

# Women in Law Enforcement: Is the Playing Field Level

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## Abstract

*Women's rights in America have come a long way over the past 50 years. Women have gone from not having the right to vote to holding positions of authority in the private sector and government. One profession where women still lag behind men in promotions and advancement is law enforcement. Professional policing has existed since Sir Robert Peel began transforming the profession in 1829 in England. Horne noted (2011) that, the first female police officer wasn't hired in America until almost a century later when in 1908 when Lola Baldwin was hired in Portland Oregon. Even then Baldwin was relegated to assignments such as skating rinks, movie theaters, and arcades. These were locations typically patronized by other women and children and therefore a fit assignment for a woman. According to the US Census Bureau women make up 50.7% of the US population. However, when the number of sworn female officers is examined we find that women only make up 12-13% of all sworn officers. When supervisory positions are looked at we find even worse numbers. The National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) found in a recent survey that women make up 5.7% of sergeants and only 1% are lieutenants, captains or higher (command staff ). A primary reason for the low numbers of women pertains to equitable recruiting. Felperin noted (2004), that "Although research shows that women can be just as effective as men, uneven hiring practices, selection processes and recruitment policies keep the number of women artificially low". Today women clearly are not fairing as well as men in the profession of law enforcement. The author's objective in this study is to determine whether the lagging status and advancement of women in law enforcement is due to gender discrimination or poor performance and ability on the part of women.*

## Introduction

What are law enforcement agencies doing to ensure that the playing field for promotions and assignments are equally fair for women and men? A review of national statistics as well as an examination of agencies in the state of Florida of similar size will examine how women are fairing at moving up the ranks in the police profession. The practice of placing sworn female members in less dangerous positions such as juvenile crimes will also be examined to determine if women are slighted due to stereotypes of them being weaker candidates to fight "real" crime.

Women in law enforcement have come a long way since the days they were referred to as “matrons”. However, issues of fairness and equality in achieving senior level management positions should be examined and kept on professional Chiefs of Police and Sheriff’s radar screens. Professional female law enforcement officers possess all of the key skill sets required to lead and be effective managers of professional agencies. High degrees of intelligence, compassion, communication skills and restraint in the use of force category make women ideal candidates for law enforcement jobs in an era when working “smarter and not harder” is the key.

In a male dominated profession, women will have challenges to deal with that men simply won’t have to concern themselves. Men, due to their “macho” psychology, constantly compare themselves to other men in terms of toughness, strength, and popularity. In other words, many men, who were once “jocks” in high school or college, are drawn to careers in law enforcement due to false images seen on television or movie screens depicting fictional characters. Many police officers today grew up watching television shows like “Hill Street Blues” and “The Shield”. Although these programs may have dealt with topics true to the day the manner in which the characters are displayed always focus more on sensationalism and entertainment than on reality. TV shows are about making money and ratings and not showing men and women as true professionals seeking to enhance and serve society. Many women in these programs are also either depicted in some manner relating to sex objects or as a maladjusted rude masculine idiot.

Issues of “Upward Mobility” and the limitations for vertical progression for women in law enforcement vary greatly. “Good Ole Boy” networks and cultures once the norm are slowly being dismantled. Education, testing ability, and dedication are replacing once unethical systems of “buddy buddy” hiring and promoting. Still women who make up more than half the US population and half the workforce find themselves in the daunting position of playing catch-up in the modern world of professional law enforcement.

## **Literature Review**

In March 2011, *The Police Chief Magazine* examined the historical introduction of women into law enforcement. It found that the first women in America to be hired and placed in sworn positions were assigned positions that dealt specifically with issues pertaining to other women and children. Their jobs were mainly to determine the social conditions or reasons for these women and children becoming involved in crime. Instead of being viewed as real crime fighters these women were viewed more as “matrons” or mother figures with uniforms. (Carroll, 2011)

In the 1996 book *Policing in Central and Eastern Europe: Comparing Firsthand Knowledge with Experience from the West* author Barbara Raffel Price made the following observations, among others, on the issue of women in law enforcement: (1) women are motivated to become police officers for financial

security; (2) pre-employment exposure to police work was a key factor; (3) most women are preparing for promotion exams; (4) almost all black women and half of white women report discrimination within police departments. Lastly, she makes the point that “gender bias is clearly attitudinal as well as behavioral while the organization and its practices are inherently a matter of structure”. (Price, 1996)

In the 2006 fifth edition of *Character and Cops: Ethics in Policing* former Madison, Wisconsin Police Chief David C. Couper makes the following assessment of women in law enforcement. Women should be assigned to all areas and assignments of an agency based on their knowledge and skill sets. Research has proven women to be exceptional at defusing violent situations and to be less likely than their male counterparts to use excessive force when making arrests. Couper went on to make the point that “good judgement and restraint are not, however, a function of sex or race; they are the achievements of individuals, who should be assessed as such by a department”. (Delattre). As noted by Crary (2002), “Women comprise 12.7 percent of the personnel in large police departments, yet account for only 2 percent of the cases in which a complaint of excessive force is upheld.”

## **Methodology**

The methodology used for this study was as follows: A survey was given to female sworn officers at 11 municipal, county, and state law enforcement agencies to gain their opinions on whether or not they felt gender-based discrimination occurred in the law enforcement profession. Research was conducted using articles, journals, and publications to add validity and depth to this study as well.

Data was collected through a ten-question survey. The survey questions captured opinions from a broad range of female sworn officers around the state. The officers have varying degrees of experience and ranks.

The last portion of this research involved an interview with a member of the City of Quincy Florida Senior Management Team to get their point of view on this important topic of ensuring all employees are protected and have equal opportunity to the senior levels of management and ultimately success.

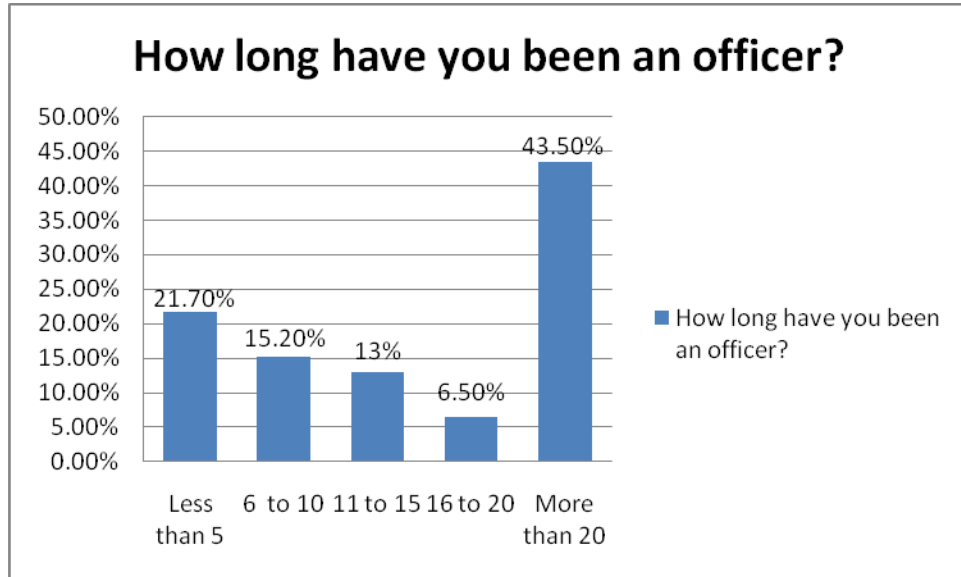
## Results

70 surveys were sent out and 46 were completed generating a 65% return rate. The survey consisted of 10 questions designed to reveal an objective view of the feelings of female law enforcement officers with varying ranks and degrees of experience levels. The questions were:

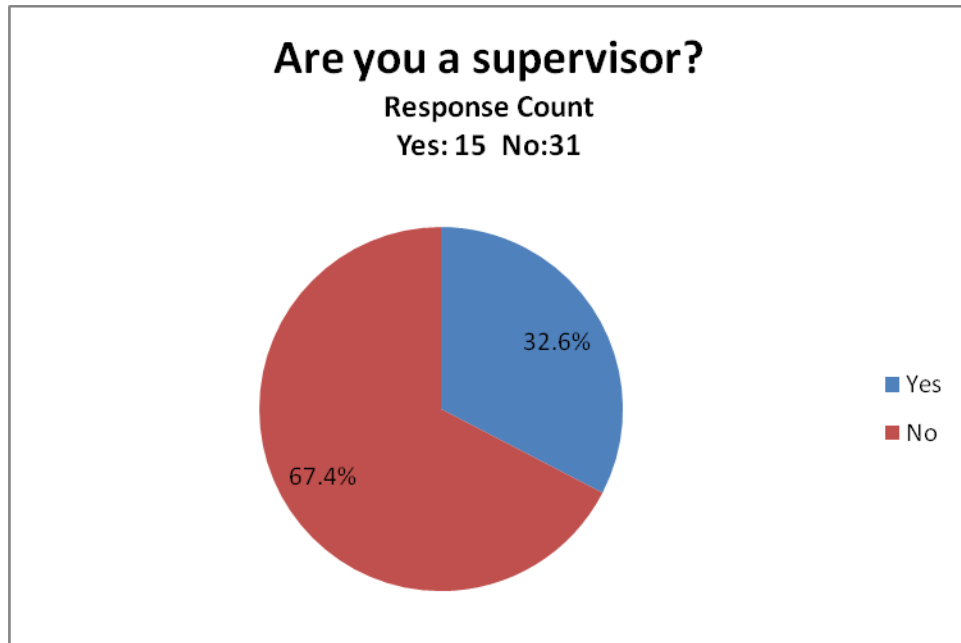
1. How long have you been an officer?  
Less than 5 years  
6 to 10 years  
11 to 15 years  
16 to 20 years  
more than 20 years
2. Are you a supervisor?  
Yes/No
3. Do you enjoy your job?  
Yes/No
4. Have you ever been discriminated against due to your gender?  
Yes/No
5. Do male subordinates give female supervisors the same respect they give male supervisors?  
Yes/No
6. Does your agency have enough female officers?  
Yes/No
7. Does your agency place a priority on recruiting female officers?  
Yes/No
8. Does being female put you at a disadvantage for promotion in law enforcement?  
Yes/No
9. Would you recommend this career field to a female relative?  
Yes/No
10. If you were the victim of discrimination would you report it?  
Yes/No

The responses to the survey questions are as follows:

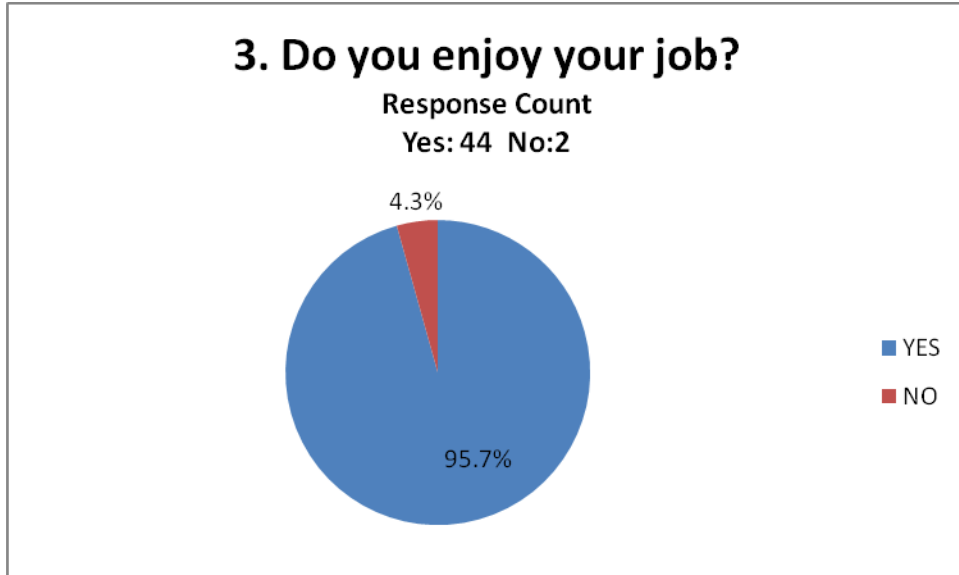
Question 1:



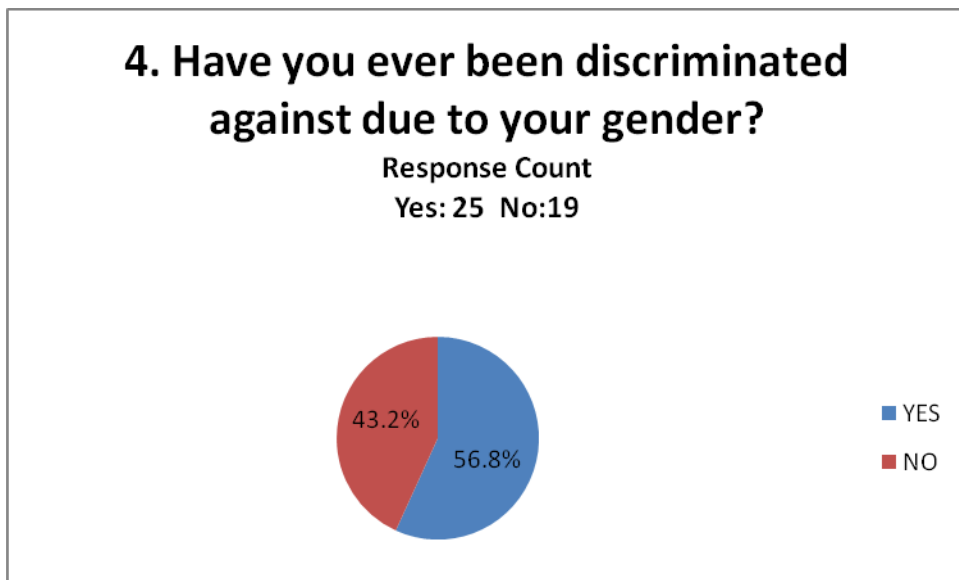
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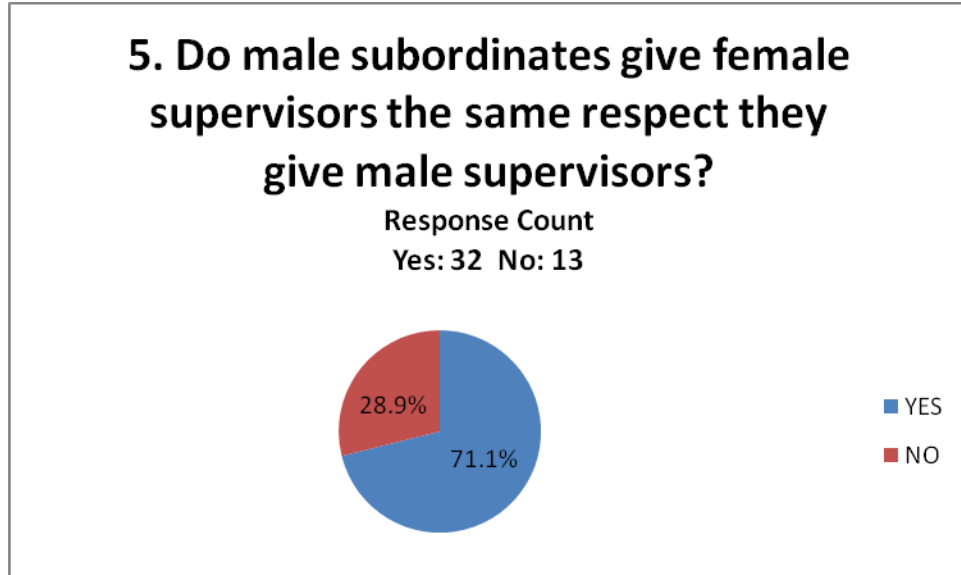
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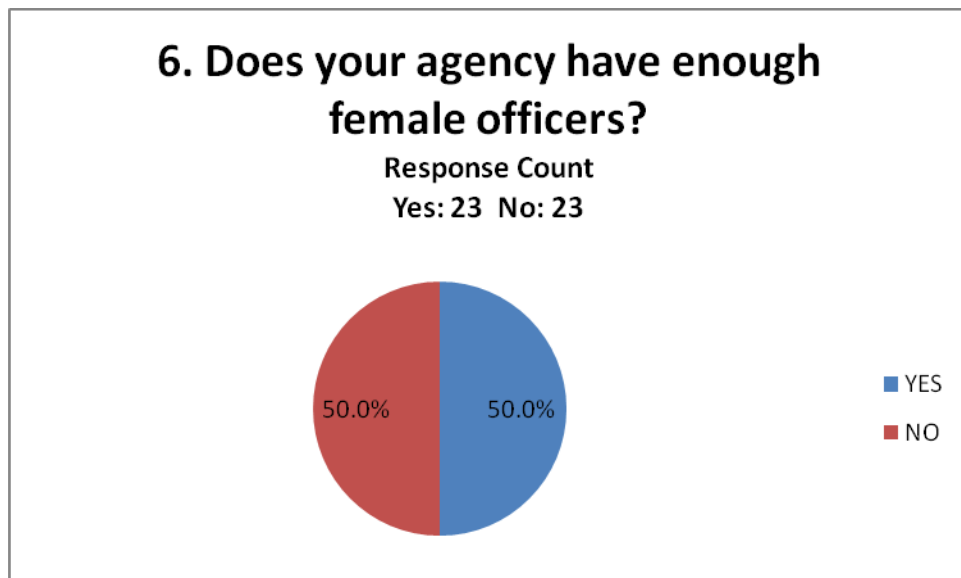
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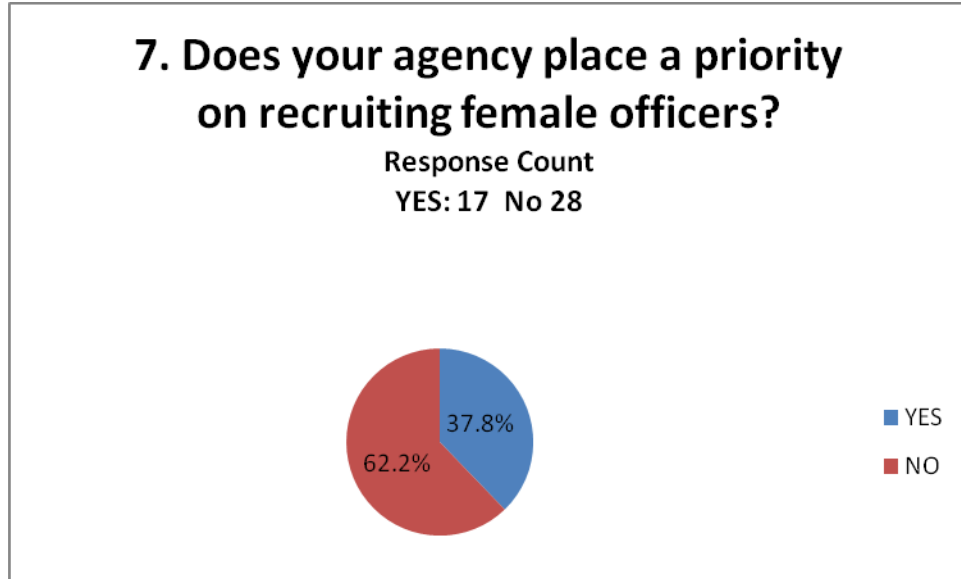
Question 5.



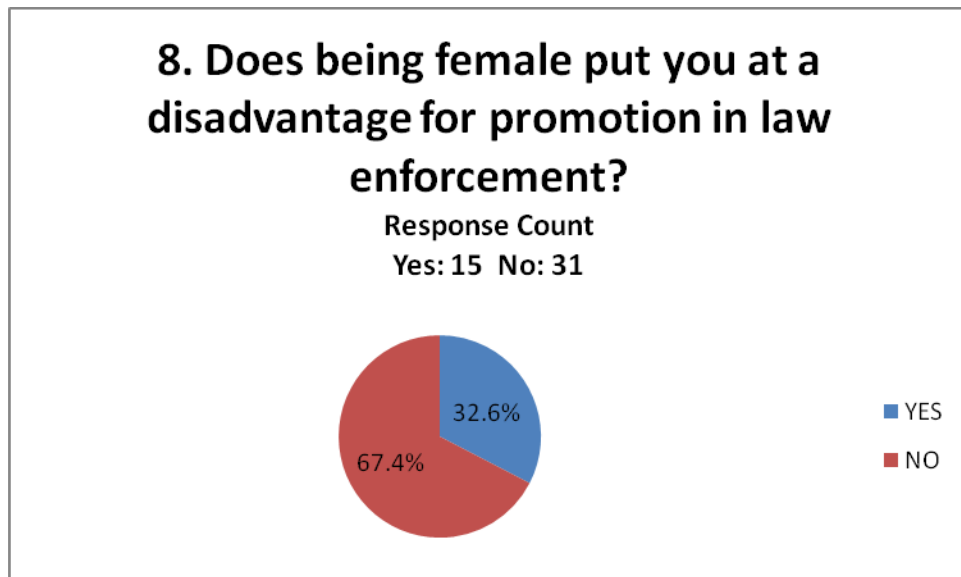
Question 6:



Question 7:

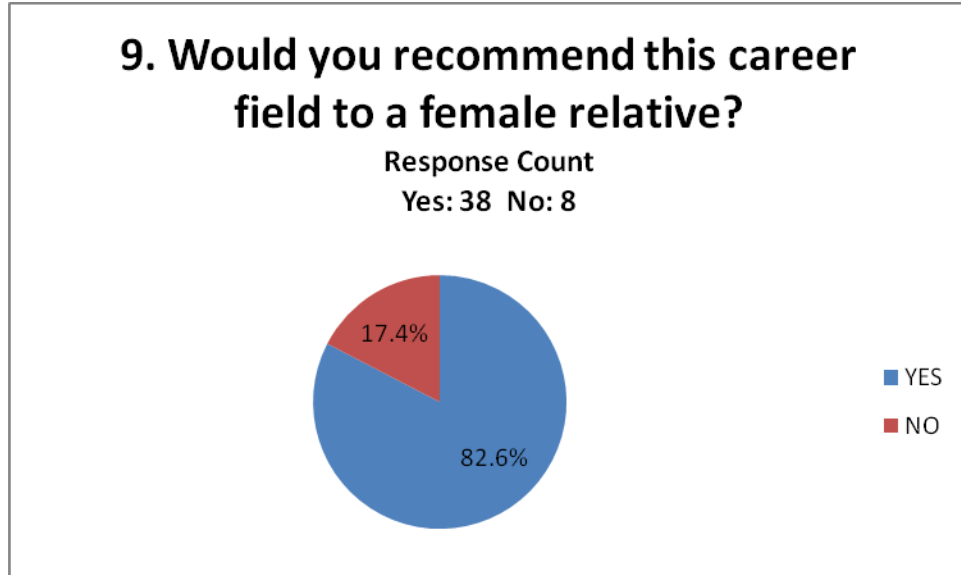


Question 8:

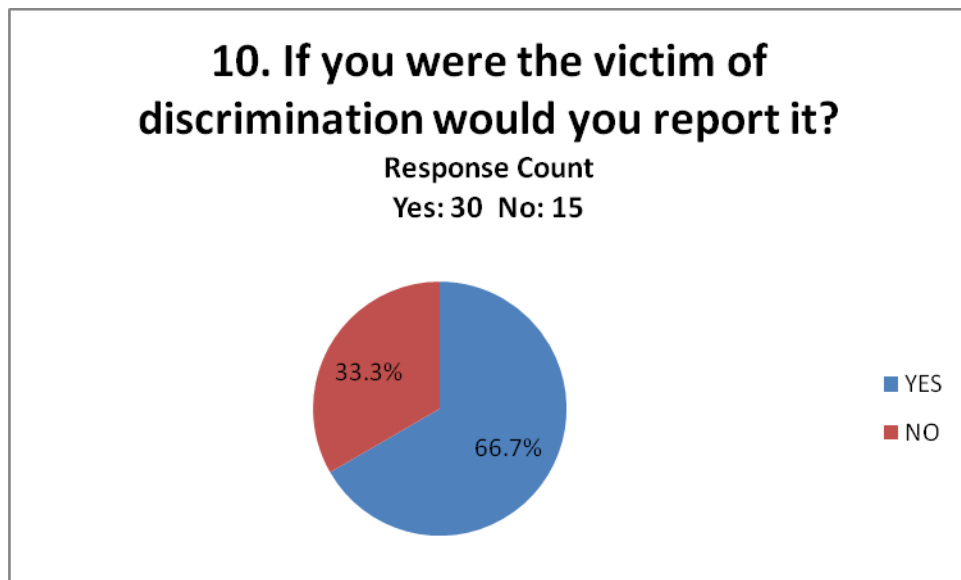




Question 9:



Question 10:



## Discussion

Walter A. McNeil, former Secretary of The Florida Department of Corrections and incoming President of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), gave these thoughts on the topic of women in law enforcement and equality. "Things have gotten better; however, when considering how bad things were the current state of affairs can be a bit confusing. In terms of opportunity women still lack equal access many times. In a profession which stresses so many mental skills brawn is still favored over brains. Being physically weaker than their male counterparts many women suffer during the front end of their careers due to the males getting the glory for kicking in doors, foot chases and wrestling down the bad guys".

Chief McNeil went on to say that women excel in areas of thinking, human relations, interpersonal communication skills, diplomacy and disciplines of our noble profession. In many instances' women have great mastery of these skills sets which are touted as critically important in policing today's information-based society. McNeil went on to say that "Many times women in law enforcement actually perform higher in these areas than males, yet we as a profession still have not arrived at a destination of equal access".

On the topic of gender discrimination and why he felt many women would not report discrimination if it occurred to them McNeil offered these thoughts. "Gender discrimination is a lot like racism, the victim knows it when they experience it yet at the same time these issues can be hard to prove. Many victims don't feel the outcome would be worth the repercussions even if reported and thus many simply live with these transgressions being committed against them". Senior level Chiefs, Sheriffs and Command Staff have a responsibility to monitor their workforce and keep their thumbs of the pulse of all employee components of their labor pools. Ultimately Chief McNeil ended his interview with this thought: Chiefs at times must "Right the wrongs of society" when promoting qualified, educated and loyal employees to levels of management beyond any "Glass ceiling".

Finally, this research has revealed some interesting data in regards to how women in law enforcement view the profession and their chances for promotion and elevation. Most female officers currently are not making it into the supervisory ranks. But most female officers are still happy with their jobs and enjoy the profession even to the point of recommending it to female relatives. There is still much work to do in regards to perspectives on fair and equal opportunity and treatment. When asked if they had been discriminated against over half the women surveyed indicated that they felt that they had at some point been discriminated against due to their gender. Yet when asked if they would report being mistreated a full one-third (33%) indicated that they would not make a report. This indicates to the writer that there are still too many women who have the perception that they will not be taken seriously or have their situation dealt with in a truly professional manner. In a profession whose core principles are based on honesty, integrity, and principles and fair play this is a real shame. We still have much work yet to do.

## Recommendations

It is clear that gender bias and gender diversity are still unconquered challenges for many law enforcement agencies in America today. Female law enforcement officers face both internal and external barriers in policing that their male counterparts do not. The percentage of police officers that are female is disproportionately small when compared to the percentage of women who make up the female portion of the US workforce. Additionally, the number of women who become supervisors and commanders is even smaller. The following are measures that executive level law enforcement commanders may consider to ensure the playing field is level for women to have a fair chance at both promotions and prestigious positions within agencies:

- All agencies should develop and/or review their policies that address sexual harassment and gender discrimination within the workplace. All policies should model and adhere to all US EEOC guidelines set forth by the federal government.
- Develop and include in policy mentoring, training, and career shadowing policies which allow female officers ample opportunity to become exposed to prestigious “high risk” positions within agencies. These positions and units include robbery, homicide, career criminal units, training and public information.
- Ensure that analysis takes place to determine a gender diversity baseline and benchmark for measuring future progress. This includes an overall assessment of the percentages of females who are represented in all ranks and divisions of the agency.
- Make recruiting top-notch female law enforcement candidates a top priority for the agency’s human resources section. The use of outstanding female recruiters is a key component of this recommendation.
- Protect the rights of female officers returning to duty who have recently given birth to children as well as the rights of female officers who are pregnant. Becoming a parent in no way should be cause for one’s career to be de-railed or unfulfilled.

Assistant Chief Glenn Sapp began his law enforcement career as a US Army Military Police Officer in 1985. He went on to serve his country in the Army Reserves and served during "Operation Desert Storm" in Saudi Arabia in 1991. He then worked for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in an entry level position prior to gaining employment with The Tallahassee Police Department in 1988. He worked as a patrolman, DARE Officer, Housing Officer, CID Auto Theft Investigator, and PIO prior to being promoted to Sergeant. As a Sergeant he served again in Patrol and in CID as supervisor of the Leon County Robbery/Auto Theft Task Force. He was then promoted to Lieutenant and spent most of this time serving as a Watch Commander and Administrative Lieutenant/Assistant Patrol Division Commander. He was then promoted to the rank of Commander/Captain where he served as one of two Patrol Division Commanders for TPD. In April of 2011, Chief Sapp retired from the Tallahassee Police Department and was appointed Assistant Chief of Police for the City of Quincy, Florida where he currently is employed.

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