

Seattle Police Department 30 By 30 Report

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Executive Summary

On August 7th – 9th Dr. Lois James conducted multiple focus groups and interviews at the Seattle Police Department (SPD) as part of the “30 By 30” Initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to promote women in Law Enforcement, with the ultimate goal of having women make up 30% of sworn personnel by the year 2030.

Nine focus groups and interviews were conducted over the three-day period, taking approximately one hour each. Participants were women from SPD, both sworn and civilian, ranging in rank and role. Prompting questions focused around the major topic areas of: “What is the culture like in SPD?”, “How are women respected in SPD?”, “What are barriers for women in SPD?”, “What would help promote women in SPD?”

The major themes that emerged from focus groups and interviews were:

1. Masculine culture, expectations for women, and double standards
2. Generational distinction
3. Pregnancy and childcare
4. Promotion and leadership
5. Exclusion and pigeon holing

Key recommendations resulting from these themes were:

1. Awareness
2. Department childcare options
3. Mentorship for women

Background

The 30 by 30 initiative is designed to promote numbers of women in Law Enforcement, with the goal of having women represent 30% of sworn officers by the year 2030. The initiative provides a tool kit for conducting focus groups in departments to understand the lived experiences of women in policing, and to uncover potential solutions for promoting women. In August 2023, Dr. Lois James came to SPD to conduct multiple focus groups for the 30 by 30 initiative.

Focus groups took on average 60 minutes, with participant numbers ranging from two to six. Interviews were one on one and typically took 30 minutes. Focus groups were categorized by type of employee (sworn or civilian) and rank (officers, sergeants, etc.). No additional information on participants will be provided to protect the opinions of women willing to share their experiences and recommendations for improvement.

Across the course of three days and nine focus groups and interviews, several distinctive themes emerged. In addition, several key recommendations for potential solutions were proposed. These themes and recommendations are provided below, with supporting quotes from participants.

Theme 1: Masculine Culture, Expectations for Women, and Double Standards

This theme represents the challenges of women fitting into the inherently masculine police culture, and how women in policing are perceived differently than men. Many of these quotes reflect that women do not feel that they can behave in the same way as their male counterparts, as they will be thought of as difficult, challenging, or problematic. They also reflect how women are expected to behave, and how that can be at odds with the expectations of policing.

[As a woman]... “When you have a bigger personality, there's more conflict.”

“Going through the process to become an officer in the first place as a woman is, is a little bit harder, um, but I think you, you learn to hold stuff back... My guess is she probably thought it was gonna be used against her in some way. It'll be your fault, because you should have known better, even though maybe it wasn't directly something that she was responsible for, right? I feel like that scapegoating happens a lot.”

“I had the sergeant, he's gone now, God, he would not respond to a single email... It just wouldn't matter. Like he just, he refused to acknowledge, right? That you even existed. And I don't know if it was sexism or if it was like, oh, you're just a civilian right here. And I'd have to go to the lieutenant and be like, um, like, he's not responding, like, what?”

“I mean, anecdotally, that's one of the strengths of women in law enforcement, is that, you know, oftentimes we have an ability to, um, get along with people because, you know, historically and traditionally, that's what we've been taught to do.”

“You kind of have to take on that persona that's typically masculine, right? To, like, detach, and it's just very cold and, like, okay, well, I'm just gonna get where I need to go, and I don't care if who gets hurt.”

“My experiences is that I've had to work harder, um, then my male counterparts, for sure.”

“They have to be more careful than their male counterparts for fear or, you know, for concern, that if they make anything that could be perceived as a misstep, they'll be judged harsher for it.”

“When I was in training, you know, student officer going to the range, I was like, people are waiting for me to fail.”

[A female family member who is a firefighter] "...was trying to make the decision between Seattle and Bellevue, and ultimately chose Seattle because at least there are a couple of women, you know, right? Versus in Bellevue, there were none. But the point being, you know, I mean, we think that we think that this is a policing problem. It's not, right? I mean, there are a lot of professions that are very male dominated. And even if they're great guys, even if they're good men, it still comes along with challenges, right?"

"You know the perception is like you kind of, have to be like a bitch to survive and it shouldn't be like that... there's so much softness that that our police officers do also have to have."

"And I think that that in order to be taken seriously in a culture, you have to emulate the culture, right? But if you go too far, then you're horrible. But if you don't go far enough, then you're soft."

"But there have been times in my career when I've literally said, like, is that something that you would say to a man? And Oh my God, the reaction to that is like, how dare you? At the end of the day, it can be really exhausting. It feels like two jobs."

"You know, guys can do whatever the heck they want with a million women. And just no consequences, career wise, relationship wise, friends and stuff like that. Women don't even have to sleep with someone, people will make up that you slept with someone and then spread that rumor. And it's just like, not even remotely grounded in reality. I had a lot of those issues when I was a younger officer."

"Like, am I imagining this? Or am I being unreasonable? Like, is this really like a, something that has to do with me being a woman? Or something else, right? When you

talk to other women and they're like, oh no, I've had that exact same experience with that person, or in that scenario or whatever, you're kind of like, okay, it's not just me."

"It's like, okay, well, I'm gonna embody this culture so that nobody can say that I, you know, don't belong."

Within this theme also emerged some distinct personal experiences with sexual harassment within the department.

"I was in grad school, and I had a sergeant told me I look yummy in front of a bunch of officers, and that was just like, oh, okay... And like, I was introduced in a roll call in the lieutenant was like, don't worry, guys, she's married. It's like, is that necessary? Like, my marital status is necessary for you to say out loud? So there's, in the culture, there's also some sexual harassment stuff that's pretty, I don't wanna say rampant, because I don't think that that's the right word."

"So I had somebody I was in a car with, essentially start asking me, like, why are you single? So I kind of shut down. And I was like, well, my last boyfriend killed himself, so I just don't date. And I thought maybe that would just kind of end the conversation. And he just continued on, and it continued for 4 hours just random questions about, like, why are you single? Why don't you date? What's your love language? Blah, blah, blah. And like, it didn't sit right. And so I went to a supervisor who was a woman, and I said, this happened... It is federal fucking law to report it. It took four months for that person to report it, and I, I'm still working with this guy. I still just see him every fucking day and listen to him fucking talk. And he know, because he got told about it, he tried to apologize. And the apology ended up him yelling at me, um, and it should have been totally confidential. Like, he knows my personal phone number. And I remember asking the team do I need to worry about for safety purposes – he is able to carry a gun and they're like well we don't I don't think it would get that far. I had, like, a whole panic

attack for a good 20 min after that.”

Theme 2: Generational Distinction

Another theme that emerged was the generational component of policing culture, and many participants referenced the “good old boys club” and how some of these issues are not as problematic with the younger / newer generation. Despite some improvements, concern about maintaining status quo were evident. Differences in challenges for women based on precinct were also raised.

“Each precinct kind of has its own atmosphere, um. And some of that has to do with history.”

“And then, and there's the culture of, well, we've always done it this way, or, well, we're focusing on this.”

“There's definitely a section of sworn individuals that have been around forever, and they're, like, people were saying, stuck in their way.”

“And there's some that are kind of in between the old guys and the newer group who are the middle, like, they've, they understand, like, the value of how it was used to be done, but are also, like, willing to listen.”

“And then the new people who are, like, totally educated and more up with the times and totally go with the flow and maybe drive the old crew a little too crazy because they're not doing it the way they think it should be done.”

“So there is, I think, some fracture within the department in general.”

“And the only way we can break the cycle is by having, you know, less of the status quo, right?”

“Because you are disruptive, even if you don’t intend to be, you're disrupting a status quo by virtue of being there.”

“And so... if we don't do something to interrupt that that generational trauma... But I think it's the same thing with women, right? So, traditionally, you know, law enforcement has been a male dominated field, and so there are certain expectations and norms that, um, and trauma responses of women in law enforcement that just get continually perpetuated... So even if I've never experienced anything sort of overtly sexist in the workplace, um, if I'm taught that it's a thing that happens, then everything gets filtered through that lens.”

“You have the generation gap of you've got your old, salty, you know, guys that have been on forever... and then you have your ten to 15, and then you have your new hires. And the new hires are drastically different, I think, generationally.”

Theme 3: Pregnancy and Childcare

A theme that emerged in every focus group was challenges around pregnancy and childcare. Although policies around maternity leave have clearly improved based on differences in lived experiences of younger and older women employees, many challenges remain.

“I definitely saw my temp employee gets discriminated against for being pregnant. And like, well, should you be working by yourself? You shouldn't be out here by yourself. You shouldn't be doing this. So, um, there is still that mentality that, oh, well, you're pregnant and you must have, like, a disability...”

“We’ve had some pregnant women working in our unit on light duty, while pregnant and then when they come back and they’re still breastfeeding, um, and there’s a lot of pressure for them to get back out on the street. And so there’s, there’s a lot of pressure of, like, well, how much, like, how long can I do this? How long should I, like, should I fight for myself to be able to stay on light duty longer?”

“On that same note, like, I didn’t know exactly what my, my rights were for breast feeding, like for pumping at work after the fact, even for my first pregnancy, I didn’t think at all about looking that up.”

“I mean, you know, when I first got hired on, we didn’t have a breastfeeding room. So if you were breastfeeding when you came back to work, you either had to stop, or you had to find a private place to do that, which always wasn’t only possible, feasible, like I just, I stopped.”

“I know this is the way for a lot of female officers they’re managing the brunt of their households and they’re managing the brunt of their children and then they’re working or they’re trying to get an education or you know whatever, else that comes with that.”

“So, and I think the other thing too is women, they don’t promote because they do have children at home, and they just stick you wherever they stick you, right?”

“Females can’t have that, especially when they’re managing so much at home with their kids and schooling, and, you know, all that, I mean, we have to be mindful of those things because that’s real life for people, right?”

“We are the primary caretaker of not just our kids, our parents, our peers, our brothers and sisters.”

“I have to make up for it on the back end because I've been taking care of my family for three years, so now it's like, oh, I have to re-prove myself and my value to the department.”

“I wonder, if men could sometimes personally experience some of the difficulties and the challenges and the kind of the extra hoops and all that comes along with [being a woman] would it make a difference? Have you ever seen those videos where men put those sensors on their belly to feel labor pain, or just cramps? I just don't think you could replicate the experience of being a woman because there's some of it that's cumulative, right? And so, like, as a woman, you sort of build up this um framework, for how you think about the interactions that you have, with other people, men.”

“I'm a single mom, and I have been for five and half years, and there's no childcare that's offered for when we are forced to work events. I'm at the behest of my babysitters, you know.”

“It makes you wonder how many single dads there are in the department. And if there were more, would it be different, you know, I mean it's not an actual equitable problem, right?”

Theme 4: Promotion and Leadership

A major theme that was consistently raised was difficulties with promotion, and how discrimination against women appears to be more evident the higher up the ranks you go. Relatedly, the idea that women in leadership are more likely to be used as scapegoats than their male counterparts.

"I know of a lieutenant who, like her goal was like, I'm going to take the captain's test. I'm gonna climb, I'm gonna make assistant chief. And like, in a matter of months, she's like, screw this place. I'm not putting my time and energy into this. I'm not getting the respect I deserve. I worked my butt off and did all this for this program, and it was handed off to these three men."

"She was more visible and, I think, more proactive. And I it bothers me when I hear my colleagues, male and female, actually sworn, um, you know, talking shit about her, and just saying, oh, good riddance you know. Kind of, blows my mind a little bit how willing they are to just like dismiss somebody who literally gave like her entire career to this department and then she just got stepped on and kicked out the door, and just she didn't have the support. The city was trying to, like, basically use her as a scapegoat. There wasn't enough, there wasn't strong enough leadership in the department to stand up and say, what the hell are you doing?"

"And I think the higher that I've promoted, I feel like it's gotten a little bit worse, frankly."

"It's been an interesting shift in dynamics to see promoting as a woman as opposed to being an officer, because a number that starts small actually gets smaller and smaller, because your [female] peers get less and less."

[The mentality was] "if you wanna be promoted you have to go to this shift, everybody that gets promoted has to go to patrol shift... And I said, look I need you to give me any shift but the night shift because frankly there was nobody home to look after my kid... [And the response was]... this is the only one we have available... So I guess I'm not getting promoted. But then I'll turn around and I see, um, a counterpart who is going through a divorce, and he gets a hardship transfer assignment okay no problem."

"I got promoted with eleven people. Of those eleven people, only three of us got patrol. Everybody else who promoted and didn't go to patrol... I don't think they have that, that nagging sense that, like, oh my God, that's gonna be really bad for my career, you know, like, oh shit."

"And so, like my husband is, I'm talking to him, he's like, why are you fighting this fight? You're losing sleep, you're crying, let it go. He's like, is it worth it? And I go, because if this is the foot I get off on when I first get promoted, this is going to basically let everybody know how they can treat me for the rest of my career as a sergeant, and I'm not having it. Okay, so I will lose the sleep, I'll cry for a year. I'll lose friends, I'll go to OPA with all that stuff happened. And he was just like... that would never have happened to me as a man, huh?"

"I'd known her for a while, so she got promoted to lieutenant, and I was in her office when one of her new detectives came in to talk to her, and he, she told him something, and he literally rolled his eyes at her and like, started to walk off."

"I'm not part of that, um, command and control situation. You know how I can tell? Because if I tell people to do things, they don't do them right."

"Um, I think our promotion process needs to be revamped. I think it's outdated. I think we have a lot of people that are in positions of power, that have no business being in positions of power, and it's because they're good test takers. I think we need to have peer review as part of our promotion process, and I think that will help alleviate, um, some of that."

"I'm gonna work for a female chief. I'm going for somebody that's gone through, like, the universal experience of womanhood, like, oggled on the bus, cat called, like, dealt with crappy bosses. Somebody that knows that feeling... And then, obviously life happened."

“And the fact that you took all the detectives and they're all male, and it's called either sausage squad or the testosterone squad. It's like you touted these people as the best, the best in the agency, and you're like, what's missing, huh? So you can check the box and say, we hired all these women, but are their careers going anywhere now?”

Related to the theme of promotion and leadership is mentorship, and some challenges women felt about not having sufficient mentorship to break into the “good old boys club”.

“It's like, if you don't have the same connections that a guy would in your place, you're not gonna have the same results, regardless of if people are good, good guys or, even if it's not like active or intentional discrimination.”

“I kind of made it my personal mission to try to get um, women to promote, and I would help them study through the process and try to get a sense from them about why they weren't promoting.”

“I've always tried to, even if I don't maybe get along with other women, I try to still like support them, build them up, not tear them down in public.”

“Now definitely the men outnumber the women. So it's easier for men to move up in this department because they have that mentoring relationship with other men, right?”

[Chief O'Toole] “I mean, the whole, the atmosphere just change when she came in and there was actually a sense of, okay, now we, you know, we've got somebody who's gonna stand up for us. I mean, she didn't take much shit from anybody, right? So she probably did get, you know, the bitch label, right? Whereas, I mean, Carmen [Chief Best] seemed to get along with everybody, and it still didn't really protect her.”

Additionally, some women reported being torn down by other women, perhaps for competition over limited resources, or due to women acclimating to a hyper masculine culture.

“The other culture that we have not embraced is women building, we tend to break each other down and shit, talk each other and, um, view each other as threats rather right to each other, as was like friends, right?”

“When I first came on the department, I had another female officer corner me in the locker room and basically tell me, before you hit the streets, you need to know. Like this, watch is mine, all these men that you're talking to, all these men you think you fucking cute around... I saw you out in the hallway talking to so and so and so and so, like, I don't know what you think you're doing, but like, button it up.”

“We see it here, where, because there are so few women, then women believe that in order to have power, they have to put down other women. Because it's like, there, there are only a finite number of spots for us in the top, right? And so we have to push each other down or to get there. And I think it takes, like a critical mass of women being like, “no, that's not how it should be” to combat that.

A concerning point brought up by many was that despite the complete agreement that more women are needed in Law Enforcement, most of the participants would not encourage other women in their lives to join the department.

“Well, if I were to tell my daughters or, you know, my friends, I tell them to run in the opposite direction, you know, because of the experiences that I've had.”

Theme 5: Exclusion and Pigeon Holing

The final theme that emerged across the focus groups and interviews was exclusion and pigeon holing. Many participants reported being excluded from activities, groups, social events and so on. Others discussed the “categories” that women were pigeon holed into.

“There's this place where you can eat, like a patio, open space. I'm not allowed there. I'm not on the list. I'm not on the list to go eat outside. There's, there's definitely some, like, club atmosphere. And it's like, it's like, oh, you're not in that club.”

“I had to volunteer for significant events. I was never chosen for those events. Um, I had a kind of beg and, like, throw a tantrum to, like, be included in what I perceive as the good old boys system.”

“We have a tendency to let the same people do the same jobs over and over, but not to include other people. I specifically feel that that's relevant to women, because what we do is that we box them into administrative roles or doing other things that are not tactically related or tactically sound.”

“We're talking years and years of not having a female in commander roles and precinct command, you know, positions managing patrol.”

“The two people that were appointed in that position, I can tell you, hands down, I have more experience than they do. I have more education than they do. And I received no feedback from the Department of any reason why I couldn't have gotten that position or, you know, my qualifications. So that essentially says to me that there's no skills that I have to be, you know, credible for that job.”

“Um, I don't think women have that same bonding opportunity to be hanging out with the good old boys to say, okay, um, you know, I want that job.”

"I mean, when I was a patrol officer... women's roles on the department we were kind of socially pigeon hold into four different categories. You were, incompetent, technically inept, shouldn't be a police officer, or scared to be on the street. A baby factory who, you know, got pregnant to get off the street quickly, and then got a dust job and stayed there forever. A slut who would sleep with anyone. Or just a bitch."

"On the union board, they have a uniform committee, and [name redacted] is picking new uniforms. There's not a single female on there. Oh, so I said, great. You're gonna pick pants that fit dudes. Great. How about you get somebody in there that's a female and has a waist, or has some hips, or has some breasts... they just don't, and that's part of this, right?"

"There could be drama with me because I'm a woman... or you only got that position because your looks, or you only got that position because that sergeant wanted to get your pants or stuff like that."

"A male captain that would order you around, but it wasn't in your chain of command, like he would ask us to do stuff that we had no business doing, or when we tell him no he would circumvent and go to his buddies above us and, like, get us to do stuff."

"And then it reminds me a lot of GI Jane, did you guys ever watch that? Demi Moore, her character joins the Seals. It was like, a whole thing. They're hazing. They don't want her in because she's, she's a liability to others. Remember when women were first introduced to being in combat positions, the military was in uproar. For a long time, policing was just women were there to do secretarial and evidence work. God forbid that there was an actual woman on the street taking reports, even though, we're better."

Again, within this theme there were personal stories or retelling of friends stories that were clear sexual harassment and discrimination.

"I have a close friend... She was a federal agent for [redacted] on the SWAT team. They [her team] took her to a bar for lunch and, and every square inch of the walls was a female in sexual positions, from magazines, everything was covered."

[Name redacted] "saw me and she grabbed me after I came out of the office [after resigning]... She goes, I heard you resigning... And she grabbed me. She said, don't you know what's happening here? We just sat down and we talked, and she said, listen, they are forcing you out. And I didn't see it, um, because I was just trying to work hard, you know. She said, I want you to take 30 days. And I said, like, I don't even know who you are. The next thing I knew, she walked me up... I unresigned. I took 30 days off... I went and talked to some people at SPD... anyway I came back and went to the [redacted] precinct and it was a completely different feeling there."

"I remember the guys, they all used to go to breakfast and they would leave one person out on the road, and the one person on the graveyard crew that they would leave out on the road was the woman who would never get to go. She would never be invited to breakfast and go every morning at 05:00, you'll get breakfast for an hour, hour and a half, and she'd be the one babysitting the city."

Recommendations

From the themes documented from the SPD 30 by 30 focus groups several key recommendations emerged:

1. Awareness
2. Department childcare options
3. Mentorship for women

Awareness

A recommendation that was suggested by most focus groups was the need for greater awareness around active sexism within the department.

“Sexism is when you or I say something, and then he says the same thing, and everybody, when the dude says it is like, oh, of course. We all have to be aware that, you know, if we're all sitting here at the command staff table, it's possible that everybody here has something to offer, right?”

“I think culturally, in the department we, we kind of don't recognize women and their skills and what they try to do to better themselves.”

There was a feeling that despite good (often great) intentions, so much gender-based discrimination occurs. Raising awareness about this is a critical first step in dismantling some of the structural sexism that is unavoidable in a historically male profession.

“I think a lot of it is implicit on their part... They don't even realize what they're doing. I had a boss tell me um how difficult at the time he was having because you know his wife is a stay at home, mom and she's doing this and, doing that, and he has to do his laundry for the first time. And he, you know, he had to get instructions on how to run the washer, and he has to go out to lunch every day because he can't even make his own lunch. And so, these two weeks are just gonna be a mess. And I'm like... This wife that you speak of, how can I have one?”

Ultimately, there was a feeling that solving this problem will be challenging because it typically falls on women to do it (as men are not as incentivized to change the status quo) and they are already exhausted. The only path forward is for men in policing to commit to change.

“I don't think that women are the ones who are going to end sexism any more than I think that people of color are gonna end racism. This really takes a conscious and concerted effort by men to notice what they're doing and stop.”

Department Childcare Options

A practical recommendation that was brought up in most focus groups was the need for department childcare options. Without it, gender-based issues around discrimination due to childcare difficulties are not going to be solved.

“I just really think that we need to really start thinking about um when you talked about recruiting you know more women or whatever, I think that we really need to think about, like, the roles that women take on in their house, right? We need to think about how we can accommodate them with childcare, or if they're single parents, how we're gonna work out their schedule, like, you know, assisting with, you know, what kind of things that they need.”

“I mean, if you were looking for getting more women in the door, in my opinion... a pretty big problem is the lack of child care in the evenings. I know other agencies, not in this state, but they offer it, like, if you need child care from, you know, 10:00 p.m. to 06:00 a.m., it's available.”

“A big piece of it is how the health and wellness here does not have, um, childcare options, and why they will not think about childcare options... it is mind blowing to me, because that is where a lot of the discrimination happens. If we had more single dads in the department, or, you know, dads that are that are primarily responsible for child care, it would have happened decades ago. Hell. If men could get pregnant...”

Mentorship for Women

The final recommendation that was brought up across most focus groups and interviews is the need for better mentorship of women from recruitment through promotion. Over and over again it was raised that it's about who you know. That getting ahead is more about connections than anything else. Women need to be included and recognized in those circles, and ultimately become the people who are important to know and have connections with. Not just for the betterment of women, but for the betterment of policing.

"It's about who you know, and getting people [women] kind of in the spots... which are beneficial for them to be able to move up."

"I really encouraged the females that worked under me to become FTOs or to promote up... I think it brings a different dynamic, we don't have the physical strength that the men do, we just don't, but we have more often than not the gift of gab and we have the capacity to de-escalate verbally."