

Reforming Gender Bias in Police Recruitment and Hiring

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Article

Introduction

There's a traditional idea of what a police officer looks like to the average American citizen. Usually, the image is of a white, tall, middle-aged man with a serious expression. Over the past several decades, however, women have increasingly become a valuable addition to police work. In the 1970s, during the start of the modern era of policing, only two percent of police officers were women.¹ Today, that percentage has risen to thirteen.²

Northampton, Massachusetts, along with other cities, is part of the 30X30 initiative, a national effort to ensure that women make up at least thirty percent of police recruits by 2030. From 2015 to 2024, Police Chief Jody Kasper made history as Northampton's first-ever female police chief and the ninth woman to become an active chief in Massachusetts.²³ Under her leadership, the department became one of the most inclusive and forward-thinking in the country.

In 2017, Chief Kasper introduced a youth-engagement program designed to allow children to interact with officers and see firsthand that "police officers were friendly, supportive, and on their side."⁴ Programs like this help build trust and even encourage more people, especially girls and young women, to consider policing.

In an interview, Chief Kasper also emphasized how women often approach calls with more patience and attentiveness.⁵ She also points to the broader trust gap between police and communities, one rooted in a history of mistakes, and argues that change starts with accountability and "a need to accept responsibility."⁶ There is hope that the perception of police

¹ E.B.K. Vallance, *Women Police Officers, Up in the 70s, Still a Small Share*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Jan. 11, 1982. PJ Verrecchia, *Learning from the Perceptions of Women in Policing: A Survey of Women Police Officers*, Police Chief Online, Mar. 20, 2024.

² E.B.K. Vallance, *Women Police Officers, Up in the 70s, Still a Small Share*, , CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Jan. 11, 1982.

PJ Verrecchia, *Learning from the Perceptions of Women in Policing: A Survey of Women Police Officers*, Police Chief Online, Mar. 20, 2024

³ Northampton Massachusetts Police Dep't., *History*, <https://northamptonpolice.com/history/> (last visited Mar. 2025)

⁴ L. Enerson, *Getting Everyone on the Same Team in Northampton*, COMMONWEALTH BEACON, Mar. 2, 2017.

⁵ Enerson, *Getting Everyone on the Same Team*, *supra* note 4.

⁶ Enerson, *Getting Everyone on the Same Team*, *supra* note 4.

can improve, and part of that change begins with having more women in higher-ranking positions. Greater representation brings more empathy, transparency, and understanding to the work of protecting communities.

Despite nationwide reforms, women still face discrimination during police recruitment and later during academy training, which are both shaped by longstanding stereotypes and gender biases. Without consistent guidance and mentorship, especially around issues like work-life balance, physical standards, and training expectations, women continue to face more obstacles than men when trying to earn a badge. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 has broadened access to jobs previously closed to women, but the policing profession still has a lot of room for improvement.

Description of Legal Activity

Police recruitment refers to the initial hiring process. This stage typically consists of written exams, physical tests, medical evaluations, and a background investigation. Departments look for qualities like integrity, judgment, communication skills, and physical fitness. Only after being hired as a recruit does a person enter the police academy, which is the formal training program required before becoming a sworn police officer.⁷ Depending on the state and the department, the training can last between twelve and twenty-seven weeks, while the national academy takes about five months to complete.⁸ Before even starting the academy, there are financial and administrative barriers. Many states require application fees, entrance exam fees, academy tuition, fingerprinting, and more. In Massachusetts, applicants must be of a legal age, pass medical exams, and may be required to attend interviews.⁹

During the academy, recruits complete a physical fitness test designed to evaluate cardiovascular endurance and strength in the completion of obstacle courses, timed runs, and lifting assessments.¹⁰ These requirements exist because policing can be physically demanding, but the standards can feel dated or unnecessarily rigid.

The academy curriculum is broad and intended to ensure recruits understand the legal and ethical responsibilities of policing. Training includes an extensive and comprehensive knowledge of state and federal laws, courtroom procedures, arrest techniques, report writing, and professional conduct.¹¹ Additionally, training also includes firearms instruction, defensive tactics, and the use of tools such as tasers, pepper spray, and batons. Recruits must also practice communication, conflict de-escalation, and cultural awareness.

Due to high-intensity training with long runs, high-stress simulations, and strict discipline, many programs now incorporate non-stress training, similar to collaborative learning in the military.¹²

⁷ P. Staff, *Police Academy Training: What to Expect*, Police1, Feb. 20, 2025.

⁸ Staff, P. *Police academy training: What to expect*. Police1, Feb. 20, 2025.

⁹ Commonwealth of Mass., *Your Police Career in Massachusetts Begins Here*, <https://www.mass.gov> (last visited Mar. 1, 2025).

¹⁰ Staff, *Police Academy Training*, supra note 7.

¹¹ P Staff, *Police Academy Training*, supra note 7.

¹² P Staff, *Police Academy Training*, supra note 7.

Potential for Bias

Policing has historically been seen as a male occupation, and that culture still influences departmental attitudes. Many departments rely on an “occupational ethos”¹¹ that shapes how officers are expected to look, act, and lead. Because most departments are still majority male, ingroup/out-group bias can take hold,¹² leading to a diminishing eagerness for women to participate. As both implicit and explicit bias significantly impact the recruitment and hiring process, women are often rejected or feel defeated by the unrealistic standards that would otherwise be considered ineffectual for a man to consider.¹³ Physical tests also tend to reflect traditional assumptions about strength rather than emphasizing equally important skills like communication, empathy, and de-escalation, areas where research shows women often excel.¹⁴

In a recent study, it was found that female police officers, much like minority officers, are more likely to stay in lower-ranking positions.¹⁵ Due to the idea of what a police officer should represent, and what they should “be able to do,” there’s a significant amount of bias in the system that impacts the standards women must live up to. Another study suggests that four main issues interfere with the inclusion of women and minority groups.¹⁶ Those four major issues that limit inclusion include: “organizational and internal predictors”, “motivations and attitudes”, “effective recruitment strategies”, and “screening process barriers.”¹⁷ Departments dominated by men may hold implicit negative attitudes toward women seeking employment. This dynamic, tied again to in-group favoritism,¹⁸ contributes to male-dominated hiring practices, discouragement caused by physical testing standards, and even high rates of sexual harassment. Some women have described academy environments as having a “boy’s club” atmosphere.¹⁹

¹¹ David Alan Sklansky, *Not Your Father’s Police Department: Making Sense of the New Demographics of Law Enforcement*, 96 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 963 (2006).

¹² Henri Tajfel & John C. Turner, An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict, in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* 33–47 (William G. Austin & Stephen Worchel eds., 1979).

¹³ Cheryl Corley, *Increasing Women Police Recruits to 30% Could Help Change Departments’ Culture*, NPR, July 31, 2022.

¹⁴ Corley, *Increasing Women Police Recruits to 30% Could Help Change Departments’ Culture*, supra note 13

¹⁵ Sklansky, *Not Your Father’s Police Department*, supra note 11.

¹⁶ Richard H. Donohue, *Shades of Blue: A Review of the Hiring, Recruitment, and Selection of Female and Minority Police Officers*, 57 SOC. SCI. J. 123 (2020).

¹⁷ Donohue, *Shades of Blue: A Review of the Hiring, Recruitment, and Selection of Female and Minority Police Officers*, supra note 16

¹⁸ Tajfel & Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, supra note 12

¹⁹ Corley, *Increasing Women Police Recruits to 30% Could Help Change Departments’ Culture*, supra note 13

Proposed Reform

Because long-standing structures and traditions shape policing, departments often develop a specific internal culture that influences how they operate. “In theory, increasing the number of female officers may increase organizational agility through the creation of an alternative cultural ethos.”²⁰ Including a diverse population within the police force, both with gender and ethnicity, would, in turn, create significant balance and trust in the police throughout the community. To reduce gender bias, departments should implement mentorship and inclusion programs that help recruits understand expectations, navigate the academy, and feel supported from the start.²¹

Seeing and communicating with current officers could reassure recruits about the process of becoming an officer of the law, as they could discuss strategies to encourage inclusion. Implicit bias training should include practical education, such as scenario-based exercises, discussions of unconscious bias, and exposure to diverse community members to help the officers recognize how bias affects decision-making.

This could include implementing training in exposure to others and reaching out to schools directly to invite and educate students and raise awareness by creating opportunities for women in the workforce without discrimination.²² A holistic approach to recruitment, rather than just physical ability and appearance, would remove the constant stress of feeling excluded in training and work scheduling. Meaningful reform requires participation from officers at all levels, from patrol officers to chiefs, because each plays a role in shaping department culture.

Inclusion must be encouraged in all positions, as there is an imbalance of power between gender representations in departments. At the federal level, the Department of Justice could strengthen and standardize anti-discrimination guidelines to ensure consistent expectations for departments nationwide. In published data studies, the Department of Justice already seeks to raise awareness for the public.²³ Police unions are vital in maintaining and creating the norms and policies of individual departments; therefore, they must make it apparent that internal discrimination will not be tolerated.

Reforms should also include better-fitting equipment for women and workplace policies that protect pregnant officers and parents from being penalized in their careers.²⁴

Using “load-bearing” vests instead of the belt option could allow women to be more mobile and ready to perform the tasks of their assignments, and alter tasks for women with families and/or who are pregnant.²⁵ Departments like Madison, Wisconsin, offer pregnant officers

²⁰ Amie M. Schuck, *Female Officers and Community Policing: Examining the Connection Between Gender Diversity and Organizational Change*, 27 WOMEN & CRIM. JUST. 341 (2017).

²¹ S. Blonder, *Breaking Barriers: Women in Police Recruitment*, POLICE RECRUITING AGENCY, Feb. 19, 2024.

²² Blonder, *Breaking Barriers: Women in Police Recruitment*, supra note 21

²³ DOJ Off. of Inspector Gen., *Gender Equity in the Justice Department’s Law Enforcement Components* (June 26, 2018).

²⁴ Cheryl Corley, *Increasing Women Police Recruits to 30% Could Help Change Departments’ Culture*, NPR, July 31, 2022.

²⁵ Corley, *Increasing Women Police Recruits*, supra note 5.

temporary in-station roles, allowing them to stay active in the workplace without compromising their safety.²⁶

The 30X30 initiative encourages departments to evaluate how women are treated internally and adjust policies to support both recruitment and long-term retention. Federal policymakers could accelerate progress by encouraging or requiring departments to participate in initiatives like 30X30, ensuring broader and faster adoption of best practices. Together, these reforms, paired with wider adoption of the 30X30 Initiative, could significantly reduce implicit bias by expanding women's representation in leadership positions, strengthening mentorship, and standardizing inclusive training across departments. Creating new norms requires intentional awareness, active support for diversity, and commitment to changing outdated practices.

Addressing gender bias is essential for strengthening trust in law enforcement and ensuring that departments reflect the communities they serve. Dismantling the structural barriers that prevent equal treatment of women in recruitment will require assistance from the federal government, advocacy from leadership organizations, and educational strategies that encourage recruitment and discourage implicit biases against women.

²⁶ Cheryl Corley, *Increasing Women Police Recruits to 30% Could Help Change Departments' Culture*, NPR, July 31, 2022.