Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women Police Officers: Challenges, Triumphs, and Gender Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in law enforcement has expanded considerably; however, their professional experiences continue to be shaped by structural and personal challenges within a traditionally male-dominated occupation. This study explored the lived experiences of women police officers in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental, Philippines, with particular attention to work–life balance, occupational demands, coping strategies, and institutional support systems. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design and analyzed using Moustakas' framework, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve women police officers. The analysis generated several interrelated themes reflecting persistent difficulties in balancing professional responsibilities and family life, the emotional and physical demands of police work, experiences of workplace inclusion, the role of supportive leadership and organizational culture, the importance of time management and personal wellness, and the value of peer support and mentorship. The findings indicate that irregular work schedules, extended duty hours, and emotionally demanding assignments contribute to physical fatigue and emotional strain. Despite these pressures, participants demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and professional commitment, supported by personal coping strategies and organizational resources. The study underscores the need for institutional policies that promote work–life balance, gender inclusivity, and holistic well-being. Implementing flexible scheduling arrangements, wellness programs, and structured mentorship initiatives may enhance job satisfaction, reduce burnout, and support the sustained participation of women in policing.

Keywords: women police officers; work–life balance; gender and policing, coping strategies

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Over the past decades, the participation of women in policing has expanded significantly, mirroring broader social transformations toward gender equality (AlQahtani, & Alghamdi, 2025). Once largely confined to auxiliary or administrative roles, women have progressively assumed operational and leadership positions within law enforcement institutions worldwide (Carrinton et al., 2023). Their growing presence has challenged long-standing gender norms and introduced alternative approaches to policing, particularly in areas requiring communication, community engagement, and conflict resolution (Keddie, 2023). Contemporary scholarship recognizes gender diversity as a critical factor in enhancing organizational effectiveness, fostering public trust, and promoting inclusive institutional cultures (Volodzkiene, 2025). Despite these advancements, policing remains a predominantly male-oriented profession, where structural and cultural barriers continue to influence women's participation and professional advancement (Andotion et al., 2025).

Empirical studies consistently show that women police officers contribute distinct strengths to law enforcement, including de-escalation skills, empathetic engagement with victims, and culturally responsive policing strategies (Smith, 2025). Their involvement is especially crucial in handling sensitive cases such as domestic violence and

sexual assault, where victim cooperation and trust are essential. Moreover, gender-diverse police units are better positioned to address complex social problems through collaborative and innovative problem-solving (Biason, 2025). However, these contributions often exist alongside persistent challenges, including gender bias, limited access to promotion and training opportunities, and workplace cultures that marginalize or isolate female officers (Dukes, 2025). Such conditions negatively affect morale, job satisfaction, and retention, underscoring the need for institutional reforms that address gender-based inequities within policing organizations (Tlali et al., 2024).

Qualitative inquiry, particularly research grounded in lived experiences, offers an effective lens for understanding how women police officers navigate these challenges within male-dominated environments. By foregrounding personal narratives, qualitative research captures the nuanced realities of workplace dynamics, informal power relations, and coping strategies that are frequently overlooked in quantitative studies. Examining lived experiences not only illuminates the barriers women encounter but also highlights their resilience, agency, and professional contributions. These insights are essential for developing responsive policies, gender-sensitive training programs, and supportive organizational practices that align policing institutions more closely with principles of equity and social justice.

Within the Philippine context, and specifically in the province of Misamis Occidental, research on women in policing remains limited. The province's distinct socio-cultural conditions, community diversity, and institutional structures present unique challenges for female police officers that are insufficiently addressed in broader national or international studies. Issues such as culturally embedded stereotypes, lack of mentorship mechanisms, work–life balance pressures, and professional isolation warrant localized investigation. This study sought to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of women police officers in Misamis Occidental, with the aim of generating context-specific insights that can inform policy formulation, institutional support systems, and gender-inclusive reforms. By amplifying the voices of women in law enforcement, the study contributes to the advancement of gender equity and the development of more inclusive and effective policing practices.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design grounded in Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of women police officers. The approach enabled an in-depth examination of participants' subjective meanings, focusing on workplace challenges, identity negotiation, emotional demands, and coping strategies within a male-dominated profession. Phenomenology was appropriate as it emphasized participants' conscious experiences and the essence of shared realities.

The research was conducted in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental, Philippines, a key urban center with diverse socio-cultural and institutional contexts relevant to local law enforcement. Women police officers were selected through purposive sampling, with the number of participants determined by data saturation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be active-duty police officers, self-identify as women, willingly share their experiences, and provide informed consent. These criteria ensured the relevance and richness of the data.

Data were gathered through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol covering demographic information, professional experiences, and coping mechanisms. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, in-depth interviews, and careful transcription of participants' narratives. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, confidentiality was strictly maintained, and interviews were conducted in private locations chosen by the participants.

Data analysis followed Moustakas' phenomenological reduction, involving repeated reading of transcripts, identification of significant statements, clustering into themes, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions. Dependability was supported through a systematic and transparent analytic process, while confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in verbatim data and maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions. Through these procedures, the study upheld methodological rigor and trustworthiness in capturing the essence of participants lived experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Participants

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Code Name	Rank	Civil Status	Years of Service
P1	Police Corporal	Married	9 years
P2	Police Corporal	Married	9 years
P3	Police Staff Sargeant	Married	12 years
P4	Police Staff Sargeant	Married	11 years
P5	Police Corporal	Married	9 years
P6	Police Corporal	Married	10 years
P7	Police Master Sargeant	Married	13 years
P8	Police Staff Sargeant	Married	12 years
P9	Police Master Sargeant	Married	13 years
P10	Police Corporal	Married	10 years
P11	Police Staff Sargeant	Married	11 years
P12	Police Corporal	Married	10 years

The phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews with twelve women police officers in Misamis Occidental yielded six interrelated cluster themes that describe the essence of their lived experiences in law enforcement. These themes reflect the complex interplay between professional demands, personal responsibilities, and institutional contexts shaping women's roles in policing.

Theme 1. Struggles in Balancing Professional Duties and Family Life

The first theme highlights the persistent struggle to balance professional duties and family life. Participants consistently described irregular schedules, extended duty hours, and sudden deployments as major constraints to sustaining meaningful family engagement. Although they expressed commitment to their roles as police officers, many acknowledged emotional strain arising from missed family milestones and limited personal time. This internal tension between professional dedication and familial responsibilities mirrors findings that unpredictable policing schedules intensify work–family conflict and emotional exhaustion (Li et al., 2022; Valmari et al., 2023). Consistent with Rohwer et al. (2022), participants noted that individual time-management efforts were insufficient without organizational flexibility, underscoring the need for systemic interventions to support work–life balance.

Theme 2. Emotional and Physical Demands of Police Work

The second theme centers on the emotional and physical demands inherent in police work. Participants portrayed policing as a profession characterized by sustained exposure to stress, long hours, and physical fatigue. They described emotional regulation and physical endurance as essential to effective performance, often accepting exhaustion as an unavoidable aspect of duty. These accounts align with research documenting heightened risks of burnout, sleep disruption, and physical strain among police officers exposed to prolonged stress and trauma (Forrest, 2025). While participants demonstrated resilience, their narratives reinforce concerns raised by Violanti et al. (2021) regarding the long-term consequences of insufficient recovery time on officers' well-being (Beckley et al., 2026).

Theme 3. Experiences of Equal Treatment and Inclusion

The third theme reflects experiences of equal treatment and inclusion within the workplace. Participants generally perceived their work environments as respectful and performance-oriented, where gender did not overtly limit opportunities or professional recognition. This sense of inclusion fostered teamwork, trust, and motivation, contributing positively to job satisfaction. Such findings support studies indicating that inclusive

organizational cultures enhance psychological well-being, cohesion, and commitment among police officers (Che Yusoff et al., 2025). The participants' experiences contrast with research linking exclusionary practices to reduced morale and higher turnover, emphasizing the value of equity-driven institutional norms (Leo, 2025).

Theme 4. **Supportive Leadership and Institutional Culture**

The fourth theme underscores the importance of supportive leadership and institutional culture. Participants emphasized that approachable leaders, recognition of effort, and access to professional development strengthened their sense of belonging and motivation. Supportive supervision and collaborative practices were viewed as critical buffers against occupational stress (Sandhya, & Annamalai, 2025). This finding is consistent with evidence that leadership styles emphasizing support and trust significantly enhance resilience, engagement, and job satisfaction in policing contexts (Amurshedi, & Yaakub, 2024). The accounts further affirm that organizational cultures grounded in respect and professional growth are central to sustaining employee well-being (Jaiyeola et al., 2025).

Theme 5: Time Management, Family Support, and Personal Wellness

The fifth theme highlights time management, family support, and personal wellness as essential coping mechanisms. Participants described deliberate efforts to structure time, establish boundaries, and engage in self-care to manage occupational stress. Family support emerged as a key source of emotional stability, reinforcing motivation and resilience (Kaur, 2025). These strategies are supported by research demonstrating that effective time management and strong familial ties reduce stress and improve mental health outcomes among law enforcement personnel (Salapa, & Abadilla, 2025). The findings also align with Healy (2025), who emphasized the role of wellness practices in mitigating burnout in high-demand professions.

Theme 6: Peer Support, Mentorship, and Institutional Flexibility

The final theme focuses on peer support, mentorship, and institutional flexibility. Participants valued collegial relationships and mentorship as sources of guidance, confidence, and emotional reassurance. Flexible policies and access to training further reinforced perceptions of organizational support (Wu, & Zhang, 2025). These findings corroborate studies showing that peer networks and mentoring relationships enhance professional identity, resilience, and job satisfaction among police officers. Additionally, institutional flexibility has been linked to improved work–life balance and reduced burnout, particularly in demanding work environments (Rivera & Amaya, 2023).

Collectively, these themes illustrate that while women police officers demonstrate resilience and adaptability, their well-being and effectiveness are strongly shaped by organizational structures, leadership practices, and support systems. The findings reinforce the need for context-sensitive policies that promote gender equity, flexibility, and holistic support within law enforcement institutions.

While this study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of women police officers, several limitations must be considered. The analysis draws on interviews with a relatively small group of participants, allowing for in-depth exploration but limiting representation of experiences across different ranks, assignments, and locations. Moreover, the phenomenological approach prioritizes personal meaning and interpretation rather than broad generalization. Future studies could expand this line of inquiry by involving participants from multiple regions, incorporating comparative perspectives, or employing mixed research designs to strengthen and extend the present findings.

Limitation

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regions, incorporating comparative perspectives, or employing mixed research designs to strengthen and extend the present findings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that women police officers continue to encounter significant challenges in balancing professional responsibilities with personal and family life, largely due to the demanding and unpredictable nature of police work. Irregular schedules, extended duty hours, and emotionally taxing assignments contribute to physical fatigue and emotional strain, despite the participants' strong sense of commitment and resilience. While many officers employ personal coping strategies to manage these pressures, the results suggest that individual efforts alone are insufficient without supportive institutional structures that promote work–life balance and well-being.

The study further reveals that participants generally perceive their work environments as respectful and inclusive, with professionalism and equality serving as guiding principles in daily interactions. This perception reflects a positive shift in organizational culture within local law enforcement, where gender-based bias appears less pronounced. However, sustaining this progress requires continued reinforcement through leadership practices and organizational policies to ensure that inclusivity remains embedded and responsive to evolving workplace dynamics.

Moreover, the experiences of women police officers highlight the importance of an integrated support system that combines personal resilience with organizational commitment. Effective time management, family support, mentorship, and supportive leadership emerged as key factors in maintaining well-being and professional effectiveness. These findings underscore the need for holistic approaches that address both individual and institutional dimensions of women's experiences in policing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study and the issues identified in relation to the experiences of women police officers, the following recommendations are proposed to inform institutional practices and policy development. Law enforcement administrators and policymakers are encouraged to strengthen and institutionalize work–life balance initiatives, including flexible scheduling arrangements, family-responsive leave policies, and wellness programs tailored to the needs of women police officers. Such measures may help mitigate burnout, enhance personal well-being, and improve long-term job satisfaction.

Police leadership and human resource units should continue to reinforce gender sensitivity and inclusivity through regular training, clear policy implementation, and equitable access to professional development opportunities. Establishing structured mentorship pathways for women officers may further support career progression and sustain a culture of fairness and respect within the organization.

Additionally, police organizations are advised to enhance peer support systems, mentoring networks, and wellness monitoring mechanisms that address emotional, psychological, and professional needs. Strengthening these support structures can foster resilience, improve morale, and enable women police officers to more effectively navigate the demands of their profession while maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life.

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