

Redefining Law Enforcement: Policy Innovations for Gender Equality in South African Law Enforcement



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ongoing issue of gender inequality within South African law enforcement, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms to establish an equitable and supportive environment for female officers. Despite the existing efforts to address these disparities, women in policing continue to face significant challenges, including systemic gender bias, limited opportunities for career advancement, and inadequate support structures. The research explored the perspectives of 18 current and retired women officers, who were identified as key informants due to their experience and understanding of the challenges faced by female officers. Using semi-structured interviews, the study uncovered four major themes which are leadership and attrition, factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in law enforcement, perceived barriers to career progression, and challenges encountered at police academies that affect women's ability to complete their training. The findings suggest that systemic barriers, lack of mentorship, and inadequate institutional policies remain critical issues that hinder women's full participation and success in law enforcement careers. The study highlights the need for law enforcement agencies to implement targeted policies that promote gender diversity in recruitment, provide equal access to professional development opportunities, and create a workplace culture that values and supports female officers. By addressing these key areas, law enforcement agencies can foster a more inclusive and effective organizational framework. This research contributes to the broader scholarship on gender inequality in policing by providing valuable insights into the specific challenges women face and recommending policy reforms that can help create a more gender-inclusive law enforcement sector.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in South African law enforcement has been a focal point for advocacy and reform, yet substantial challenges persist. Despite various initiatives, women remain underrepresented, particularly in senior ranks, within the South African Police Service (SAPS). A study by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in 2020 revealed that only about 27% of SAPS personnel are women, and this figure decreases further at higher ranks.¹ This disparity underscores the need for targeted policy changes to enhance the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women in law enforcement. Addressing these gaps is crucial not

¹ Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Gender in Policing: Improving the Representation and Status of Women in the South African Police Service," 2020.

only for achieving gender parity but also for improving the effectiveness and community trust in law enforcement agencies.

The barriers to gender equality in South African law enforcement are multifaceted, involving structural, cultural, and institutional challenges. Research by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2021 highlighted issues such as gender-based discrimination, lack of mentorship, and insufficient work-life balance policies as significant obstacles for female officers.² The implementation of inclusive recruitment policies, comprehensive training programs, and supportive career development frameworks is essential. For instance, the promotion of mentorship programs tailored to women's needs and the establishment of flexible working conditions are critical steps that can enhance female officers' career progression and job satisfaction. These measures align with broader international recommendations for gender equality in law enforcement, emphasizing the need for supportive work environments and equitable opportunities for advancement.

Moreover, the South African government and various stakeholders have recognized the importance of aligning with international standards and commitments to gender equality. The United Nations, through its UN Women program, has continually stressed the need for gender-sensitive policing practices globally. In South Africa, the 2022 UN Women report reiterated the significance of implementing policies that promote gender diversity and inclusion within law enforcement agencies.³ These recommendations advocate for the removal of systemic barriers to women's participation in law enforcement, including discriminatory practices and biases in recruitment and promotion processes. By adopting such international best practices, South Africa can make significant progress towards creating a more equitable and effective police service.

Furthermore, recent policy discussions and reforms in South Africa have begun to address these issues more systematically. The South African Police Service's Gender Policy Framework, revised in 2023, aims to enhance the representation and advancement of women in the service. This framework includes initiatives for gender sensitivity training, the establishment of gender desks within police stations, and measures to support work-life balance for female officers.⁴ Additionally, the South African government has committed to enhancing gender equality through legislative reforms and strategic plans, such as the National Policy Framework on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality.⁵ These efforts demonstrate a growing recognition of the need for comprehensive policy changes to support gender equality in law enforcement, aligning national strategies with global standards and best practices. The purpose of this study is to explore perceived factors associated with the lack of women recruitment, retention and progression of women officers within law enforcement agencies in the Gauteng province, South Africa. The second goal is to use this information to make policy recommendations that would help free the law enforcement sector from gender disparities and discrimination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the critical issues affecting gender equality in law enforcement, with a focus on police culture, attrition, and the empowerment of female officers. Drawing on research from South Africa, international organizations like the United Nations, and comparative studies from Australia, the review highlights how entrenched cultural norms, high attrition rates, and insufficient support systems hinder women's advancement in the police force. It underscores the necessity of comprehensive policy reforms and cultural shifts to create a more inclusive and effective law enforcement environment.

Police Culture

Police culture significantly shapes the experiences and opportunities available to women in law enforcement, influencing the success of policies aimed at improving gender equality. Historically, South African police culture has been male-dominated, often perpetuating gender stereotypes and biases. Research by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2021 highlighted that entrenched cultural

² Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), "Gender Dynamics in the South African Police Service," 2021.

³ UN Women, "Enhancing Women's Participation in Law Enforcement: Global Best Practices and South African Context," 2022.

⁴ SAPS, "Speaking Notes Delivered by Police Minister General Bheki Cele (MP) at the Release Of The Quarter Two Crime Statistics 2022/2023" (Pretoria: Government Printer, November 23, 2022), <https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/msspeechdetail.php?nid=43497>.

⁵ Department of Women, "National Policy Framework on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality," 2022.

norms within the South African Police Service (SAPS) marginalize female officers, hindering their advancement and integration into the workforce.⁶ This exclusive culture, rooted in traditional masculinity, negatively impacts the morale of female officers and reduces the overall inclusivity and effectiveness of the police service. Effective policy changes must address these cultural barriers by promoting a more inclusive and respectful workplace environment. Similarly, the United Nations has emphasized the impact of police culture on gender equality within law enforcement. A 2022 UN Women report stressed that achieving gender equality in policing requires addressing the underlying cultural attitudes and practices that discriminate against women.⁷ The report advocates for reforms fostering a culture of inclusion and respect, such as implementing gender sensitivity training and developing policies that challenge traditional stereotypes. Creating an environment where female officers are valued and supported can enhance law enforcement agencies' effectiveness and community trust.

In Australia, the impact of police culture on gender equality has also been a significant concern. The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) reported in 2021 that a prevailing "tough guy" mentality within many police forces creates a hostile environment for women, affecting their job satisfaction and career progression.⁸ Australian law enforcement agencies have begun implementing cultural change initiatives, including leadership programs promoting gender diversity and inclusivity. However, continued efforts are necessary to ensure these cultural changes lead to meaningful improvements in gender equality.

Recent literature underscores that addressing police culture is essential for the successful implementation of gender equality policies. Smith and Wright emphasized in their study on law enforcement training barriers the importance of transforming organizational culture to support female officers effectively.⁹ They found that policies promoting gender equality are more successful when accompanied by efforts to shift cultural attitudes and practices within the police force. This involves formal policy changes and ongoing efforts to engage and educate officers on gender issues, ensuring cultural norms evolve in tandem with policy reforms.

Improving gender equality in law enforcement requires a comprehensive approach that addresses cultural barriers within police forces. Experiences from South Africa, the United Nations, and Australia demonstrate that while policy changes are crucial, they must be supported by cultural transformations within law enforcement agencies. By fostering an inclusive and respectful culture, law enforcement agencies can better support female officers, enhance organizational effectiveness, and build stronger connections with the communities they serve.

Attrition

Attrition among female officers is a significant concern impacting the effectiveness and gender balance of law enforcement agencies in South Africa, the UN, and Australia. High attrition rates among women often stem from workplace challenges, such as discrimination, lack of career progression opportunities, and inadequate support systems. In South Africa, HSRC research in 2021 found that female officers experience higher turnover rates than their male counterparts due to factors like gender-based harassment and insufficient work-life balance policies.¹⁰ These challenges affect individual career trajectories and contribute to the overall underrepresentation of women in law enforcement, hindering efforts to achieve gender equality.

The United Nations has identified attrition as a critical issue affecting gender equality in policing globally. A 2022 UN Women report emphasized that high turnover rates among female officers often result from systemic barriers within law enforcement agencies, including hostile work environments and lack of advancement opportunities.¹¹ The report advocates policy reforms, such as improving workplace conditions, implementing mentorship programs, and establishing clear pathways for career advancement to address these barriers. Addressing these issues can reduce attrition rates and improve gender balance within law enforcement agencies.

⁶ Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), "Gender Dynamics in the South African Police Service."

⁷ UN Women, "Enhancing Women's Participation in Law Enforcement: Global Best Practices and South African Context."

⁸ Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), *The Impact of Police Culture on Gender Equality*, 2021.

⁹ J. Smith and P. Wright, "Enhancing Female Representation in Law Enforcement: Addressing Training and Development Barriers," *Journal of Policing Studies* 45, no. 2 (2022): 123–45.

¹⁰ Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), "Gender Dynamics in the South African Police Service."

¹¹ UN Women, "Enhancing Women's Participation in Law Enforcement: Global Best Practices and South African Context."

In Australia, attrition among female officers has also been highlighted in recent studies. The AIC reported in 2021 that Australian police forces face significant challenges in retaining female officers due to cultural biases and a lack of supportive policies.¹² The prevalent "tough guy" mentality in many police cultures creates an unwelcoming environment for women, contributing to their decision to leave the police service. Australian law enforcement agencies have begun to address these issues through various initiatives, such as introducing flexible work arrangements and promoting gender-sensitive training. However, continued efforts are needed to effectively reduce attrition rates.

Addressing attrition through targeted policy changes is essential for improving gender equality in law enforcement. Smith and Wright highlight that policies aimed at reducing attrition must include comprehensive support systems, such as professional development opportunities, work-life balance initiatives, and anti-discrimination measures.¹³ Successful implementation of these policies requires a commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive work environment in which female officers can thrive and advance. By focusing on reducing attrition and supporting female officers throughout their careers, law enforcement agencies can improve their effectiveness and achieve a more balanced gender representation.

Imperatives to Empower Female Officers

Empowering female officers within law enforcement agencies is critical for advancing gender equality and enhancing overall effectiveness. In South Africa, ongoing research and policy discussions have highlighted the need to empower female officers. A 2023 SAPS study identified barriers such as insufficient mentorship, limited career advancement opportunities, and gender-based discrimination as hindrances to women's progress in the police service.¹⁴ Policy changes must focus on creating structured mentorship programs, implementing gender-sensitive training, and promoting equal career development opportunities to address these issues. These measures are essential to support female officers and ensure their full participation and advancement within law enforcement.

Internationally, the United Nations has emphasized the importance of empowering female officers as part of broader gender equality initiatives. A 2022 UN Women report underscores that empowering women in law enforcement requires comprehensive strategies, including developing leadership training programs and establishing support networks.¹⁵ The report advocates for policies addressing systemic barriers and providing female officers with the tools and opportunities needed to succeed. These include fostering a culture of inclusion, providing career development resources, and ensuring equal access to training and advancement opportunities. Implementing these strategies can create an environment in which women are more likely to thrive and progress in their careers.

In Australia, the need to empower female officers has also gained attention, with research indicating that women face significant challenges in achieving career advancement within the police service. The AIC reported in 2021 that cultural biases and lack of supportive policies contribute to the underrepresentation of women in senior positions.¹⁶ Australian police forces have begun implementing policies promoting gender equality, such as flexible work arrangements, targeted leadership development programs, and anti-discrimination measures. Despite these efforts, ongoing reforms are necessary to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for female officers.

Recent literature highlights the importance of addressing structural and cultural barriers impeding the empowerment of female officers. Johnson and Carter's 2023 study on gender equality in law enforcement emphasizes that effective policy changes must include measures to counteract workplace discrimination, enhance work-life balance, and provide targeted support for career advancement.¹⁷ They found that policies promoting mentorship, leadership training, and inclusive work environments are crucial for empowering female officers and improving their retention and career progression. Implementing these measures can help create a more equitable and effective law enforcement agency.

¹² Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), *The Impact of Police Culture on Gender Equality*.

¹³ Smith and Wright, "Enhancing Female Representation in Law Enforcement: Addressing Training and Development Barriers."

¹⁴ South African Police Service (SAPS), "Gender Policy Framework," 2023.

¹⁵ UN Women, "Enhancing Women's Participation in Law Enforcement: Global Best Practices and South African Context."

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), *The Impact of Police Culture on Gender Equality*.

¹⁷ L. Johnson and M. Carter, "Addressing Gender Barriers in Law Enforcement: Effective Policy Measures for Empowering Female Officers," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 54, no. 3 (2023): 342–59.

Empowering female officers through targeted policy changes is essential for achieving gender equality in law enforcement. National and international research underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to address the barriers faced by women in the field. By implementing policies promoting mentorship, providing career development opportunities, and fostering an inclusive work environment, law enforcement agencies in South Africa, Australia, and globally can enhance the effectiveness and diversity of their forces. These efforts will not only support female officers but will also contribute to the overall success and integrity of law enforcement agencies.

Policy Innovations

Policy implications to recruit, retain and advance women officers should include a combination of flexible employment practices and affirmative action quotas regulated in a policy. The importance of having a wider perspective to achieve gender equality can be seen in studies on policing. These studies acknowledge the advantages of policies that help all officers overcome obstacles, such as promotion barriers, and the advantages of gender-focused policies, like work flexibility, for all officers. Drew and Saunders, for instance, argue that it is important to consider gender-focused policies as dealing with challenges encountered by all employees when it comes to creating policies aimed at promoting work/life balance, and it is important to show that despite being seen as a policy focused on gender, the evidence demonstrates that it benefits all employees.¹⁸ The policy is not a traditional gender-focused equity policy, but a mainstream policy that benefits both male and female officers and can be accessed by all.

At the continental level, gender equality is embedded in various continental and regional instruments, including The Windhoek Declaration and Namibia Plan of Action 2000 which demands effective gender mainstreaming as a standard component of all peacekeeping missions.¹⁹ The African Union (AU) Framework on Security Sector Reform notes that “security sector reform will adhere to the principles of gender equality and women’s empowerment. The African Union Gender, Peace and Security Programme (2015–2020) is a framework for the development of effective strategies and mechanisms for women’s increased participation in the promotion of peace and security. The East Africa Community Treaty 1999 endorses that women make a significant contribution towards the process of socio-economic transformation and sustainable growth (Articles 121 and 122); Gender Mainstreaming Strategy for East African Community (EAC) Organs and Institutions, 2013 whose goal is to facilitate the promotion of more effective gender mainstreaming approaches. East African Community Framework for Gender and Social Development Outcome Indicators for East African Community Development Strategy (2011–2016) is the Monitoring and Evaluation Tool for Gender and Social Development. The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region’s Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region (2006) commits member states to ‘equality between men and women, including the use of positive discrimination policies; and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has adopted a Regional Action Plan (RAP) for Resolution 1325. This RAP addresses the under-representation of women at the negotiating tables for conflict prevention, management and resolution, the lack of understanding of gender needs in peacekeeping missions and the absence of women from the various levels of security forces.²⁰

At a regional level, South Africa’s definition of gender and goals for achieving gender equality are guided by a vision of human rights that incorporates acceptance of equal and inalienable rights of all women and men. This ideal is a fundamental tenet under the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. It emerged from a long period of struggle for a democratic society that respects and promotes the rights of all its citizens irrespective of race, gender, class, age, disability, etc (Bill of Rights, Sections 9.1 to 9.4). The conception of such an ideal emerged from people whose history is steeped in institutional racism where rights, life chances and the distribution of goods and services were

¹⁸ Jacqueline M Drew and Jason Saunders, “Navigating the Police Promotion System: A Comparison by Gender of Moving up the Ranks,” *Police Practice and Research* 21, no. 5 (2020): 476–90, 487..

¹⁹ National Police Service (NPS), “National Police Service Gender Policy 2020 – 2025,” 2020, [https://nationalpolice.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-08/Gender Policy 7A.pdf](https://nationalpolice.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-08/Gender%20Policy%207A.pdf).

²⁰ National Police Service (NPS), “National Police Service Gender Policy 2020 – 2025.”

predicated along racial lines. More importantly, respect for the dignity of individuals was determined by the colour of their skin and, further within the various racial groupings, by their gender designation.²¹

Ensuring equality reform is accessible to those who need it is important in recognizing the intersectional way that injustice works. At present, as McLeod and Herrington contend, female-focused initiatives in policing organizations have subsumed diversity under the category “woman,” thereby “utilizing ‘women’ as a proxy for diversity writ large”—thereby also obfuscating this diversity.²² Like Fraser and other intersectional feminist scholars, they argue for a multi-lens approach to gender equality reform that enables recognition of the diverse and complex ways in which inequality operates.²³

The socio-cultural dictates of all groups defined women to be inferior to men and as such assigned to them the position of minors in both the public and private spheres of life. In the private sphere, women were less likely to lead in decision-making. In most interpersonal relationships men had more power. This historical legacy of patriarchy influenced essential informal and formal human relationships with a marked impact on the workplace. The Gender Policy Framework establishes guidelines for South Africa as a nation to take action to remedy the historical legacy by defining new terms of reference for interacting with each other in both the private and public spheres and by proposing and recommending an institutional framework that facilitates equal access to goods and services for both women and men. The Gender Policy Framework proposes a process that moves away from treating gender issues as “something at the end-of-the-day” business. Often, while discussing development issues, it is presumed that gender issues can be addressed after the “hard-core issues” have been dealt with. The South African Gender Policy Framework attempts to ensure that the process of achieving Gender equality is at the very centre of the transformation process in South Africa within all the structures, institutions, policies, procedures, practices and programmes of the government, its agencies and parastatals, civil society and the private sector.

Singh and Khan posit that it was not until 1997 that the SAPS drafted what it called the “Credo for Affirmative Action.”²⁴ This document stated that “in order to manifest commitment to this policy and constitutional responsibility, the South African Police Service shall strive to reflect the demographics of the country in all occupational classes and at all levels of the organisation at national and provincial levels, in terms of race and gender.”²⁵ As Newham, Masuku, and Dlamini, cited in Singh and Khan observe, at “this point the goals set for the organisation included ensuring that middle and senior management levels comprised at least 50% black people and 30% women by the year 2000.”²⁶ In pursuit of political justice, emphasis was placed on the importance of organizations incorporating inclusive and democratic practices to allow all members to participate in decision-making; for cultural justice, emphasis was placed on challenging masculinized cultures linked to the ideal police officer through critical awareness of gendered, heteronormative, racialized, and classed perspectives; and for economic justice, emphasis was placed on adequately funding equality reform and providing access to redistributive initiatives for those in need.

Thus, education plays a crucial role in challenging stereotypes and biases in law enforcement and society at large. Efforts should focus on educating both law enforcement personnel and the general public, with a particular emphasis on early intervention and strategic guidance. Enhancing the selection and training of managerial staff will bring about change, as will advocating for greater participation of women in decision-making processes. While various solutions were proposed at the conference, it was recognized that ongoing efforts are vital: consistent, year-round promotion of police work, highlighting the contributions of women, is necessary to shift societal perceptions and attract diverse talent to careers in law enforcement. Participants acknowledged the importance of civil society and collaborative initiatives in improving law enforcement policies and stressed the significance of building connections for cooperation and mutual support.

²¹ South Africa. Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, Act No. 4 of 2000. (2000). Available at: <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/2000-004.pdf> [accessed 2024-05-07].

²² Abby McLeod and Victoria Herrington, “Valuing Different Shades of Blue,” *International Journal of Emergency Services* 6, no. 3 (November 13, 2017): 177–87,180. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJES-04-2017-0021>.

²³ N. Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

²⁴ S. Singh and S. Khan, “Empowering Women in Blue Uniforms—Gender and Police in South Africa: Gender and Policing in South Africa.” *Gender Questions* 7, no 1 (2019):15. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-8457/6769>.

²⁵ SAPS (South African Police Service)., *The SAPS Annual Report 1996/1997: National Strategic Plan* (Pretoria: SAPS, 1997).

²⁶ Singh and Khan, “Empowering Women in Blue Uniforms—Gender and Police in South Africa.” 9.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study employed purposive convenient sampling to investigate the views and experiences of female officers in law enforcement agencies in Gauteng province, South Africa. The research, derived from a doctoral study conducted in May 2023, involved key informant interviews conducted by the first author and a research assistant. A total of 18 women officers participated, selected based on their prominent roles in law enforcement. The selection criteria included their years of service, rank, and the insight they could provide on the challenges facing women in policing. According to Pahwa, Cavanagh, and Vanstone, key informants offer high-level perspectives on policy and organizational dynamics, making them valuable in this study.²⁷ The number of participants was not predetermined but guided by data saturation, a concept explored by Robson and McCartan, and the interviews continued until no new information emerged, which occurred in the fifteenth interview.²⁸ However, three additional interviews were completed to ensure saturation was reached.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, field observations, and the collection of artifacts such as participant resumes to validate their years of experience. Participants answered the same interview questions, which explored themes such as recruitment challenges, retention, career progression, and barriers within the police academy. Thematic analysis was employed, following the systematic steps outlined by Saldana, including descriptive coding, values coding, and pattern coding, which revealed key themes such as leadership and attrition, perceived barriers, and the impact of training environments on women's ability to succeed in law enforcement.²⁹

To ensure ethical standards, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained through coding systems. The data are securely stored, and measures were taken to prevent any harm to the participants, in line with the ethical guidelines of Creswell.³⁰ This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the systemic challenges faced by women in law enforcement and offers insights into potential policy reforms to promote gender equality in the field.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study revealed several critical issues affecting female officers in law enforcement agencies in Gauteng. The key findings highlight systemic barriers that impact women's career progression, job satisfaction, and retention. These issues are categorized into themes such as leadership and attrition, factors contributing to the lack of women in law enforcement, perceived barriers, and experiences in the academy. The findings were in part informed by the research project's research questions and in part reflected themes that emerged in the interviews. In the sections that follow, the authors explore these findings drawing from the women's narratives of their occupational experiences and career paths.

Emerging Themes

Leadership and Attrition

Leadership and attrition are critical issues in improving gender equality within South African law enforcement. Despite various initiatives, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles. Systemic barriers, such as gender bias and lack of mentorship, hinder women's career progression, affecting individual careers and limiting diversity in decision-making. Effective policies should focus on clear pathways to advancement, leadership development programs, and mentorship opportunities.

Participants highlighted that deficient or toxic leadership influenced their decisions to join, stay, or leave law enforcement. The sub-themes included the importance of leadership, female role models, mentoring, and progression to senior positions. Many participants reported that a hostile work environment reduced job satisfaction and motivation, with none holding supervisory positions, indicating inadequate representation of women in leadership roles. The responses from participants correlate with the findings from previous research. Potential female officer applicants for senior positions are less likely

²⁷ Manisha Pahwa, Alice Cavanagh, and Meredith Vanstone, "Key Informants in Applied Qualitative Health Research," *Qualitative Health Research* 33, no. 14 (December 30, 2023): 1251–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323231198796>.

²⁸ C. Robson and K. McCartan, *Real World Research* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

²⁹ J. Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009).

³⁰ J.W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009).

to apply due to various reasons, such as required courses, police training, and entry criteria (like medical examinations), leading to reduced recruitment numbers and attrition. Reduced employment results or attrition in increasing instances of mistreatment by male officers, understaffing, and overwhelmed female officers, along with new demands struggling to afford high work-related stress.³¹ The increase in media attention to the limited opportunities for female officers and people of different backgrounds has also lowered recruitment rates.³²

Response from Participants:

"They're really pushing for females to reach out and help their subordinates... because in the past there was almost this spirit of competitiveness..." (Participant 18)

"I feel like a lot of people don't take female officers as seriously as male officers..." (Participant 12)

The lack of women in leadership contributes to discrimination and the absence of mentors. Participants from smaller departments with few women and male leaders noted the difficulty of navigating a male-dominated profession. Perceived double standards and lack of promotion opportunities further hindered their career progression. Establishing clear pathways for career progression and equal access to training are essential steps in fostering a supportive workplace and improving the retention and advancement of women in law enforcement. Drawing on past studies in South Africa and other locations overseas, local law enforcement entities such as SAPS, MPDs in Gauteng, and other provinces, along with Australian groups, face difficulties in hiring and maintaining female officers. However, police organizations should concentrate on the overall workplace experiences of their officers. Instead of focusing on officers' gender when assessing workplace skills, shift the narrative to portray policing as a fair and balanced profession in Australian society. Viewing police work as a gender-neutral profession will probably enhance female officers' recruitment and retention rates.³³ Drew and Archbold assert that the gender imbalance in policing, especially the notion of police work as predominantly for men, is frequently supported by the viewpoints of male officers in higher positions whose opinions could harm the efforts to motivate female officers to seek advancement.³⁴ Moreover, male officers' negative views on the competence of female officers at work play a crucial role in determining if female officers stay in the profession.³⁵ If this change is not made, unfair staffing practices within organizations and discriminatory policing will persist, leading to the unnecessary displacement of female officers and continuing issues with staffing and police effectiveness.

Factors contributing to the lack of women in law enforcement

Several factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in law enforcement, including gender-based discrimination in recruitment and hiring, cultural attitudes within police forces, and inadequate support for work-life balance. Physical fitness requirements and hostile work environments deter women from pursuing and sustaining careers in law enforcement. Participants cited obstacles such as lack of mentoring, presence of harassment, and gender bias. They reported seeking credibility and acceptance from male colleagues. Perceived barriers included difficulty with promotion, favouritism towards male officers, and exclusion from the "boys club."

Responses from Participants:

³¹ P. Birch et al., "Cultivating Well-Being Among Police Officers: Examining Challenges in the Workplace," in *Police Behaviour, Hiring and Crime Fighting: An International View*, ed. J.A. Eterno et al. (New York: Routledge, 2022); Amanda Keddie, "Gender Equality Reform and Police Organizations: A Social Justice Approach," *Gender, Work & Organization* 30, no. 3 (2023): 810–25.

³² Birch et al., "Cultivating Well-Being Among Police Officers: Examining Challenges in the Workplace"; Keddie, "Gender Equality Reform and Police Organizations: A Social Justice Approach."

³³ J.M. Drew and C. A. Archbold, 'Issues of Merit and Affirmative Action in Police Promotion Systems.' In Prenzler, T. (ed), *Gender Inclusive Policing: Challenges and Achievements*. (New York: Routledge), (2023): 70 – 80.

; Dee Khosa, "Leadership Development Framework for Women in Policing in South Africa: Overcoming Leadership Barriers," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147- 4478) 11, no. 7 (November 6, 2022): 110–20, <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i7.2018>; Dee Khosa, "Gender Equality or Inequality in Learning Institutions in South Africa: A Case of the Professional Advancement of Women," *Educational Leadership (Routledge, 2021)* 126 (2023): 34.

³⁴ Drew and Archbold, 'Issues of Merit and Affirmative Action in Police Promotion Systems.'

³⁵ W. Laverick, and E. Cunningham, "Advances in Gender Equity in British Policing." In Prenzler, T. (ed), *Gender Inclusive Policing: Challenges and Achievements*. New York: Routledge, (2023): 23–35.

"I heard information from colleagues regarding female officers being promoted over male officers by virtue of their sex..." (Participant 4)

"There are barriers for female officers, like when you're applying for promotion..." (Participant 11)

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy reforms, including anti-discrimination policies, flexible work arrangements, and robust support systems. These measures will help retain female officers and cultivate a diverse leadership cadre, enhancing the overall effectiveness and credibility of law enforcement agencies.

The above responses correlate with previous research in which the findings highlighted that due to their gender, women in many law enforcement agencies face discrimination and marginalization in staffing situations. The progress of female officers within the profession is being hindered by the gendered nature of policing and gendered perceptions of police work.³⁶ Women in law enforcement agencies will feel the adverse impact of exclusionary workplace practices that are ingrained in the culture of policing. Comprehending how a female officer's gender can lead to exclusion can assist police agencies in creating early prevention and intervention strategies for exclusionary behaviors starting at the beginning of her career. Creating prevention and intervention strategies to address exclusion is not a new concept. However, there has been a lack of focus on developing specific prevention and intervention policies for female officers in terms of exclusion in recruitment, deployment, promotion, and attrition compared to previous strategies aimed at addressing staffing problems and police practices. If police departments are seeking to avoid discrimination in the recruitment, deployment, promotion, and retention of female officers, they should make gender a central focus in their prevention and intervention efforts.³⁷

Perceived Barriers

Perceived barriers to women's participation and advancement in law enforcement are rooted in institutional and cultural factors. The perception of law enforcement as a male-dominated field discourages women from pursuing careers in policing. Lack of support and mentorship, the absence of female role models, and inadequate work-life balance further hinder women's progression. Participants reported stereotypes as a significant barrier, with women needing to demonstrate their competence more than male officers. The lack of trust and loyalty from male colleagues, the disparity in promotion procedures, and exclusionary practices were also observed.

Responses from Participants:

"In every station I've worked in, it's still very much a boy's club regarding promotion..." (Participant 16)

Creating an inclusive culture and implementing family-friendly policies, gender sensitivity training and supportive workplace practices are crucial steps in addressing these barriers. The responses above, correlate with previous research. Research indicates that the significant gender divide among police officers appears to be more relevant to the meagre number of female police officers than the current plateau effect. It may, however, be one of several factors that collectively restrict the overall percentage of women who are both interested in policing and ready and able to undergo a recruitment and training procedure that appears to be significantly more specialized to males than women.³⁸ Recruiting women for law enforcement careers is simply one aspect of the problem. Retention is equally challenging for female cops. Women are believed to quit the police force due to work-life balance difficulties, lack of

³⁶ Tessie H.H. Herbst, "Gender Differences in Self-Perception Accuracy: The Confidence Gap and Women Leaders' Underrepresentation in Academia," *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology* 46 (February 24, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v46i0.1704>; Khosa, "Leadership Development Framework for Women in Policing in South Africa: Overcoming Leadership Barriers." Drew and Archbold, "Issues of Merit and Affirmative Action in Police Promotion Systems."

³⁷ Herbst, "Gender Differences in Self-Perception Accuracy: The Confidence Gap and Women Leaders' Underrepresentation in Academia"; Khosa, "Leadership Development Framework for Women in Policing in South Africa: Overcoming Leadership Barriers"; Drew and Archbold, "Issues of Merit and Affirmative Action in Police Promotion Systems."; Singh and Khan, "Empowering Women in Blue Uniforms—Gender and Police in South Africa." 9.

³⁸ Gary Corder and AnnMarie Corder, "Stuck on a Plateau?," *Police Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (September 16, 2011): 207–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611111413990>.

representation, and leadership.³⁹ Similar to the challenge of recruitment related to trust issues within a department, being new in a department is a challenge that may be linked to the police culture of not trusting outsiders or cynicism and adhering to the code of silence.⁴⁰

Experiences in the academy affecting women officers' ability to complete courses

Experiences at law enforcement academies significantly affect women officers' ability to complete internal development courses. Female recruits often face gender biases and discriminatory practices, undermining their confidence and performance. The lack of tailored support systems and mentorship exacerbates these difficulties. Participants reported physical and mental challenges at the academy, and instructors reinforced negative stereotypes about women's capabilities. Experiences of discrimination, harassment, and retaliation were common. Addressing these issues requires implementing gender-sensitive training, mentoring programs, and policies accommodating the specific needs of female recruits. Creating an inclusive and equitable training environment will enhance the career advancement of women in law enforcement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To advance gender equality within South Africa's law enforcement agencies, several key stakeholders must be involved to ensure the successful implementation of the necessary reforms. These stakeholders include law enforcement agencies (such as the South African Police Service, SAPS), government policymakers (Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities; Department of Justice; Department of Public Service and Administration), police leadership, human resources departments, training academies, and labor unions representing police officers. These recommendations aim to address the significant gender disparity within policing through targeted, collaborative action.

Recommendations for Stakeholders:

Law Enforcement Agencies (SAPS and Metropolitan Police Departments)

Enhance Recruitment and Retention Policies

Law enforcement agencies should implement targeted recruitment strategies specifically designed to attract female candidates. This includes establishing clear pathways for career advancement and providing flexible working arrangements, including maternity and parental leave, to address work-life balance challenges and family responsibilities.

Address Workplace Harassment and Discrimination

These agencies should enforce zero-tolerance policies for harassment and discrimination and establish clear, confidential reporting mechanisms to protect whistle-blowers. Additionally, conducting regular gender sensitivity and equality training for all officers will help foster a more inclusive environment.

Government Policymakers (Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities)

Policy Development

Policymakers should introduce national-level policies that mandate equal opportunities for women in law enforcement. This includes integrating a gender perspective into all aspects of policing, ensuring equal access to resources, and considering gender impacts in all decision-making processes.

Police Leadership and Human Resources Departments

Promote Equitable Career Development Opportunities

³⁹ Helen H Yu, "Work-Life Balance: An Exploratory Analysis of Family-Friendly Policies for Reducing Turnover Intentions among Women in US Federal Law Enforcement," *International Journal of Public Administration* 42, no. 4 (2019): 345–57.

⁴⁰ N. C. Donner, et.al., "Two models of inescapable stress increase tph2 mRNA expression in the anxiety-related dorsomedial part of the dorsal raphe nucleus". *Neurobiology of Stress*, no 8 (2018): 68-81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ynstr.2018.01.003>; Juha Kääriäinen and Reino Sirén, "Do the Police Trust in Citizens? European Comparisons," *European Journal of Criminology* 9, no. 3 (2012): 276–89.

Police leadership should introduce structured mentorship programs designed for female officers and provide leadership training specifically tailored to women. Establishing clear advancement pathways to higher ranks and specialized units will promote career progression for women in policing.

Training Academies

Gender-Responsive Training

Training academies should integrate gender-responsive policies and practices into their curricula, ensuring that female recruits have the necessary support to complete their training and excel in their careers.

Labor Unions and Professional Bodies

Advocacy for Female Officers

Unions and professional bodies should advocate for gender equality by supporting female officers in cases of harassment, and discrimination, and ensuring their access to fair and equal professional development opportunities.

By including these key stakeholders in a coordinated effort, South Africa's law enforcement agencies can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women, leading to improved recruitment, retention, and career advancement opportunities. This collaborative approach will foster a police force that is more gender-diverse, equitable, and ultimately more effective in serving communities.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore perceived factors associated with the lack of women recruitment, retention, and progression of women officers within the law enforcement agencies in the Gauteng province, South Africa. The second goal is to use this information to make policy recommendations that would help free the law enforcement sector from gender disparity and discrimination. Fostering gender equality within law enforcement is a multifaceted endeavour that demands collaborative action at various levels. By challenging stereotypes, advocating for women's involvement in decision-making processes, and implementing supportive policies, law enforcement agencies can cultivate more inclusive and efficient environments that better serve and represent the communities they safeguard. In addition to meeting international standards and employment quotas, empowering women in law enforcement brings a wealth of diverse perspectives and skills to the sector. Integrating gender equality into police reform efforts nurtures inclusivity and bolsters problem-solving abilities by offering varied viewpoints and enhancing communication in conflict resolution. Retired senior police officials have underscored that gender inclusivity fosters heightened community trust, operational efficacy, and overall policing effectiveness.

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