

# Women in the Police Force

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by Katherine Spillar

**Women officers are less inclined to use deadly force, even though they are involved in just as many violent confrontations.**

*The following article is excerpted from the testimony of Katherine Spillar (National Coordinator, The Fund for the Feminist Majority) before the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, May 13, 1991. Though it refers to American police forces, the information and recommendations are relevant for Canada.*

**S**tudies in the 1980s and early 1990s have shown women to be more effective than men in many facets of policing. Women police officers rely less on violence and more on verbal skills in handling altercations, they are less likely to be involved in "serious unbecoming conduct" (1), and they are more effective in handling female victims of violence.

In his 1983 study of the performance of women in the Los Angeles Police Department, Kenneth Hickman noted that women had superior communication skills, field tactics, initiative and self-confidence, and were more adept at public relations. The 1990 Claremont Graduate School study on the selection, recruitment, training, appointment and performance of women and minorities found that "females on probation were the subject of significantly fewer citizen complaints than either male or minority officers" (2).

In perhaps the most significant empirical research on the differences in the use of force between women and men police officers, Sean Grennan studied the 3,515 complaints filed against the New York City Police Department in 1989. Women officers received fewer complaints, were less inclined to use deadly force and were involved in fewer shooting incidents, even though they were involved in just as many violent confrontations as their male counterparts. Grennan concluded:

*The reality of the information related to the [lower] proportion of shooting incidents involving female officers and the [lower] number of civilian complaints against female officers is that these figures have remained, consistently, at the same levels for the past seven years. This, of course, seems to indicate that female officers have not accepted the overly aggressive style of policing that has become the trademark of most male officers.* (3)

## **Les femmes dans la police**

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Des études ont montré que les femmes font à bien des égards de meilleures policières que les hommes. Elles s'appuient moins sur la violence et davantage sur leurs talents oratoires, elles sont moins susceptibles d'avoir un comportement tout à fait inconvenant, elles sont plus tendres et plus coopératives avec les femmes victimes de violence. En fait, une étude effectuée par Katherine Van Wormer suggère que la propension à la violence d'un policier et la résistance qu'il oppose aux policières font qu'il est contre-productif. Une autre étude cite plusieurs cas où le policier qui était arrivé le premier sur la scène d'un viol profita de la vulnérabilité de la victime pour la violer à son tour.

Si on augmente le nombre des policières, les comportements misogynes et les tendances à blâmer les femmes diminueront, les femmes victimes de violence seront moins réticentes à signaler une agression à la police, et la force nécessaire pour résoudre les conflits sera moindre en raison des qualités de médiatrices des femmes.

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**In several cases, the police officer first reporting to the scene of a rape actually sexually assaulted the woman again.**

In an earlier article entitled "Findings on the Role of Officer Gender in Violent Encounters with Citizens," Grennan writes:

*Police officials and the public have speculated that because women lacked the physical stature and body strength of male officers a female officer may be more inclined to use a firearm than her male counterpart. This research indicates that this belief is incorrect. Women police officers ... lack a need to project the "macho" image that seems to be inherent in the personality of most male officers. The female officer, with her less aggressive personality, is more likely to calm a potentially violent situation and avoid injury to all of the participants. [emphasis added] (4)*

Studies show that because of their less authoritarian personalities, there is less likelihood of escalation of potentially violent situations with women police officers than with men. Researcher Carol Ann Martin found that "Women have proven that they have excellent communication skills which can be extremely helpful in police-citizen encounters where there may be potential violence. Quite often if the male officer is of the John Wayne-type he will provoke a fight or violence, instead of calming down the situation" (5).

In an extensive review of the research on women in policing, Joseph Balkin reports that "policemen see police work as involving *control through authority*, while policewomen see it as a public service. The women's orientation is more likely to result in better relations with the public and a better image of police department" (6). Balkin went on to suggest that "...in some respects at least, women are better suited for police work than men ... not all women are able to handle all police jobs - but neither are men" (7).

Katharine Van Wormer went even further in an article entitled "Are Males Suited to Police Patrol Work?". She found that the policeman's proclivity for violence and his resistance to women officers tends to make him counter-productive. His attitudes jeopardize both community and inter-police relations and threaten his ability to effectively serve his community. Van Wormer concludes that policewomen meet the public better and are better at dealing with rape victims and domestic violence. To overcome the men's shortcomings, Van Wormer proposed police departments create "special" selection and training policies for male recruits.

### **More Women Officers Improves Police Response to Violence Against Women**

The gross absence of women on the police force not only contributes to the problems of police violence, but violence against women is treated less seriously. Violence against women is a nationwide epidemic; yet the majority of violent crimes against women go unreported, uninvestigated, and unpunished.

Police departments have shown a lack of serious attention to domestic violence. As a result, women victims are reluctant to call the police because they believe the officers won't help or, worse yet, will side with the male perpetrator of violence. The views expressed by and reinforced within the male-dominated police department serve to obstruct justice for women victims. Jalna Hanmer and associates explain:

Research indicates that police attitudes towards crimes such as rape, sexual assault, and battering include assumptions about male rights and female blame. Police attitudes ... are likely to dissuade women from complaining about men's violence. (8)

Victims of rape and domestic violence often report feeling humiliated, accused and alienated from the criminal justice system - the very system that is supposed to help

them. One study found that in several cases the police officer who first reported to the scene of a rape actually took advantage of the victim's vulnerable situation to *sexually assault her again* (9).

In many instances, there is simply *no* response by the police to male violence against women. An internal investigation by the Oakland Police Department found that 90% of the sexual assault reports it ignored in 1989 and 1990 should have been investigated. According to *The Los Angeles Times*, "police administrators called for the investigation in January after *The San Francisco Examiner* revealed that nearly one in four women who reported a rape or an attempted rape were ignored" (10).

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## **Update**

On July 9, 1991, the Independent Commission issued its report. The Commission's findings on the relationship of police brutality to officer gender and the impacts of sex discrimination and sexism within the LAPD are compelling:

- that no females were among the top 120 officers with the most use of force reports, and no females were among the top 132 officers with the most combined use of force reports, personnel complaints, and officer-involved shootings;
- that continued discrimination against female officers deprives the Department of specific skills, and contributes to the problem of excessive force;
- that the sexual harassment in routine treatment of women officers and women victims of violence, most notably women beaten by male partners, is severe, including participation by male officers themselves in severe harassment and physical violence toward women officers and victims.

Nearly one year later, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously passed a number of proposals initiated by the Feminist Majority to gender balance the LAPD and address the serious inappropriate police response to women victims of violence. The City's new Chief of Police quickly established a joint working group of command level officers and Department specialists to meet with feminist experts to develop a blueprint for implementation of the directives. That working group will make its report in May of 1993. For more information, contact the Feminist Majority at 8105 West Third Street, Suite 1, Los Angeles, California, 90048, (213) 651-0495.

A 1985 study by Homant and Kennedy found a strong correlation between police officer gender and the amount of "involvement" displayed by the officer reporting to a scene of domestic violence. Women police officers believed more strongly in the need to show sympathy and understanding in order to successfully handle the dispute. Additionally, women officers were more convinced of the importance of responding to family fights as a crucial police duty and less apt to think "that a certain amount of physical fighting between couples was to be expected" (11). Women officers expressed greater disagreement that marital rape should be legal. The Homant and Kennedy study concluded "that policewomen have a different set of values and goals for dealing with family fights." Battered women "who had had contact with policewomen had a more favorable evaluation of police in general, and policewomen in particular, than did those women without policewomen contact" (12).

Clearly, police officer attitude plays a pivotal role in how that officer approaches incidents of violence against women. Daniel Saunders and Patricia Size, in a 1986 study, report that:

*Traditional views of women were associated with holding rape victims accountable for their rapes. ... Attitudes determine the extent of officer action, with stronger sexist attitudes and greater general approval of marital violence associated with a lessened tendency to arrest, counsel, or refer in domestic violence cases (13).*

Sexist attitudes and approval of marital violence among police officers correlate with greater police violence: it should be noted that the same officers who beat Rodney King so severely referred to an earlier domestic violence call as a scene out of "Gorillas in the Mist."

Increasing the number of women in the police force will decrease the prevalence of anti-woman, victim-blaming attitudes which preclude the appropriate and critical handling of domestic violence and sexual assault cases. Women victims of violence will be less hesitant to report incidents of violence to police, as they will be more confident their pleas for help will be taken seriously. Women's stronger verbal mediation skills will also reduce the amount of force needed to resolve incidents of domestic violence.

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## **Formal Structures Needed for Gender Balance**

The goal must be a police force that reflects the community's entire population. But in order to increase the numbers of women in the Police Department across all police functions, it will be necessary to have formal plans and administrative structures for mandated change and gender balance.

Experts emphasize the need to create a "formal administrative structure" established specifically to achieve social equity for women in policing. Susan Martin, in *Women on the Move*, recommends police departments:

- concentrate voluntary affirmative action efforts on enlarging the pool of women recruits
- alter promotional standards to eliminate criteria that are irrelevant to supervisory ability or potential
- adopt stringent policies for dealing with sexual harassment
- alter work conditions to increase the number of women in recruitment training and assignments
- periodically monitor departments to ensure that women are not tracked into clerical (or "female") assignments.

Michael Hennessey, the Sheriff of San Francisco, writes: "the only way we can overcome the mistakes of the past is by implementing pro-active policies today." He concludes: "It is not enough to announce a commitment to equal opportunity we must reach out and bring these opportunities directly to those who have been traditionally under-represented" (14).

*The Fund for the Feminist Majority* is a national American organization specializing in research on the impacts of, and public policy responses to, the under-representation of women in decision-making positions and positions of authority in all sectors of society.

1. Patricia W. Lunnenborg, *Women Police Officers - Current Career Profiles*, Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1989, p.110.
2. "The Impact of Fanchon Blake v. City of Los Angeles," Claremont Graduate School Study, July 1990, p.108.
3. Sean Grennan, "Who is More Violent: The Male or Female Police Officer," Article submitted to *Glamour Magazine* for publication, April 1991.
4. Sean Grennan, "Findings on the Role of Officer Gender in Violent Encounters with Citizens," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 15:1, 1987,84.
5. Carol Ann Martin, "Women Police and Stress: Remarks," *The Police Chief*, March 1983, 108.
6. Joseph Balkin, "Why Policemen Don't Like Policewomen," *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 16, p.34.
7. Balkin, p.35.
8. Jalna Hanmer et al. *Women, Policing and Male Violence: International Perspectives*. Routledge: New York, 1989, pages 65 and 52, respectively. (See review in this issue.)
9. "Testimony Before the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families," Dean Kilpatrick, Ph.D., 1990.
10. "Police Were Wrong in Rapes, Chief Says," *Los Angeles Times*, 2/4/1992.
11. Robert J. Homant and Daniel B. Kennedy, "Police Perceptions of Spouse Abuse: A Comparison of Male and Female Officers," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 13: 29-47.
12. Homant and Kennedy, p. 42.
13. Daniel Saunders and Patricia Sire, "Attitudes About Woman Abuse Among Police Officers, Victims, and Victim Advocates," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 1,

1986: 25-42.

14. Michael Hennessey, *Law Enforcement News*, 2/28/1989, 8-9.

**PREVENTED!**

A few months after CAPP had done workshops in a Montreal school, a grade three student disclosed to her teacher that she was being sexually abused in her home. The girl told the teacher that the workshop allowed her to realize what was happening to her, and helped her to tell someone she trusted.

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