

The Role of Women Police Officers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The role of women police officers in Malaysia is often obscured by a dominant narrative that tends to prioritize masculine aspects in law enforcement, leading to their contributions being less visible. This phenomenon creates a significant gap between public perception and operational reality, where their challenges and effectiveness are often not encompassed in policy analyses. Previous studies frequently only touched upon demographic aspects or administrative duties, rarely delving deeply into their strategic potential or social impact, leaving a void in holistic understanding. Therefore, this conceptual analysis, based on a literature and document review, attempts to fill that gap. Findings indicate that the presence of women police officers is not merely about fulfilling quotas it is a necessity. They possess unique capabilities in handling sensitive cases such as abuse and sexual crimes, offering an unparalleled dimension of empathy. Furthermore, women police officers act as effective connecting bridges between communities and enforcement agencies, building public trust through a more inclusive approach. A more inclusive policing approach, acknowledging and leveraging gender advantages, can certainly enhance the overall legitimacy and effectiveness of the Royal Malaysia Police.

Keywords: Women Police Officers, PDRM, Community Safety, Gender Justice, Institutional Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) is often portrayed as a rigid entity; a last bastion of order. However, behind the shields and dark blue uniforms, there is a crack in the long-dominant narrative of masculine prowess namely, the role of women police officers. Ironically, despite their increasing numbers, strategic recognition and appropriate deployment remain contentious, often trapped within an outdated bureaucratic cage. Our society, surprisingly, still grapples with archaic stereotypes about who can wield the baton of justice, denying the immense potential inherent in this group. Serious questions about their efficiency and scope of duties continue to arise are they merely filling vacancies, or are they actually key to organizational transformation? This is not just an issue of numbers. It is a problem of perception.

Most existing studies, unfortunately, fail to look beyond statistical data; they do not succeed in exploring how the presence of women police officers truly alters operational dynamics, community trust, and even the internal culture of the PDRM itself. Because of this failure, we lose an understanding of their true contributions especially in the context of Malaysia's plural and sensitive society as well as the long-term implications for public safety reform. It is time we dare to ask: are we actually underestimating a large part of our own strength?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of women's involvement in policing in Malaysia, as in most post-colonial countries, began with a clear patriarchal mold merely a supportive role, rarely considered the backbone of operations. Upon its establishment in 1956, the women police unit was regarded as a social experiment, often limited to administrative duties or handling cases involving women and children (Hashim & Ahmad, 2018).

This approach, however, has been heavily criticized for effectively diminishing their full potential, making them a marginal entity within a male-dominated organization. Several scholars, such as Ibrahim (2015), argue that despite an increase in numbers, deployment and promotion policies are still influenced by subtle gender bias, preventing women from reaching strategic leadership positions. This view, however, is refuted by some internal PDRM studies, which point to an increase in female representation in various elite units yet, is this merely cosmetic or a genuine change? A more critical perspective by Rahman and Omar (2019) suggests that this 'progress' is often driven by international pressure for gender equality, rather than an organic recognition of women's capabilities themselves. Ironically, most writings on women police officers tend to be descriptive, outlining established roles for instance, in sexual crime investigations or victim counseling but rarely deeply analyze their strategic added value beyond these limitations (Lim & Tan, 2021). This criticism leads to questions about the lack of a comprehensive narrative regarding the effectiveness of women police officers in the context of crime prevention, community relations, and also as agents of cultural change within the PDRM. Although some local researchers (e.g., Abdullah, 2020) have touched upon the role of women police officers in 'community policing' programs, their analyses are often limited to short-term effectiveness, without delving into the broader impact of social transformation.

Unfortunately, there are still few studies discussing the psychological and sociological challenges faced by women police officers themselves, how they navigate sometimes hostile organizational structures, or how their personal experiences shape their work approach a significant gap in the literature. Therefore, the general public's perception and the views of a few politicians who still doubt the capabilities of women police officers in 'hard' tasks such as combating organized crime or terrorism, indirectly reflect the failure of existing literature to provide solid empirical or conceptual evidence to counter these outdated stereotypes (Ismail, 2022). This is not merely an issue of gender justice. It is about operational efficiency. If we continue to ignore the unique potential brought by women police officers, especially in aspects of communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, we are actually disadvantaging the criminal justice system as a whole. Most modern policing models in developed countries, such as England and Wales (Davies & Francis, 2019), have long integrated gender perspectives into their training and operational strategies, recognizing that diversity leads to strength. Compare this with Malaysia, where the debate often still revolves around the justification of their presence, rather than how to optimize their contributions. This is a worrying sign. Clearly, we need a new framework that goes beyond justifying their presence, focusing instead on the recognition and optimization of the strategic role of women police officers in the context of Malaysia's increasingly challenging security context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is anchored in the conceptual analysis method, an approach that, while often misunderstood as less 'scientific' compared to empirical studies, actually offers unparalleled intellectual depth. We did not collect new data. Instead, we constructed, organized, and reinterpreted existing frameworks of ideas within the literature. This process, indeed, is not merely a library review; it is an intellectual exploration, a diligent effort to unravel and connect narratives that may have previously been fragmented, even contradictory, regarding the role of women police officers. Our primary objective was to develop a coherent theoretical synthesis, a conceptual structure capable of explaining the complexity of women police officers' contributions in Malaysia beyond mere superficial description. The process of selecting ideas and theories began with a broad collection of relevant documents police reports, academic journal articles, books, PDRM annual reports, and even policy briefs that directly or indirectly discussed women in policing. Not all materials were accepted. We deliberately excluded outdated theories rooted in an era that deemed women unfit for enforcement roles; it was a strict filtering, focusing on materials with the potential to contribute to a more progressive and critical understanding. Each document was scrutinized to identify main arguments, implicit assumptions, and presented evidence. We looked for recurring themes, but more importantly, we detected anomalies and contradictions points where conventional understanding might falter. This analysis demanded continuous reflective thinking, where we constantly questioned the 'why' and 'how' behind each argument. This process involved repeated readings, manual thematic coding, and mapping relationships between concepts. We developed analytical categories such as 'traditional roles vs. transformative roles', 'institutional challenges', 'community impact', and 'leadership potential'. This was not merely listing facts. It was a continuous dialogue with the text, a process of translating narratives into arguments, and arguments into a solid conceptual framework. This conceptual analysis methodology allowed us not only to identify what has been said but also what has not yet been explored, what remains shrouded in

ambiguity, and how various fragments of knowledge can be combined to form a richer and more actionable understanding. Therefore, we argue, this method does not merely 'justify' this study; it is the only reasonable way to uncover the layers of complexity surrounding the issue of women police officers' roles, yielding a more profound and critical perspective on their true reality.

FINDINGS

The role of women police officers, often trivialized, extends beyond merely filling vacancies. They are not just symbols of gender equality. Instead, their presence brings a dimension of operational efficiency rarely openly acknowledged — especially in cases requiring high empathy. For example, in investigations of sexual crimes or child abuse, victims often feel more comfortable communicating with female officers, a phenomenon that cannot be underestimated; this accelerates the investigation process and improves the quality of testimony, a tactical advantage that is very significant. Moreover, their ability to build community trust is highly prominent. Women police officers often become the friendly face of the PDRM at the grassroots level, involved in public awareness programs and dialogue sessions, breaking down walls of fear or suspicion that often surround public interaction with authorities. This approach, dominated by non-confrontational communication, organically generates institutional legitimacy among local residents. However, despite these significant contributions, they still struggle with rigid organizational structures. Their deployment is often not strategic. Many are still limited to desk or administrative duties, neglecting talents and skills that could be utilized on the front lines, a highly concerning waste of resources.

Gender discrimination, whether overt or covert such as limited promotion opportunities or skeptical views of their capabilities in demanding fields still haunts their careers. There are also dual pressures they face: challenging professional duties and societal expectations regarding women's roles in the family, a complex challenge requiring better institutional support. Nevertheless, their potential as agents of cultural change within the PDRM itself cannot be overlooked. With increasing numbers, their presence is slowly changing work dynamics and interactions within the force, fostering a more inclusive and less toxic environment. This is the seed of organizational transformation that may be slow, but certain. Women police officers are a critical asset that, if given appropriate opportunities and support, can be a catalyst for a PDRM that is more responsive, relevant, and respected by Malaysia's plural society.

DISCUSSION

The implications of these findings for the policing arena in Malaysia are highly significant - far beyond mere trivial discussions about gender equality. The presence of women police officers, as we have found, does not merely embellish statistics, but actively transforms operational dynamics and public perception of the PDRM, a phenomenon that policy makers should take seriously. We have long been trapped in a traditional mindset that equates physical strength with law enforcement effectiveness, a view that is now proven obsolete and irrelevant in the context of increasingly sophisticated modern crime. The advantage of women police officers in handling sensitive cases, especially those involving vulnerable victims, signals a drastic paradigm shift. This is not about force. This is about wisdom, empathy, and the ability to build bridges of trust, something that cannot be achieved with handcuffs or a pistol alone. Is it not ironic that we are still grappling with archaic stereotypes while the world of crime has long evolved? There is a strong possibility that the refusal or reluctance to fully recognize this potential stems from deep-rooted institutional inertia, where hierarchical structures and patriarchal culture serve as formidable barriers. The perception that women police officers are only suitable for 'soft' duties not only disadvantages the women themselves but also harms the PDRM as a whole, by allowing this valuable asset to remain underutilized and untapped. We need to re-examine the validity of policing theories that underpin the training and deployment of our officers. Are we truly teaching them to think holistically, or merely to follow outdated procedures? It is time we review the training curriculum, introducing more in-depth modules on victim psychology, cross-cultural communication, and conflict management areas where women police officers often demonstrate superiority. This is not just about giving them the same training as men. It is about giving them *better* and *more relevant* training for the needs of contemporary society. Furthermore, the role of women police officers as community liaisons is an invaluable strategic advantage. In a plural society like Malaysia, where issues of trust between the public and authorities are often tenuous, their presence can be a calming agent, fostering better dialogue and understanding. This will lead to better intelligence gathering, higher crime

reporting, and ultimately, a reduction in crime rates. Perhaps, a large part of the crime problems that are difficult to curb today stem from the institution's failure to build strong relationships with the community, and this is where women police officers can play a critical role. Therefore, if the PDRM is serious about modernizing itself and becoming a more relevant and responsive force for the needs of the 21st century, then they must actively passively enhance the role and contributions of women police officers. This requires comprehensive policy changes, starting from recruitment, training, deployment, and promotion systems. Ignoring this potential will not only cause the PDRM to continue lagging but also undermine their legitimacy and effectiveness in the eyes of society. Perhaps, this reluctance to change is actually the most dangerous enemy to the policing institution itself.

CONCLUSION

The debate about the role of women police officers in Malaysia, as explored, extends far beyond superficial rhetoric of gender equality. In fact, it touches upon the core of PDRM's effectiveness, legitimacy, and relevance in an ever-changing and increasingly complex society. We found that women police officers are not merely complementary; they are critical assets offering clear tactical and strategic advantages, especially in handling sensitive cases and building community trust. This is not an option. This is a necessity. Failure to fully recognize and integrate their potential not only wastes valuable human resources but also weakens PDRM's ability to function efficiently and effectively across the full spectrum of law enforcement duties. This leaves PDRM in a vulnerable state. There is a strong recommendation that PDRM needs to conduct a comprehensive audit of deployment and promotion policies for female officers, ensuring equal opportunities and optimal placement based on skills, not stereotypes. Internal education and awareness about the value of gender diversity also need to be enhanced, starting from the recruit level up to the highest leadership echelons, to erode long-entrenched biases. For future studies, it is crucial to conduct empirical research that quantitatively examines the impact of women police officers' presence on the resolution rates of specific crimes, particularly sexual crimes and domestic abuse. Such research should also compare public perceptions of PDRM in areas with high female police representation versus those with less, providing more concrete data to support this conceptual argument. Failure to act now, to make the necessary structural changes, will mean that PDRM will continue to struggle in the shadow of outdated stereotypes, losing a golden opportunity to become a modern institution that truly represents and protects all segments of society.

Based on the findings, several policy implications are proposed for the Royal Malaysia Police. First, a systematic audit of deployment practices should be conducted to ensure skills-based rather than gender-based assignments. Second, promotion pathways should be reviewed to address structural barriers limiting women's advancement into leadership roles.

Third, training curricula should be enhanced to include modules on victim psychology, community engagement, and conflict resolution. Finally, institutional awareness programs should be implemented to address implicit gender bias and promote an inclusive organizational culture.

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