2003). However, they were largely placed in "Women's Bureaus," performing duties similar to what they had done for the previous half-century, i.e. protecting women and youths from society's ills, and handling juvenile cases and runaways (Grennan, 2000). The most relevant change that had been noted over the previous fifty years had been the placement of female officers on traffic control and enforcement duties since the 1940s (Garcia, 2003).

Figure 4.1: Percent of Full-Time Female Law Enforcement in Police and Sheriff

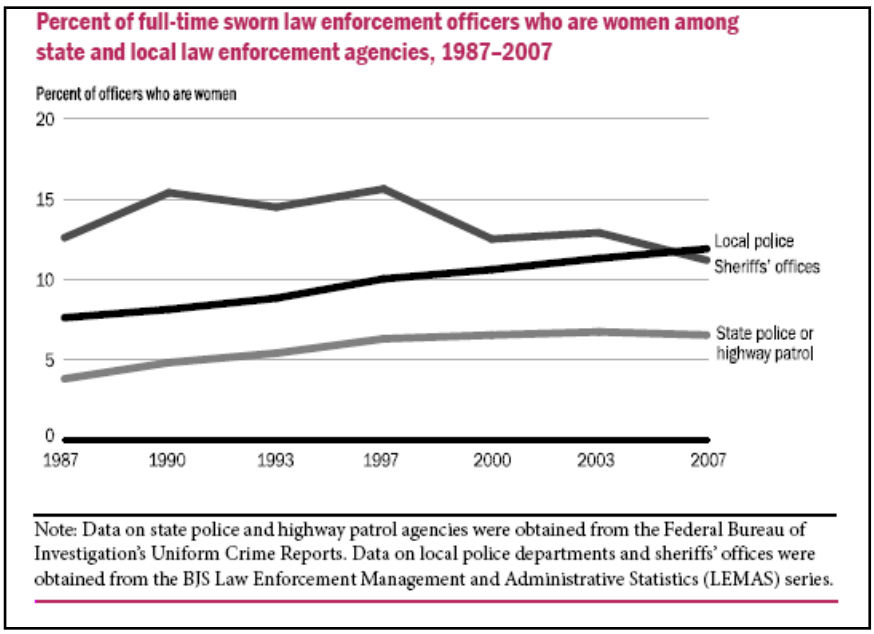
Agencies by Size of Agency



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (2010). *Women in law enforcement, 1987-2008*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 4.2: Percent of Full-Time Female Law Enforcement in State and Local Agencies

Pakistan Journal of Criminology Volume 5, No.1, Jan-Jun,2013,pp. 97–104



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (2010). *Women in law enforcement, 1987-2008*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Today, as a result of the 60's and 70's push for positive changes for women in the workforce, female police officers engage in the full range of police activities that their male counterparts are involved in. Even though this is true, women still account for around 15% of all sworn law enforcement officers in large agencies across the United States. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 provide data that illustrates the representation of women in different types of police agencies in the USA.

The "Glass Ceiling"

There is some debate as to whether the "glass ceiling" still exists for women employed within the criminal justice system. The "glass ceiling" is a term for official or unofficial barriers to promotion that exist for women within the workforce. For all practical purposes, it could be considered that some sort of obstacle does indeed exist because there are substantially fewer female supervisors than there are male supervisors within most correctional facilities. Further, throughout history, women who worked in prisons and jails have tended to do so in facilities for women, and since the female offender

population was proportionally smaller than the male population, the need for women to work in corrections has been much less than that of men.

In addition, there are social constraints in society that tend to frown upon women working within the prison environment. Historically, this type of employment was not considered 'ladylike' and therefore instilled a social aversion toward this type of employment. Coupled with the intensely masculine nature of the prison subculture, the hard-nosed population of male guards who already worked in prisons, and the dangerousness of the job, it is not surprising that during the past 100 years, women have not been commonly employed in this field. However, the modern era of corrections has seen a change and women are more commonly seen working in prisons and jails and in parole and probation.

An employee's expectations and internal belief systems often determine how much success they may have in their field of work. People placed in situations in which they are powerless and with limited promotional potential tend to lower their goals and develop approaches to work that are defensive and not postured for upward mobility. In many cases, women may not utilize the same set of aggressive social skills that their male counterparts employ and may therefore be at a socialized disadvantage. These skills may need to be learned on the job, and for women in particular, there may be a need to learn about the prison environment's social cues. This means that women may have to adjust their body language and facial expressions to assert an authoritative image rather than one that is pleasant. In all cases, the stereotypical 'subservient' image of women must be avoided. Likewise, attempts to make themselves look attractive have also proven to be problematic within a prison setting. This means that the correctional environment may create an atmosphere that exposes females to socialization skills that are counter to the practical demands needed in the field.

However, many women in corrections report that even when they have the skills and desire to work in corrections, they are often still at a disadvantage. This is due to the effects of the "glass ceiling" which prevents them from being included in informal social circles, gaining appropriate mentoring and on-the-job training from their senior male counterparts, or having access to positions that are more dangerous but more prestigious within the informal guard subculture. Indeed, paternalistic desires to protect female officers may prevent them from working some job assignments and this places female officers at a disadvantage in terms of training and experience, resulting in impaired promotional opportunity.

Pakistan Journal of Criminology Volume 5, No.1, Jan-Jun,2013,pp. 97–104

Women as Supervisors in the Criminal Justice System

Female supervisors in law enforcement agencies are important to have from both intra-agency perspective and community relations perspectives. It is advisable that police chiefs, particularly in larger jurisdictions, ensure that female officers receive opportunities for assignments and training that prepare them for promotion. A failure to do so can lead to underprepared candidates in their ranks and can be grounds for civil litigation. In addition, administrators can, quite naturally, leave themselves open to lawsuits based on discrimination if they neglect the pool of female officers in favor of male personnel. Regardless, law enforcement executives should in practice seek to prepare their female officers for promotion simply because it is ethical to do so and because, as leaders, it is their responsibility to ensure that all personnel under their supervision are treated with respect, equality, and professionalism.

In addition, chiefs, sheriffs, and other administrators should pay close attention to whether women are applying for promotional opportunities within their respective agency. Clearly this should be encouraged. If there is a disproportionately low number who apply, it is the leader's responsibility to determine the reasons for this. Executives in police agencies will need to ensure that promotion processes are not overly subjective and will need to also make certain that the process is free from bias, whether intended or accidental.

In relation to the field of corrections, it is advisable that prison, jail, parole and probation agencies continue to recruit and promote more female representatives into the management arena. The role of the supervisor is one that requires effective communication skills and the ability to share the agency's mission and values. If the agency is truly sincere about professionalism, ethical behavior, and a desire to develop a safe institution, then having optimal female representation can add to all of these objectives. This is especially true since the inclusion of women with supervisory authority will tend to counter the negative aspects of the prison subculture. This will also create an organizational environment that does not enhance the sexist views that male inmates tend to hold within the institution.

Finally, women in supervisory positions within the judicial and juvenile justice systems have not been as restricted as females working in law enforcement and correctional positions. Indeed, many court workers, clerks, and other staff in courthouses around the US are women. In addition, supervisors tend to be drawn from these ranks and are also often females. Likewise, women have traditionally been well represented within administrative and supervisory positions within the juvenile justice field. The

same is true of females employed in child protection and family services. Contemporary trends have revealed that the proportion of females in criminal justice and related management positions continues to improve.

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