

The Psychological Impact of Perceived Gender-Based Discrimination against Female Police Officers of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Gender-based discrimination (GBD) challenges female police officers globally, yet its psychological impact, especially in Sri Lanka, has not been thoroughly researched. This study explored perceived GBD's lived experiences and psychological consequences for Sri Lankan female officers, informed by socialist feminism and Schein's organizational culture model. The primary objective was to understand GBD's psychological impact on female officers' self-identity and job satisfaction. A purposeful sample of six female police officers with 5+ years of service, perceiving GBD, was recruited from regional stations. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore subjective meaning-making. Analysis revealed prevalent experiences of perceived incompetence, devaluation, and blocked career progression, attributed to deeply embedded patriarchal attitudes. These led to significant emotional distress, including numbness, pain, embarrassment, disappointment, hopelessness, and exhaustion, as well as lower self-esteem and work identity conflict. Findings highlight how embedded patriarchy and societal gender norms have a significant negative impact on female officers' psychological well-being. Discrimination causes substantial emotional distress and challenges to identity and job satisfaction, emphasizing the urgent need for interventions against systemic gender bias in law enforcement.

Keywords: Gender-based discrimination, psychological impact, female police officers, patriarchy, organisational culture

Introduction

Patriarchy, a social system that inherently devalues women, is a significant driver of Gender-Based Discrimination (GBD), especially in male-dominated fields like policing (Fernandes, 2016; Gilbert et al., 2024). This discrimination often undermines female contributions and reinforces male-centric structures, despite anti-discrimination laws (Petitfour et al., 2022). Globally, police services actively marginalise female officers through discriminatory cultures (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020). International studies consistently

document prevalent GBD in law enforcement, where female officers face restricted development due to stereotypical perceptions, covert discrimination, and male-centric attitudes (Angehrn et al., 2021). Furthermore, male denial of bias often contrasts with female officers' reported hostility, limited opportunities, and sexual harassment (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2023; Murray, 2021).

In Sri Lanka, despite a historically independent status of women, British colonialism fundamentally shifted this, establishing patriarchal norms (Chandrika, 2021; Gamage, 2024). Even with constitutional prohibitions, GBD exists within the organization due to deeply embedded societal norms (Jayasundere, 2016; S.L. Const. art XII, § 2). Specifically, contemporary GBD in the Sri Lankan Police Service involves widespread stereotypes, perceived weakness, and severely limited senior roles for female officers, with only 0.01% holding senior positions, compounded by a restrictive 'women's cadre' (Jayatilaka et al., 2019).

The psychological impact of GBD on female police officers is significant, often stemming from the constant invalidation of their professional worth. These discriminatory experiences lead to increased stress and significantly decreased job satisfaction (Gul et al., 2024). As a result, officers experience significant distress, including feelings of undervaluation, leading to work identity conflict (Veldman et al., 2017). This deep emotional burden often results in increased anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, alongside a deep sense of hopelessness (Illias et al., 2024; Rabichuk, 2021).

Despite important global findings, there's a significant gap in research about how GBD specifically affects the psychological well-being of female police officers in Sri Lanka, where no such studies exist. This qualitative study addresses the above gap by exploring the psychological impact of perceived GBD on these officers' self-identity and job satisfaction. The current study utilised socialist feminism to examine how patriarchy impacts the self-identity of female officers and Schein's Organisational culture model to analyse how their workplace itself influences job satisfaction.

Materials and methods

Design

This qualitative study adopted a semi-structured interview methodology. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to explore subjective meaning-making processes associated with participants' lived experiences.

Participants

A homogeneous, purposive sampling strategy recruited six female police officers from regional police stations. Participants were mainly stationed in Sri Lanka's Western Province, with service periods ranging from 6 to 28 years. Inclusion criteria were female police officers working for 5 or more years who perceived GBD within the police force. Exclusion criteria included male police officers and female officers working for less than 5 years or not perceiving GBD within the service.

Data analysis

To explore the lived experiences of Sri Lankan female police officers, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. Data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews were transcribed. Transcripts underwent repeated readings to identify emerging themes and patterns. Detailed analysis of specific passages explored the complexity of experiences, considering language, tone, and underlying emotions.

Interpretation of highlighted themes considered relevant theoretical frameworks and Sri Lanka's sociocultural background.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology's Ethic Review Committee and relevant gatekeepers. Participants received detailed information, provided written informed consent with the right to withdraw, and were interviewed in a supportive, confidential, and anonymous environment. They were also informed about available support services for emotional distress.

Results

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis illustrated two superordinate themes of Gender-Based Discrimination (GBD) experienced by female police officers in Sri Lanka: "Women were not enough: perception of incompetence and stereotyping" and "The Weight We Carried: Psychological and Emotional Impact of Gender Discrimination." Sub-themes are explained under each superordinate theme to further understand participants' experiences. Table 1 below summarizes these themes and their sub-themes.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Women were not enough: perception of incompetence and stereotyping	They didn't think we could: Perceptions of Inherent Female Incompetence We were set up: Unfair Treatment and Accusations
The Weight We Carried: Psychological and Emotional Impact of Gender Discrimination	Personal Cost of Constant Invalidation Disappointment, Exhaustion, and the Unfulfilled Promise of Our Careers

Theme 1: Women were not enough: Perception of incompetence and stereotyping

This superordinate theme captures the pervasive perceptions of female incompetence and stereotyping experienced by female police officers, leading to various forms of discrimination.

They didn't think we could: Perceptions of inherent female incompetence

Participants frequently encountered assumptions of female incompetence and negative stereotypes, leading to male interference in their work and being labelled "problematic." This was aggravated by widespread disrespect for their rank and authority, as male officers often viewed saluting female officers as a "humiliation." Their professional contributions were disregarded, and ideas were overlooked, reinforcing a sense of devaluation.

"Male officers who sat around the same table with me..., meet the director and say, 'sir, we shouldn't do this, she can't handle the responsibility. A woman can't work at those stations' "(Kathy)

"Male officers are a bit reluctant to salute us... There are very male-dominated discussions here... they don't even look at our faces when we speak." (Emily)

We were set up: Unfair treatment and accusations

Gender acted as a direct barrier to career advancement, with qualifications overlooked and promotions denied. This extended to unfair treatment, including discriminatory transfers and false accusations based on male colleagues' stereotypical attitudes towards women who did not conform to their expectations.

"We weren't allocated any vacancies. For females... even though our equal male officers got promoted, we couldn't get promoted." (Emily)

"They filed a court case against me and started an inquiry by the DIG... So, based on those accusations, I was demoted to this position." (Brianna)

Theme 2: The weight we carried: Psychological and emotional impact of gender-based discrimination

This superordinate theme illustrates the profound personal and emotional toll of discrimination on female police officers, as detailed in its two sub-themes.

Personal cost of constant invalidation

Participants reported significant psychological and emotional distress stemming from their experiences of gender-based discrimination. This appeared as feelings of numbness, pain, and embarrassment, particularly from prolonged and unresolved injustices like delayed promotions. A deeper impact involved feelings of regret about their gender, indicating an internalization of negative experiences, and in severe cases, depression requiring psychological support.

"So, when there's nothing like that it becomes numb... think if you're seeing the same person with the same star they also ask 'oh... miss, you have worked this much haven't you got promotions yet?' at that moment we feel very painful and embarrassed." (Penny)

"My biggest wish is that I don't want to become a woman in another life ever again." (Brianna)

Disappointment, exhaustion, and the unfulfilled promise of our careers

Perceived Gender-based discrimination significantly impacted job satisfaction, characterized by feelings of profound disappointment, hopelessness, and exhaustion. Participants frequently experienced a sense of meaninglessness, feeling unable to utilize their skills and potential due to obstructive behavior from male colleagues. This emotional burden resulted in a desire for professional disengagement and a feeling of an unfulfilled career.

"That career I started then, I'm still doing it with disappointment... All I want now is to move slowly until I retire. There's no point in trying, so I don't try hard, I don't want any more problems here." (Brianna)

"I work very strategically. But I'm very tired because of that... So, I feel like they don't want to accept what I'm presenting. That makes it overwhelming to work." (Emily)

Discussion

Gender-based discrimination (GBD) profoundly impacts female police officers' psychological well-being. The current findings highlight how patriarchal perceptions within the Sri Lankan police and broader society shape occupational and emotional experiences. Female officers faced perceived incompetence, devaluation, and blocked career progression, leading to significant psychological distress and hopelessness. The current study confirms deeply embedded negative stereotypes portraying women as less competent (Fernandes, 2016; Gilbert et al., 2024). This translates into disrespect for their rank and contributions and severely limited career advancement despite qualifications (Jayatilaka et al., 2019; Petitfour et al., 2022). This patriarchal system, which views femininity as weak, traps women in powerless roles, reflecting socialist feminist views. Furthermore, the police force's organizational culture, characterized by gender disparity and ingrained assumptions, restricts female advancements, aligning with Schein's organizational culture model. Unfair treatment, including false accusations and biased transfers, stemming from a "masculine-coded ideal officer mentality", further demonstrates this harmful disrespectful cultural impact, aligning with global patterns of police services marginalising female officers (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2023; Angehrn et al., 2021; Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020). Despite constitutional prohibitions and Sri Lanka's historical shifts, GBD persists due to ingrained societal norms (Chandrika, 2021; Gamage, 2024; Jayasundere, 2016)

These discriminatory experiences cause a heavy psychological toll. Participants reported emotional numbness, pain, embarrassment from injustices, and constant pressure to prove competence. Feelings of regret about their gender, depression, and unfulfilled careers were common. This aligns with findings that undervaluation causes work identity conflict and GBD leads to increased stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and decreased job satisfaction (Gul et al., 2024; Rabichuk, 2021; Veldman et al., 2017). This emotional burden reflects how deeply rooted patriarchy within the organisational culture affects psychological well-being, encouraging alienation and undermining self-identity. The strength of the current study lies in its qualitative IPA methodology, offering rich insights into female officers' lived experiences, addressing a significant research gap in Sri Lanka. However, the small sample size limits generalisability, and self-reported data may introduce bias. Future research should use larger, diverse samples, potentially employing mixed methods.

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