Executive Summary

In the Face of Challenges, 
Women in Federal Law Enforcement Persist and Excel

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BACKGROUND

According to the U.S. Department of Justice-Bureau of Justice Statistics (2001), women comprise just 14.4% of federal law enforcement and their presence has increased at a rate of only 0.4% annually since 1996 (Reaves & Hart, 2001). To this point, the majority of research on women in law enforcement has been conducted on female police officers in state and local law enforcement, all but ignoring women in federal law enforcement. The focus of previous research has been on recording the numbers of women in police departments and examining the reasons why they entered policing. While it is important to document the numbers of women in law enforcement and to understand the reasons for their career choice, it only provides part of the story. Focusing attention solely on recruitment masks the long-term issue of retention. It is equally important to gain insight into the experiences of women in law enforcement—the challenges they face, how they cope, and what ultimately makes them stay. The purpose of this study was 1) to describe women in federal law enforcement; 2) to investigate the factors that influence their decisions to stay; 3) to identify the challenges in the work environment; and 4) to describe the strategies they utilize to cope with these challenges.

METHOD

The sample was collected at the Women in Federal Law Enforcement (WIFLE) Third Annual Leadership and Training Conference held in Washington, DC in August 2002. Two hundred and eighty female sworn federal law enforcement agents completed a survey, which collected demographic information and other data on various factors that influence their decisions to stay in federal law enforcement. A sub-sample of twenty women participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the researcher. These women shared their experiences in federal law enforcement, described the challenges they faced, and identified the strategies they used to cope.
WOMEN IN FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT: A DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

Average Age of Participants

![Average Age Chart]

Average Age: 37.5 Years

Race/Ethnicity

![Race/Ethnicity Pie Chart]

Education

![Education Pie Chart]
Relationship Status

- Single: 32%
- Married: 47%
- Domestic Partner: 7%
- Separated/Divorced: 13%
- Widowed: 1%

Number of Children

- 0: 63%
- 1: 19%
- 2: 14%
- 3: 3%
- 4 or more: 1%

Tenure in Federal Law Enforcement

- 0-5 Years: 20%
- 5-10 Years: 21%
- 11-15 Years: 15%
- 16-20 Years: 9%
- Over 20 Years: 35%
FINDINGS

I. Factors that Influence Women’s Decisions to Stay in Federal Law Enforcement

Three factors were hypothesized to influence women’s career persistence in federal law enforcement: 1) Background factors; 2) Self-Efficacy; and 3) Environmental Factors. Several variables were embedded in each of the factors.

**Background Factors** consisted of:
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Education
- Relationship status
- Number of children
- Present federal law enforcement agency
- GS-level
- Tenure at present federal law enforcement agency
- Tenure in federal law enforcement
- Previous employment in state and local law enforcement
- Gender role

**Self-Efficacy** consisted of:
- Nontraditional Career Self-Efficacy, defined as a person’s judgments of her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully perform the duties of a nontraditional career. A nontraditional career consists of 25% or fewer women. Federal law enforcement comprises just 14.4% women.

**Environmental Factors** consisted of:
- Perceived Social Support from Friends
- Perceived Social Support from Family
- Perceived Occupational Barriers
- Job Satisfaction
- Personal experience of Sexual Harassment
- Organizational Commitment
Career Persistence consisted of:
- Intent to Stay in Federal Law Enforcement

Environmental Factors proved to exert the strongest influence on women’s decisions to stay in federal law enforcement. The women in this study perceived strong levels of social support, were satisfied with their jobs, had few perceptions of occupational barriers, and were committed to their federal law enforcement agencies.

Specifically, there were significant positive correlations between:

- **Job Satisfaction and Intent to Stay.** That is, as one’s level of satisfaction rose, she was more likely to intend to stay in federal law enforcement.
- **Organizational Commitment and Intent to Stay.** The more committed she was to her federal agency, the more likely she was to persist.
- **Perceived Occupational Barriers and Intent to Stay.** The fewer occupational barriers a woman in federal law enforcement perceived, the more likely she was to stay.
- **Tenure (Present Agency/Federal Law Enforcement) and Intent to Stay.** As expected, the longer a woman has been in federal law enforcement, the more likely she was to stay in federal law enforcement.

Further, there were significant negative correlations between:

- **Nontraditional Career Self-Efficacy, Age and Tenure.** Older women were less likely to have confidence in their abilities to perform the duties of other nontraditional careers. The explanation is twofold: 1) There was a measurement issue with the assessment tool. It asked participants to rate confidence in abilities to perform seven occupations (probation officer, electronic equipment repairer, firefighter, police officer, mechanical engineer, park ranger, technical drawer); and 2) It has been several years since the choice of career for older women. They may be comfortable in their abilities to perform the duties of their present career and may find it difficult to speculate about other careers.

- **51% of the women surveyed had NOT experienced sexual harassment in the course of their work in federal law enforcement.** This number is much lower than the rates (63%) reported in state and local law enforcement (Martin 1990).
II. **Challenges in Federal Law Enforcement**

The women who were interviewed didn’t have difficulty identifying the challenging aspects of working in federal law enforcement. The challenges seemed to fall into three categories.

**Personal:**
- Proving themselves
- Establishing credibility
- Working twice as hard as their male counterparts
- Facing intense scrutiny
- Loneliness
- Isolation
- Exclusion from informal networks
- Choosing to be one of the boys or remain an outsider
- Unsupportive families
- Balancing work and family

**Organizational:**
- Mandatory move policies
- Lack of diversity in the workplace
- Problems with equipment, uniforms, weapons (improperly sized)
- No policies or guidelines addressing female issues (pregnancy)
- Quotas

**Colleagues:**
- Negative attitudes
- Harassment
- Stereotypes
- Double standards

III. **Perceptions Of Challenges**

The women who were interviewed easily identified challenges faced in federal law enforcement. **However, they were quick to state that no one challenge was enough to make them quit.** These women perceived the challenges as motivation to perform their jobs better, work harder, and achieve success—just to prove their male colleagues wrong.

Maria* said:

“If you tell me no, I will give you a hundred reasons why I am going to do it. Keep telling me no and I’m going to keep going on. I’m a rebel. I have thick skin, so no matter what you do to me, I’m not quitting. I’m going to stay here. You have to get over me.”
Jessica* spoke about her love for the job:

“I’m enduring. I’m persistent. I’m staying in spite of whatever is thrown at me. Sometimes I have to remind myself that I love doing this job. When I’m working—actually doing the job that I was hired to do—not being hampered or hindered or having obstacles put in my path—I think to myself, ‘I love my job’ and that’s why I’m here.”

IV. **Coping Strategies**

Nearly 70% of the women surveyed indicated a high probability that they would remain in federal law enforcement. These women are staying despite challenges and are able to do so by incorporating several strategies to cope.

**Maintain a Positive Attitude:**
- Persevere
- Have a sense of humor/having a thick skin
- Practice a strong work ethic
- Increase competence

**Seek Support:**
- Reach out to other female agents (especially in groups like WIFLE)
- Gain support from family and friends
- Be true to yourself
- Build relationships with male colleagues

**Develop Outside Interests:**
- Hobbies and interests
- Spirituality and faith

V. **Why Women Stay in Federal Law Enforcement**

**Personal Reasons:**
- Values (commitment, persistence, professionalism, stubbornness)
- Professionalism
- Opportunity to continue learning (increase competence, improve communication skills)
- Travel

**Job-Related Reasons:**
- Job characteristics (challenging work, specialized work, opportunity to utilize skills and abilities, autonomy, adventure)
- Benefits (financial compensation, equal pay for equal work, retirement benefits)

**Intrinsic/Altruistic Reasons:**
- Meaningful work
- Making a difference for the next generation of women in federal law enforcement
- Contributing to the betterment of society

**WIFLE SURVEY RESULTS**

**Sexual Orientation**
- 55.7% *did not* believe they were treated differently because of their sexual orientation (24.6% Yes; 19.6% Not Applicable).
- Of the 24.6% who *did* believe they were treated differently because of their sexual orientation, 5.7% believed they were treated differently in *work assignments*; 2.5% in *training opportunities*; 1.8% in *promotions*, and 7.1% believed they were treated differently in *all of the above* areas.

**Race/Ethnicity**
- 14.6% believed they were treated differently due to their race and/or ethnicity (73.9% No; 11.4% Not Applicable).
- Of the 14.6%, 2.9% believed they were treated differently in *work assignments*; 1.8% in *promotions*; 1.1% in *training*; 3.6% selected “other”; and 5.4% selected *all of the above*.

**Sexual Harassment**
- 31.8% of those women who were sexually harassed *did not* report the incident to their supervisors (15.7% did report; 51.8% Not Applicable).
- Of the 15.7% who *did* report, only 6.8% reported being satisfied or extremely satisfied with the outcome.
- Of the 31.8% of women who *did not* report the incident of sexual harassment, 14.3% chose not to report because of fear of *retaliation*; 20% for fear that peers and supervisors would *ostracize* them; and 18.2% did not report because they thought *nothing would be done*.
- 67.5% either agree or strongly agree that management in their agencies is concerned about sexual harassment.
- 71.8% either agree or strongly agree that management in their agencies makes sexual harassment training mandatory for managers.

**Gender Discrimination**
- 38.2% either *agree or strongly agree* that they were discriminated against due to their gender in *work assignments*; 26.7% in *promotions*; and 21.8% believed they were discriminated against in *training opportunities*.
- 51.8% who felt they were discriminated against due to their gender *did not* file a complaint.
- Of that 51.8% who *did not* file a complaint, 4.6% did not because they feared *retaliation*; 5% feared being *ostracized* by peers and supervisors; 3.9% thought *nothing would be done*; 11.1% selected “*other*”; and 5.4% did not file a complaint for *all of the above reasons.*
If they were to leave their present federal law enforcement agency
- 30.4% would leave because their contributions were not valued.
- 21.4% would leave because their agency’s policies did not provide adequate support during a pregnancy.
- 44.2% would leave because their agency’s policies did not provide adequate support in raising a family.
- 25.7% would leave because their agency’s policies did not provide adequate support in caring for aging parents.

Mandatory Move/Transfer Policy
- 41.5% would leave their present agency because of the mandatory move/transfer policy and move to another agency that did not have this requirement.

Federal Law Enforcement Agency Work Environment
- 59.2% rated their agency as either supportive or very supportive of women.
- There was a significant correlation between Work Environment and Intent to Stay.

The Biggest Challenge Facing Women in Federal Law Enforcement
- When asked to identify the biggest challenge in an open-ended format, women in this study consistently reported balancing work and life and negative attitudes of male colleagues.

CONCLUSIONS

- A profile of women in federal law enforcement. They are educated, self-motivated leaders. They are qualified to perform the duties of federal law enforcement and do so courageously and passionately. They have stepped outside traditional roles for women, aggressively pursuing a career plan that includes helping others and contributing to the betterment of society. Women in federal law enforcement adhere to a work ethic that includes working hard, striving for excellence, challenging themselves to be better, self-confident, and driven. Their professionalism is demonstrated by their ability to use difficult situations as growth opportunities, their “thick skin”, and unwavering commitment to mentoring other women. They are trailblazers. While they are proud of their accomplishments, they recognize that there is much more work to be done.

- Women in federal law enforcement face tremendous challenges. The most salient challenge women face is male colleagues’ negative attitudes. These negative attitudes are pervasive, infect all aspects of work, and make it difficult for women to concentrate on performing the job at hand. Frequently, male colleagues’ negative attitudes lead to more harmful situations such as discrimination and harassment. Even if the negativity does not rise to these levels, the effects on women often become overwhelming and lead to self-doubt and dwindling self-confidence.
Male colleagues’ negative attitudes are particularly detrimental to women in federal law enforcement because of their desire for support from friends, family, or coworkers. Women in federal law enforcement are lacking workplace social support—the combination of instrumental support, emotional support, and mentoring received from colleagues and supervisors. It is related to positive vocational outcomes such as reduced absenteeism and turnover, increased job satisfaction and tenure. This inability to establish workplace networks prevents women from satisfying their needs for affiliation and relationship.

The challenges women in federal law enforcement face are not good enough reasons to quit. Instead, the women in this study use these challenges as motivation to persist, persevere, and even excel.

In order to navigate the sometime hostile environment of federal law enforcement, women utilize a series of coping strategies. Similar to women in other nontraditional fields, women in federal law enforcement cope with challenges by maintaining a positive outlook, being true to self, seeking support from family and friends, and developing outside interests. These coping strategies appear to be effective in offsetting the frustrations and disappointments that accompany work in federal law enforcement, thus allowing women to focus on more positive aspects of life and work.

Women persist in federal law enforcement because they are satisfied, committed, and simply because they love their jobs. The environment that would drive some women away continues to attract the women in this sample. Love for this job comes from the opportunity to help people, to contribute to the betterment of society, and to engage in meaningful and challenging work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is important to bolster efforts to recruit women into federal law enforcement, focusing attention solely on recruitment will mask the long-term issue of retention. It is imperative to gain insight into the experiences of women who are presently working in law enforcement—the challenges they face, how they cope, and what ultimately makes them stay.

A clear understanding of women’s experience will enable federal law enforcement agencies to develop effective strategies to recruit and retain women; 2) to design training and mentoring programs to enhance job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and occupational success. Further, 3) career counselors can advise women about careers in federal law enforcement; and 4) develop counseling interventions to increase self-efficacy and develop coping strategies.
Based on the results of this study, the researcher and women in law enforcement themselves, make the following recommendations to retain more women in federal law enforcement:

**To Federal Law Enforcement Agencies:**

1. Recognize that federal law enforcement agencies consist of both men and women. Examine and clarify policies that may adversely affect its agents, such as mandatory move and long working hours and replace them with policies that promote a flexible work environment, such as flexible working hours or part-time work.

2. Create and implement programs to increase positive work attitudes and tenure, such as career planning, coaching, training, and mentoring.

3. Create an organizational culture that does not tolerate harassment.

**To Women in Federal Law Enforcement (advice from other women):**

1. Work hard.

2. Earn respect from colleagues.

3. Hold yourself to higher standards—leave no room for criticism.

4. Remember why you entered law enforcement in the first place.

5. Mentor other up and coming women in federal law enforcement.
References

