Turning a blind eye: Canadian women-identifying officers' experiences of gender-based violence within policing institutions

by

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Abstract

This study explored the structural nature of gender-based violence (GBV) within Canadian policing institutions, emphasizing how formal policies mask deeply embedded informal practices that perpetuate harm against women-identifying officers. Despite incremental increases in female representation in police services, these environments remain shaped by hypermasculinity, informal hierarchies, and institutional betrayal. The research was motivated by a critical gap in the literature: while prior studies acknowledge the presence of GBV, few have analyzed how such violence is systemically (re)produced, sustained, and legitimized within police culture.

Employing a grounded theory methodology within a case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 11 current and former women-identifying officers from across Canada. The data were analyzed using constant comparative methods, thematic coding, and theoretical triangulation, supported by anti-oppressive, intersectional, and power-based theoretical frameworks. The study also reviewed the findings using various documents, including a victim impact statement, legal report, and court filings, to triangulate the qualitative data.

Findings revealed that GBV is normalized through cultural indoctrination, coercive control, retaliation, and informal power networks. From recruit training onward, women officers reported experiences of exclusion, surveillance, sexual harassment, reputational threats, and systemic gaslighting. Participants described long-term physical and psychological harm, including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and moral injury. The study introduced a conceptual model mapping how organizational, cultural, and external systemic factors converge to reinforce GBV and silence victims.

Recommendations for policing organizations emphasize the need for structural and cultural reform. These include legislated, trauma-informed oversight mechanisms; independent and accessible reporting pathways; expanded definitions of workplace safety to include psychological harm; and union accountability reforms to eliminate conflicts of interest in misconduct cases. The research underscores that GBV in policing is not merely the product of individual misconduct but a reflection of institutional logics that must be dismantled to restore ethical integrity and ensure occupational safety.

This study contributes an urgently needed conceptual framework for understanding systemic harm in law enforcement and offers actionable strategies for organizational transformation rooted in justice and accountability.

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Dedication

To Ella. Never forget that your words, choices, and actions send ripples far beyond what you may ever see. Carry that truth with you, always.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) occurs within Canadian policing organizations, contributing to unsafe and toxic work environments (Bastarache, 2020; Rabichuk, 2021). According to Bastarache (2020) and Rabichuk (2021), the failure of police organizations to provide safe workplaces can negatively affect officers' mental and physical health, self-worth, self-confidence, worldview, and personal relationships. While policing is inherently a high-stress occupation (Bastarache, 2020; Bell & Eski, 2016; Bishopp et al., 2018; Bullock & Garland, 2018; Burke, 2017; Carleton et al., 2018; Geronazzo-Alman et al., 2017; Marin, 2012; McCreary et al., 2017; Noblet et al., 2009; Rabichuk, 2021; Shane, 2020; Violanti et al., 2017), the addition of GBV, including sexual harassment, discrimination, physical and psychological abuse, and emotional and financial manipulation, exacerbates the harm, especially for women officers. The failure of police organizations to adequately investigate complaints, if they are investigated at all, places women officers at an increased risk of harm, creating compounding psychological harm (Rabichuk, 2021).

This issue of abuse occurs alongside a notable increase in the number of women officers in Canada. According to Police Resources in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024), the proportion of women officers has steadily grown since gender-based data collection began in 1986. At that time, women made up 4% of the police force; by 2023, they accounted for 23% of Canada's sworn officers (16,342 out of 71,472), reflecting an increase of 324 officers from the previous year (Statistics Canada, 2024). As the presence of women in policing rises, it becomes critical to focus on how policies and interventions can address the GBV they face. Therefore, the study specifically focused on women officers.

Current policies within police agencies regarding workplace safety have been identified as insufficient, leading to high levels of psychological stress and mental health issues among officers (Centre for Addiction & Mental Health, 2018). Women officers, in particular, face a range of stressful experiences, such as navigating gender identity and roles within predominantly masculine policing cultures (Bastarache, 2020; Bikos, 2016; Cunningham & Ramshaw, 2020; Haake, 2018; Kingshott, 2013; Kurtz & Upton, 2018; Langan et al., 2017; Morash & Harr, 2012; Rabichuk, 2021; Shelly et al., 2011; Shjarback & Todak, 2019; Schuck, 2014; Silvestri, 2017; Silvestri, 2018; Silvestri et al., 2013), experiencing sexual harassment, discrimination (Bastarache, 2020; Bikos, 2023; Brown et al., 2020; Lonsway et al., 2013; Rabichuk, 2021), and various forms of physical, sexual, and psychological violence (Bastarache, 2020; Rabichuk, 2021). These experiences contribute to adverse physical and mental health effects (Bastarache, 2020; Hartley et al., 2014; Rabichuk, 2021). However, much remains to be learned about how explicit and implicit tactics of GBV function within policing organizations.

GBV within Canadian policing must also be understood within a broader international context, where similar patterns of misogyny, harassment, and sexual violence have been repeatedly documented across policing institutions. In Canada, the Bastarache Report (2020) identified systemic sexual misconduct, abuse of power, and institutional failures within the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Comparable findings have emerged internationally. In the United Kingdom, the Casey Review (2023) concluded that the Metropolitan Police Service was institutionally misogynistic, highlighting entrenched cultures of discrimination, tolerance of sexual misconduct, and failures of accountability. Similarly, in Australia, repeated investigations by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2015) have documented pervasive sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and gendered power imbalances within Victoria

police, identifying these issues as systemic rather than attributable to individual misconduct. Taken together these inquiries demonstrate that GBV in policing is not unique to the Canadian context, but reflects transnational patterns of organizational culture, power, and accountability within paramilitary institutions.

Currently, there are no studies, either in Canada or internationally, that examine how GBV operates within policing institutions, nor is there research addressing the physical and mental health impacts of being a victim of such violence within these organizations. This gap in research highlights the need for a grounded theory approach to develop a model for understanding GBV within Canadian policing, amplifying the voices of women officers and fostering the reform of unsafe workplace environments.

Positionality Statement

I identify as a cis-heterosexual woman who is middle-class, partnered, and legally married. I acknowledge that I hold multiple forms of social privilege. I have the freedom to refer openly to my spouse as my husband without fear of stigma or consequence. I do not live with any physical or cognitive disabilities that limit my access to occupational or educational opportunities, although I live with diagnoses of anxiety and depression, and am in recovery from a post-traumatic stress injury that occasionally reemerges. I was raised in an upper-middle class household that supported my pursuit of higher education. My ancestry is predominantly French, with Romanian, Algerian, and Indigenous roots. Like many families in Canada, my Indigenous lineage was erased through generations of assimilation and has only recently begun to resurface.

I carry many roles: woman, mother, partner, daughter, sister, friend, social worker, and lifelong learner. I am also a former police officer, having served three years with a police agency in Alberta. My spouse, also a former member of the same organization, served for thirteen years.

Although my policing career was brief, I have come to learn it was shaped by significant forms of GBV. I experienced sexual harassment, gossip and workplace mobbing, gendered role discrimination, and systemic disregard for my psychological and reproductive health needs. These experiences led to psychological distress, a medical leave of absence, and ultimately, my resignation from a profession I had long aspired to join. I endured hostile work conditions, including threats to my credibility, retaliatory transfers, coercive mediation with my harasser, and the weaponization of performance reviews. I was repeatedly denied support and subjected to gaslighting by both peers and supervisors. My physical and mental health deteriorated. I developed anxiety, insomnia, gastrointestinal distress, and weight loss. At one point, my distress was so visible that my family intervened out of concern for my well-being. I was later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of these experiences.

Following a period of medical leave, I returned to the organization under conditions that required me to accept an unfavourable and inaccurate performance review, which would remain in my permanent file. I was informed that a superior had actively sought to terminate me to further his promotional ambitions. Despite a brief period of reprieve at a new district where I was finally supported by a few male sergeants and reminded of my value, I ultimately resigned. My request for a medically supported accommodation related to reproductive health was met not with empathy but with punitive reassignment and bureaucratic resistance. The timing of this decision, in conjunction with my prior complaints of sexual harassment, made it feel retaliatory and deeply unjust.

This research is borne of those experiences. My motivation to explore the gendered dimensions of policing and GBV within is rooted not only in my own experiences, but in the solidarity I feel with the many women who courageously shared their stories with me, both past

and present. Throughout the study, I have worked to recognize and bracket my own history to reduce the risk of analytic bias, particularly during thematic coding and interpretation. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) caution, reflexivity requires not only transparency but active accountability in mitigating the influence of personal narrative on research conclusions. I have endeavoured to uphold this responsibility, ensuring that my own story provides context for the voices and themes that have emerged from this research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study was to examine how Canadian women-identifying police officers [hereinafter referred to as police women or women officers] experience GBV within their policing institutions, and to explore the professional and personal impacts of those experiences. The research traced participants' trajectories over time, beginning with their motivations for entering the policing profession, their experiences during recruit training, and their subsequent experiences in operational roles. Particular attention was given to how these experiences shaped their careers, mental health, and personal lives. These narratives informed the development of a conceptual model illustrating how GBV operates within policing organizations and is influenced by external factors. This research is essential for generating new insights into the systemic nature of GBV in law enforcement. If intervention frameworks are to be effective, they must first be grounded in a deep understanding of the mechanisms through which GBV is normalized and sustained.

In summary, this chapter outlined the study’s purpose and scope, including a statement of positionality. As the primary investigator, I acknowledge that my lived experience with the phenomena under investigation has informed both the design and interpretive approach of this

research. This positionality is not presented as a limitation, but rather as a source of insight that enhances the study's depth, relevance, and reflexivity within a critical qualitative framework.

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Research Questions and Theoretical Frameworks

The specific objectives of the study were threefold and addressed using a qualitative research design. First, the study aimed to reveal the various ways in which GBV manifested within policing institutions through structures and processes, thereby shaping the experiences of women officers. Second, it sought to examine the impacts of these experiences on the physical and mental health of women in policing. Finally, the research sought to visually map the pathways through which power and GBV operate within policing institutions. It was imperative to include the voices of those who are generally excluded from research and to understand the processes and procedures occurring at various levels that shaped and produced these individuals lived experiences.

Research Questions

Based on the study's objectives, the research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do women police officers experience colleague-to-colleague GBV within the context of their policing organizations?
2. What are the structures and processes that allow GBV to occur in police organizations?
3. What are the professional and personal outcomes for officers who have experienced organizational and interpersonal forms of GBV?

The Evolution of Power and Control Theories - Dominant Theoretical Perspectives

Power is at its most effective when least observable.

Lukes, 2005, pp. 1

Various theories of power were examined to provide the primary investigator with a foundational understanding of how power and control operate across interpersonal, organizational, and institutional contexts.

Max Weber: Power and Legitimacy

Max Weber, a German sociologist considered one of the foremost power theorists of the 20th century, provided one of the first definitions of power within a social context (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2019; Masterson & Owen, 2006). Weber (1978) defined *power* as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (p. 53). Weber suggested that power is a limited commodity that only a finite number of people or groups can hold, representing a constant sum of which a maximum allotment exists (Masterson & Owen, 2006). According to Dumbrill and Ying Yee (2019), Weber articulated two types of power: coercive and authoritative. Coercive power involves "getting one's way by threat or use of force." In contrast, authoritative power involves "getting one's way by persuading others of one's legitimacy, which is having others accept one's right to rule or be in charge" (p. 59). The use of the word persuading implies individuals have to be convinced of the legitimacy, not necessarily achieving full buy-in (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

Weber described three types of leadership authority (accepted power) that establish legitimacy: charismatic authority, in which "people follow because of personality" (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2018, p. 59); traditional authority, in which people follow because of a sense of duty or tradition (e.g., King Charles of the British monarchy); and rational/legal authority in which people follow because of legal or political legitimacy (e.g., democratic societies) (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2019; Masterson & Owen, 2006). These are not static categories but rather fluid and dynamic. Those individuals or groups with power can demonstrate more than one ideal authority type. While Weber differentiated between coercive and authoritative power, he noted they are

not independent and mutually exclusive. However, they can blur into each other when wielded, operating hierarchically (Masterson & Owen, 2006).

Weber (1986) later expanded his theory of power to include the concept of domination as a central component of social action. Weber discussed domination and authority as distinct types of power and domination as a component of social action, noting that it can be visible and invisible. He diverged from Marxism in that he did not link power specifically to economic ends (although Weber acknowledged that economic power exists), drawing attention to domination linked to the duty to obey (e.g., power to command, patriarchal power) and the connection between the two. Weber's work expressly detailed organizational structure and the bases of legitimate authority. He listed the characteristics through which domination can occur (e.g., a group of individuals who are accustomed to the orders of their superiors and have a vested interest in the domination continuing because of their participation and resulting benefits from doing so).

Domination as authoritarian power of command is used to produce obedience within policing; however, it is rarely viewed or recognized as domination by the institution or officers (Rabichuk, 2021). While Weber's framework helps provide a potential conceptual power framework, it fails to consider power relations between dominant and minority or marginalized groups, nor does it seek a more nuanced understanding of how power operates according to different social categories (race, gender, disability) and privilege and their links to power. Weber's work has also been critiqued: "Weberian, constant sum notions represent masculine values emphasizing competition and domination" (Masterson & Owen, 2006, p. 21). This exclusion of social categories and the concept of privilege likely indicates more expansive societal views during the eras produced (1940s and 1950s).

Despite these limitations, Weberian theory was considered in understanding how power, authority, and domination manifest within policing institutions, particularly relating to policewomen, who are primarily underrepresented and considered a marginalized group. In doing so, anti-oppressive and intersectional lenses were applied, as power is inherently about controlling others, particularly those from marginalized groups whom the dominant group views as threats.

Raven and French's Six Foundations of Power

Similar to Weber, Raven and French (1958a) "defined power as the potential influence of some individual or group…over an individual" (p. 400). Adding the words potential and influence are essential distinctions (discourse with underlying connotations, as Foucault might have argued) when defining power and adding a layer of complexity in action. Potential implies the possibility of using power that is separate from an individual or group's ability to use that power (Elias, 2008). In other words, just because an individual or group can use power does not mean they will use it. Influence suggests that those with power may or may not impact an individual because the individual (or group) can resist or question influence rather than accept it.

French and Raven presented six foundations of power (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2019; Elias, 2008; Feather & Boeckmann, 2013; Smith & Fink, 2015). These include coercion, reward, legitimacy, knowledge, reference or expert, and informational (added in 1965), all of which are socially dependent and social control components. Coercive power relies on the threat of negative consequences, forcing individuals to comply knowingly. Reward power functions by offering positive outcomes, with individuals aware they are being influenced in exchange for benefits. Legitimate power stems from a widely accepted right to authority, where people consciously surrender control to recognized leaders. Knowledge-based power arises when others

defer to those perceived as experts, believing they are best equipped to make decisions. Referent power emerges from identification or admiration, leading individuals to follow someone they respect or align with. Finally, informational power is derived from control over crucial information, compelling others to comply to gain access. Each form demonstrates a different pathway through which authority and influence operate. Table 1 applies French and Raven's six dimensions of power to the policing context, illustrating how each operates within law enforcement structures.

Raven and French (1958b) noted that legitimacy is "[s]imilar to Weber's "Legitimacy of authority" and involves a code or standard by virtue of which an influencing agent can assert his power and this is accepted by an individual" (p. 400). They further noted that "[a]cceptance of the social structure may serve as a basis for legitimate power" (p. 401).

While these social control components clarify why people adhere to social norms, laws, and authority, French and Raven presented them as distinct rather than intertwining and reinforcing (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2019). Like Weberian theory, Raven and French overlooked concepts of social categories, intersectionality, and privilege. If viewed within its historical context, it aligns with the social climate at the time.

Table 1

Application of French and Raven's six power dimensions to a Western policing context

Power Dimension	Description of Power
1. Coercion	Police officers have the ability to cause negative outcomes for others. The uniform and utility belt with numerous tools (firearm, pepper spray, baton, handcuffs, taser) demonstrate both perceived and real threat of force. The withholding of back-up at dangerous calls represents coercion.
2. Reward	Officers are socialized to conform to a particular set of cultural norms (McCartney & Parent, 2015). Those who conform are rewarded with inclusion, safety in the form of back-up at calls for service, promotions and lateral transfers, amongst other 'perks' (time off with pay, accommodations, ability to leave early; [Bourassa Rabichuk, 2021]).
3. Legitimacy	Police have the authority to behave in certain ways to protect life and property and maintain law and order. The public and other officers accept

	this because of how policing is conceptualized and viewed (discourse around same – legitimate source of power). This support gives and reinforces power and authority to certain agents/actors, in this case, police officers.
4. Knowledge	Generally speaking, the public are taught to believe that the police hold superior knowledge relating to the enforcement of law and order, and therefore should be in charge regarding such matters. The public and other officers accept this proposition and allow officers to make decisions. The public are aware that they have given control, but think this is best because policing organizations and officers with this power know best. Additionally, due to the hierarchical nature of police institutions and the power bestowed upon them, subordinates look to their supervisors regarding how to behave and the culture is one of obedience in which subordinates are not to question superiors. This process of blind following allows for existing knowledge to be maintained and perpetuated. (McCartney & Parent, 2015).
5. Reference	Individuals typically choose the police profession because they identify with the mission and values of policing organizations, and they follow them because of this identification. Officers are aware that they follow other officers and the organization, but do so because they believe in the policing as an institution.
6. Informational	Police have access to an immense amount of private and personal information about members of the public. Police officers have the ability to bring about change the use of information in both positive and negative ways. For example, police officers provide information during their court testimony that influences the outcomes of an accused. Information can also be used as a form of blackmail in the cases of corrupt officers (officers seeking payment from criminal organizations that allow those criminal organizations to continue operating). It is what one does with the information that is vital.

Note. This table effectively maps French and Raven's six bases of power onto the police context, illustrating how officers exert influence through coercion, rewards, legitimacy, knowledge, referent identification, and informational control.

Steven Lukes's Three Dimensions of Power and Moral Relativism

Lukes's model complements Weber's ideas by operationalizing power within three dimensions. As found in Dumbrill and Ying Yee (2019), Lukes identifies three dimensions of power. These include coercion (first dimension), controlling agendas (second dimension), and controlling the way others see the world (third dimension). Coercion involves threatening or using force to obtain compliance (typically overt/visible). Controlling agendas concerns what is

presented as an option versus what is not, exposing hidden power/hidden agendas. Controlling the way others see the world concerns what the dominant group views as deviant versus what is "normal." This control type influences attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (largely invisible and unquestioned). It is the most significant type of power as there is no need for the first two dimensions of power "because the people will pursue only the possibilities that those in power allow them to imagine" (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2019, p. 61).

Lukes (2008) also noted the importance of considering moral relativism and power. Moral relativism postulates that moral norms (values and beliefs) are socially constructed and, therefore, cannot be viewed as right or wrong because these values and beliefs must be considered within the context they were created. As Lukes (2008) articulated, "Our judgements about right and wrong are not, as we have supposed, unqualified absolute, but relative to our society or culture, or whatever group turns out to be the source of our moral framework" (p. 25). According to Lukes, social practices based on values and beliefs become normalized through discourse. Going against the dominant group can lead to ostracism, bullying, and violence, all forms of oppression (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2018; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2015; Mullaly & West, 2018).

Moral relativism is the case within policing organizations, which is pervasive and used to justify social practices. Police are the stewards of law and order, and morality based on laws created by society's moral code. Within policing, moral relativism allows decisions based on unwritten rules and norms (e.g., the end justifies the means). The moral relativism process, as it occurs within policing, helps us understand how norms and values emerge. At the same time, this explanation in no way excuses over-arching cis-male-heteronormative white supremacist neoliberal capitalist patriarchal values and beliefs that underpin police culture: values that are the

foundation upon which policing organizations have been built, continue to operate, and are maintained (Bastarache, 2020; Bikos, 2023; Rabichuk, 2021).

Michel Foucault – Relationships Between Power and Knowledge

Foucault (Foucault et al., 1997) considered knowledge to be invented, explaining that there is no such thing as origins but only inventions. He asserted that power is established and maintained through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific interpretation and understanding, and 'truth.' This is a distinct divergence from Weberian theory. Foucault (1982) used archaeological analysis to understand knowledge. He proposed that knowledge comes to be understood and adopted as true or false based on social, historical, and political conditions. Foucault explored how a particular concept as a knowledge object (e.g., control) is created and reproduced and under what conditions, treating structures as discursive systems. He highlighted the archaeological concepts of statements, discourse, discursive practice or formations, from which he proposed an analysis framework involving three tools. These included statement, discourse, and discursive formation.

Foucault noted that historical periods combine with social and political conditions to allow certain forms of thought and discourses to exist, which then become embedded in practices. This emphasis on contextual conditions, such as historical shifts, political climates, and institutional structures, offers a distinct contribution beyond the frameworks of Weber, French and Raven, and Lukes, who focused more narrowly on authority, relational power, or decision-making without attending to broader discursive forces. In the context of internal police culture, Foucault's analysis reveals how dominant discourses, such as those valorizing toughness, loyalty, and masculine authority, become entrenched and self-reinforcing. These discourses are not neutral but are shaped by historical developments in policing and broader societal norms

around gender and power. As a result, alternative perspectives, such as those that value emotional intelligence, collaboration, or equity, are often marginalized. Foucault's framework allows us to understand how the exclusion of women in policing a matter of individual bias or policy failure may not merely be, but a function of entrenched discourses that define who is seen as legitimate, competent, and "fitting" within the institution. His work makes visible the mechanisms by which gendered norms are reproduced and protected within the cultural and structural fabric of police organizations.

Additionally, Foucault (Foucault & Sheridan, 1995) explored disciplinary power within the prison system. He asserted that disciplinary power remains unseen and invisible, and it is the subjects of that discipline who are seen. According to Foucault, "As power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance…observation…[and] by comparative measures that have the norm as a reference" (p. 193). Using Bentham's panopticon (a disciplinary concept) as an example, Foucault explicated how the perception of constant surveillance can produce specific outcomes, whether the surveillance is occurring or not. One could argue that disciplinary power is similar to Weber's, French and Raven's, and Lukes's explanations of coercive power; however, Foucault makes the element of invisibility explicit. Considering this in the policing context, any officer who falls outside the norm (tall, muscular, white heterosexual cis-man) is surveilled to ensure they comply with the unwritten code (e.g., silence, unwavering loyalty).

Bourdieu – Learning, Symbolic Relations, and Social Capital

In *The Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) analyzed how education is more than a learning process through formal education. They posited that education is a form of social reproduction and serves to reproduce cultural norms based on

and form the basis of power (similar to Lukes's third dimension – controlling how others see the world). What is left unaccounted for is the change that occurs over time contrary to societal norms, thus indicating the importance of historical context. Their analysis and findings are applicable when considering learning and socialization within a police context. This is particularly critical when considering how structures of power and control are reproduced and reinforced within policing institutions, typically without question (Rabichuk, 2021).

Unlike his counterparts, Weber, French and Raven, Lukes (each of whom focused on social interactions), and Foucault (who focused on discourse), Bourdieu (2001) sought to understand the symbolic world order in which gendered inequality is embraced as 'normal' and reproduced, even by those most disadvantaged. We can see how these norms and values manifest in applying French and Raven's dimensions and those of Lukes. Bourdieu proposed that researchers should focus on historical structures that immortalize gender differences rather than dispel them as myths. Bourdieu used the Kabyle people, indigenous to Algeria, to explain how tradition created social order based on sexual differences (males holding power by virtue of tradition – Weber; legitimacy and reference – French and Raven) and accepted as occurring naturally and without question (controlling how others see the world – Lukes). While Bourdieu acknowledged that progress had been made over time relating to gender equality, he argued that this progress conceals the gender inequality that persists (controlling how others see the world – Lukes).

This example reminds me of a specific incident (December 2004) as a police officer. I was about to complete recruit training and start working in patrol on the street. A trainer (considered an 'old timer' and senior officer of which I was a subordinate) told me that I would be labelled "a bitch, a slut, or a dyke," implying there were no other options for how I would be

perceived within my career. It was as though he was trying to help me and provide comfort in knowing this was just how things were. I later discovered that this trope, in its numerous variations, was a common notion across multiple police organizations in Canada (Rabichuk, 2021).

In this regard, male domination was institutionalized and normalized through discourse (Foucault), upholding and reproducing inequality through stereotyping, labelling, and othering, limiting the possibilities I could see for myself (dimension three – Lukes). This replication of inequality upheld the hypermasculine culture (Bikos, 2016; Bastarache, 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Kurtz & Upton, 2019; Rabichuk, 2021; Silvestri, 2017), which, generally speaking, Bourdieu (2001) identified as male domination. It is also an example of what Bourdieu referred to as symbolic violence and symbolic force, both considered forms of power and a more subtle and "gentler" violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39).

Capital and Habitus. Bourdieu also identified various forms of capital (socially desirable goods, both real and abstract) as less apparent forms of power and, therefore, more challenging to identify and resist (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2019). Like Marx and Marxist theorists, Bourdieu viewed capital as being linked to power, essentially viewing it along a continuum linked to value. The more capital one has, the more power they possess and the more valuable they are in society. Forms of capital act as means to certain ends and produce what Bourdieu refers to as habitus (e.g., one's position based on the various types of capital they possess, which serve to increase or limit access to opportunities depending on whether possessed or not). Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) suggested that the concept of habitus was crucial to understanding power and noted that Foucault failed to incorporate this concept into his conceptualization of power.

Diverging from Marxist theory, which focused strictly on economic capital as a form of power in the context of land and factory ownership (a binary view of haves versus have-nots representing a universal truth of experience based on this difference [Moosa-Mitha, 2015]), Bourdieu posited there were four forms of capital. These included economic (financial and property-based), cultural (based on resources such as gender, race, sexual orientation, education, ability, and class), social (relational), and symbolic (based on honour or prestige, perception of status) capital. Bourdieu's conceptualization of power was helpful when applied to a police context. It provided a framework to understand better how power may operate, allowing for an intersectional lens to be applied that considers gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, class, and education – one's habitus.

Anti-Oppressive and Critical Theories

Oppression refers to the domination and unjust treatment of subordinate individuals or groups by those in positions of power (Mullaly & West, 2018). Baines (2017) defines oppression as actions or policies that unjustly target individuals based on group affiliation, limiting their ability to participate in society, exercise rights, or affirm personal and collective identities. It also involves the imposition of dominant belief systems and values on marginalized groups. Anti-oppressive and critical theories (AOCT) contend that oppression is pervasive and embedded across structural, community, and individual levels (Mullaly & West, 2018). These theories are centrally concerned with power, who holds it, who is denied it, and how it is produced and maintained through social interactions and institutional structures.

AOCT emerged in response to the limitations of positivism, which assumes a single, objective reality. Instead, AOCT emphasize that multiple realities exist, shaped by individual and

collective experiences and by one's position as either oppressor or oppressed (Moosa-Mitha, 2015).

While power, control, and domination are central to AOCT, anti-oppressive practice extends beyond analysis by placing social justice at its core. It seeks not only to understand and critique oppression but to dismantle it through transformative action at structural, cultural, and individual levels (Baines, 2017). In the context of women in policing, this framework highlights how systemic barriers, such as gendered organizational cultures, exclusionary practices, and unequal power relations, must be confronted not just analytically. They must be confronted with deliberate efforts to reform institutional norms and create equitable conditions. Anti-oppressive practice challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions within police organizations that privilege masculine norms, and calls for the reimagining of recruitment, leadership, and workplace policies to foster inclusivity and justice for police women.

Limitations

There are several broad limitations associated with each AOCT. Firstly, each assumes that one's position as an oppressor or subordinate/oppressed is static when these roles can be fluid, dynamic, and multi-factoral (Mullaly & West, 2018). Secondly, AOCT fail to consider differences within groups of oppressed individuals – some hold more or less power than others, depending on their social location or position. All of the power theories and AOCT overlook the concept of privilege and its relationship to power (Baines, 2017; Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2018; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2015; Mullaly & West, 2018). Marsiglia and Kulis (2018) defined *privilege* as "the sum of the unearned advantages of special group membership" (p. 23). Mullaly and West (2018, p. 35) underscored that oppression and privilege are two sides of the same coin and, therefore, inextricably linked.

Key Terms and Definitions

For the present study, I used French and Raven's (1958a) definition of *power*: "power [is] the potential influence of some individual or group…over an individual [or group]" (p. 400). I used Raven's (1999) definition of *social control* to understand the process by which officers within policing institutions "are influenced to adhere to values and principles of proper behaviour deemed appropriate" (p. 162) within the police culture. *Privilege* was defined as, "the sum of the unearned advantages [or rewards] of special group membership" (Marsiglia and Kulis, 2018, p. 23). Privilege is often invisible to those who have it (Mullaly & West, 2018). *GBV* was defined as any act any harmful act perpetrated against individuals based on their gender, which results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025).

In the context of intimate partner violence, Stark (2007) conceptualized *coercive control* as a form of domination that extends beyond isolated acts of physical abuse. He defined coercion as "the use of force or threats to compel or dispel a particular response" (p. 228) and control as "structural forms of deprivation, exploitation, and command that compel obedience indirectly" (p. 229). When combined, these mechanisms create what Stark refers to as a "condition of unfreedom," that is a state of entrapment marked by ongoing subjugation (Crossman & Hardesty, 2017, p. 196).

Crossman and Hardesty (2017) further expanded on this framework, describing coercive control as a sustained pattern of coercive tactics aimed at enabling one partner to dominate another. They emphasized that coercive control is often mischaracterized as a subset of physical violence, rather than recognized as a distinct and pervasive construct. While physical violence may be one tactic within a broader pattern, coercive control frequently includes emotional,

psychological, financial, and sexual abuse, all of which contribute to severe psychological distress and adverse mental health outcomes, including depression and PTSD.

Importantly, Crossman et al. (2016) found that the psychological impacts of coercive control were comparable regardless of whether physical violence was present. This underscores the need to conceptualize coercive control as a standalone form of abuse with far-reaching effects. For the purposes of the present study, *coercive control* was defined as the use or perceived use of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, and/or stalking-based tactics employed by individuals or groups to regulate, dominate, or constrain the behaviour and autonomy of another individual or group.

Such tactics reflect broader systems of domination and control (Dumbrill & Ying Yee, 2018) and are illustrative of structural mechanisms that reinforce inequality and dependence (Barlow & Walklate, 2022; Price, 2012). Within institutional contexts, these dynamics extend beyond interpersonal relationships and become embedded in organizational practices, policies, and cultures, including within policing environments.

Conclusion

This chapter established the theoretical foundation for examining GBV and coercive control within policing institutions. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of power, drawing on Weber, French and Raven, Lukes, Foucault, and Bourdieu, it became clear that power is not a singular or visible construct, but rather a complex, relational force embedded in interpersonal, organizational, and structural systems. Traditional power theories, while foundational, often neglect privilege, and the lived realities of women. By applying anti-oppressive, critical, and coercive control theoretical frameworks, the study situated power and control as mechanisms that sustain gendered and institutional forms of violence. This foundation was essential to

understand how GBV operates within policing, and develop strategies that confront and transform the systemic conditions that enable harm.

Literature Review

Policing is a male-dominated profession shaped by masculine ideals, rigid hierarchies, and an enduring culture of exclusion (Casey, 2023; Bastarache, 2020). Despite formal inclusion policies, women officers continue to experience gendered discrimination, social isolation, and psychological harm that are often rationalized as procedurally neutral (Agocs, 2015; Angehrn et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2023; Rabichuk et al., 2024; Schafer et al., 2024; Sands et al., 2022; Steinpórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2017; Turner, 2024; Watson, 2023). When complaints are minimized or punished, institutional betrayal compounds these harms (Bikos, 2021; Brown et al., 2025; Casey, 2023; Illias et al., 2024; McNabb & Puddister, 2024; Williams et al., 2024). This review synthesizes seven thematic areas including, 1) police culture and hegemonic masculinity, 2) organizational stress and mental health, 3) structural discrimination and professional devaluation, 4) isolation and informal exclusion, 5) sexual harassment, violence, workplace hostility, 6) gendered expectations, competency challenges, institutional betrayal, and 7) hierarchical structures and informal power networks. The review concludes with gaps and future directions for research.

Police Culture and Hegemonic Masculinity

Policing remains structured by hegemonic masculinity, a framework that valorizes aggression, stoicism, and dominance and control, privileging hierarchical authority, conformity, and institutional loyalty (Angehrn et al., 2021; Bikos, 2016; Brown et al., 2020). Workplace culture therefore plays a central role in shaping women officers' experiences within policing

institutions (Agocs et al., 2015; Bastarache, 2020; Bikos, 2016; Davis et al., 2023; Rabichuk, 2021). Silvestri (2017) argued that the police institution, while appearing gender-neutral, is deeply structured around a male ideal, where the "ideal" officer is envisioned as physically tough, always available, and fully dedicated, criteria that exclude those with caregiving roles of alternative working patterns. Bikos (2016) found that Canadian policewomen experience bifurcated consciousness, compelled to suppress femininity and adopt masculine traits to be accepted professionally. Bikos argued that conformity comes at a psychological cost, leading to emotional dissonance, identity suppression, and burnout. Recent studies on masculinity contest cultures show these norms reduce job engagement and increase turnover, disproportionately harming women and challenging assumptions that masculine policing cultures enhance performance (Buhrig, 2024). Even where reforms exist, masculine norms remain embedded in performance evaluations, promotion pathways, and informal hierarchies (Alexander, 2019; Angehrn et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2020; Rabichuk, 2021).

Organizational Stress and Well-being

Building on these cultural foundations, organizational dynamics further intensify challenges facing women officers. While all police officers are exposed to occupational stressors such as violence, traumatic incidents, and operational pressures (Bonner & Brimhall, 2022; Carleton et al., 2018; Noblet et al., 2009), women encounter additional gender-specific stressors, including systemic discrimination, sexualized violence, cultural exclusion, and procedural injustice (Agocs et al., 2014; Angehrn et al., 2021; Bonner & Brimhall, 2022; Morash et al., 2006; Rabichuk, 2021; Rabichuk et al., 2024) linked to elevated rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Angehrn et al., 2022; Carleton et al., 2018; Brewin et al., 2022). Women officers also report poorer sleep, higher anxiety, and greater role conflict than their male

counterparts (Angehrn et al., 2022; Bonner & Brimhall, 2021). When organizations deny, minimize, or punish complaints, institutional betrayal amplifies harm and discourages help-seeking (Bastarache, 2020; Bikos, 2021; Rabichuk, 2021). Even where support exists, it is often inaccessible, stigmatized, or culturally incompetent (Hartley et al., 2014; Rabichuk, 2021; Sands et al., 2022).

Structural Discrimination and Professional Devaluation

Cultural norms are reproduced structurally through selection, assignment, and advancement systems. Institutional barriers to promotions, specialized assignments, and leadership development systematically constrain women's career trajectories (Angehrn et al., 2021; Langan et al., 2017; Shelley et al., 2011; Shjarback & Todak, 2019; Silvestri & Tong, 2022; Spasić et al., 2015). These obstacles stigmatize and delegitimize women officers, reinforcing narrative of marginal competence (Alexander, 2019; Bonner & Brimhill, 2022; Silvestri, 2017). This pattern is reinforced by patriarchal ideologies, procedural injustice, and normalized GBV (Illias et al., 2024; Rabichuk, 2021; Silvestri, 2017; Swan, 2016; Turner, 2024).

Isolation and Informal Exclusion

Beyond formal structures, women face exclusion from informal networks that are critical to career progression and organizational belonging. These include mentorship systems, knowledge-sharing groups, and unofficial circles of influence (Dukes, 2025; Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024; Rabe-Hemp, 2009; Rabichuk, 2021; Silvestri et al., 2013; Spasić et al., 2015; Swan, 2016). Social isolation is compounded by harassment, stigma, and limited peer support, fostering environments where women officers feel devalued and unsupported and belonging and retention is weakened (Denney, 2019; Rabe-Hemp, 2009; Rabichuk 2021; Silvestri et al., 2013).

Sexual Harassment, Violence, and Workplace Hostility

Sexual harassment is widespread yet underreported, ranging from sexualized joking and hostile banter to coercive sexual behaviour and assault (Bastarache, 2020; Davis et al., 2023). In the United Kingdom (UK), recent evidence shows substantial internal harassment within policing: in one force, internal sexual harassment affected approximately one in five personnel, including 43% of women; serial victimization was common, and bystanders often refrained from reporting because conduct was dismissed as banter or to protect the harasser (Davis et al., 2023; Magsi & Ariel, 2024). In Canada, the Merlo Davidson report, *Broken Lives, Broken Dreams*, documented sexual harassment, discrimination, and bullying among more than 3,000 Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) women, with 130 women disclosing incidents of penetrative sexual assault by male colleagues (Bastarache, 2020). European data add scale: in the Dutch police, 64% of women reported unwanted sexual attention/advances at least once in the previous 24 months, linked to normative male dominance and organizational tolerance (de Hass & Timmerman, 2010). A recent study of the RCMP found that 12.8% reported on-duty sexual assault (1 in 4 women, 1 in 25 men) and 21.4% on duty sexual harassment, with women disproportionately targeted by superiors or peers (Khoury et al., 2025).

Entry and Early Detection

Persistent vetting and misconduct weaknesses, including failure to identify predatory or misogynistic behaviours, have been flagged by UK professional bodies; 2024 behavioural-science guidance specifies target behaviours (e.g., supervisors consistently challenging everyday sexism) to move policy statements to observable change (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2022; College of Policing 2024a, 2024b). Research shows that sexual misconduct can begin as early as police recruit training. Sweeting and Cole

(2023) found that training environments face barriers in detecting misconduct due to recruits' ability to hide or "mask" problematic attitudes, inconsistent disciplinary action, and a strong reluctance to report incidents. These early warning signs raise concerns about unsuitable individuals progressing into full policing roles. Beyond the academy, Birdsall and colleagues (2024) demonstrated that police sexual misconduct occurs both toward the public and within police forces, frequently involving vulnerable groups such as lower-ranking staff. The behaviours identified range from voyeurism and coercive sexual advances to sex on duty and improper relationships, and the authors argued that individual power, organizational culture, and weak oversight together enable police sexual misconduct.

Cultural Mechanisms Normalize Abuse

Sexualized banter and joking (Brown et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2023), rumour mills (Davis et al., 2023), and peer silence operate as covert enforcement tools that normalize misogyny and discourage reporting within police workplaces, with insider harassment by colleagues/supervisors driving the most harmful outcomes (Davis et al., 2023; Rostami et al., 2025). These dynamics were embedded in normative male dominance, which predicted harassment and mediated the effect of male-heavy staffing (de Hass & Timmerman, 2010; Rostami et al., 2025). Goodman-Delahunty and colleagues (2016) found that gender-based hostility was perceived to cause severe, long-lasting injury, often exceeding unwanted sexual attention, and to require more professional intervention. Field studies showed how humour and managerial discretion can trivialize and reframe incidents, shaping which complaints are treated as legitimate and which are minimized (Vallanda et al., 2024).

Women officers frequently reported unwanted sexual advances, offensive jokes, inappropriate comments, lewd gestures, and, in some cases coercive sexual behaviour tied to

professional opportunity (Bastarache, 2020; de Haas et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2023; Magsi & Ariel, 2024; Somvadee & Morash, 2008). Sexual assault, including forced sexual contact and penetrative acts, occurs within policing (Khoury et al., 2024) and is often embedded within wider institutional cultures of abuse (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2023; Angehrn et al., 2021; Bastarache, 2020; Khoury et al., 2024; Rabichuk, 2021; Williams et al., 2024). Online abuse extended these harms; senior women officers described social-media abuse that drove self-censorship and withdrawal from public-facing communication platforms, functioning as a digital extension of workplace hostility (Rostami et al., 2025; Watson, 2022).

Organizational Tolerance and Reporting

Under-reporting reflects fear of retaliation, perceived futility, and institutional betrayal; victims described hostile-obstructive and collusive minimizing responses when reporting officer perpetrated abuse (Mulvihill & Sweeting, 2025; Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2018). These dynamics produce hostile environments and long-term psychological harm and can derail careers; officers themselves anticipated greater workplace problems and longer symptom duration after gender-based harm than after other injury sources (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2016; Magsi & Ariel, 2024; Rostami et al., 2025). This pattern aligns with recent findings that sexual harassment persists in policing partly because organizational cultures shape how officers make sense of such behaviour, often minimizing systemic contributions and reinforcing silence rather than prompting meaningful institutional change (Workman-Stark et al., 2026).

Gendered Expectations, Competency Challenges, and Institutional Betrayal

Building on these dynamics of silence and minimization, gendered expectations about who is fit for policing take root and shape everyday judgements of women's capability and commitment. Women officers frequently encountered skepticism about their physical and

emotional suitability for policing (Angehrn et al., 2021; Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024; Hartley et al., 2014; Morash & Haarr, 2012; Rabichuk, 2021; Shelley et al., 2011; Shuck, 2014), reinforcing gendered stereotypes of lesser competence (Angehrn et al., 2021). The result was diminished confidence, constrained career aspirations, and fear of reporting for fear of being judged as unfit (Bastarache, 2020; Davis et al., 2023; Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024; Rabichuk, 2021). Caregiving responsibilities intersected with demanding schedules to limit access to promotions and sustaining assumptions that women are unsuited for leadership (Alexander, 2019; Angehrn et al., 2021; Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024; Rabichuk, 2021; Rabichuk et al., 2024).

Additionally, gendered assignment practices further reinforce inequity. Women officers are disproportionately steered into stereotypically “female” roles, such as community outreach or victim services (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2023; Alexander, 2019; Angehrn et al., 2021; Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024; Hartley et al., 2014; Rabichuk, 2021; Schuck, 2014), while being excluded from elite units and high-risk operations (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2023; Boag-Munroe, 2017; Haake, 2018; Rabichuk, 2021; Schuck, 2014). These practices limit their professional development and reinforce perceptions that leadership and physically demanding roles are more appropriate for men (Haake, 2018; Rabichuk, 2021).

The constant pressure to prove legitimacy fosters self-surveillance, overcompensation, and reluctance to report misconduct out of fear of being seen as weak or unfit (Alexander, 2019; Brown et al., 2017, 2018, 2020, 2025; Davis et al., 2023; Dukes, 2025; Haake, 2018). When women officers do report discrimination or harassment, they often face skepticism, minimization, or retaliation (Bastarache, 2020; Bikos, 2021; Boag-Munroe, 2017; Rabichuk, 2021; Williams et al., 2023). Inadequate policies, unclear reporting processes, and a lack of

accountability further contribute to institutional betrayal, leaving victims isolated and vulnerable to further victimization (Bastarache, 2020; Bikos, 2016, 2021; Rabichuk, 2021).

Hierarchical Structures and Informal Power Networks

Paramilitary hierarchies and informal networks concentrate authority among men and act as gatekeepers to mentorship, resources, and prestigious assignments (Casey, 2023; Dukes, 2025; Miles-Johnson & Fay, 2023). These networks foster exclusivity and often protect male colleagues from scrutiny or accountability (Bastarache, 2020; Casey, 2023). Power asymmetries facilitate exploitation and abuse, with women sometimes perceived as subordinate or sexualized targets rather than equals. Inappropriate behaviours such as lewd comments, sexual innuendos, and harassment are normalized or dismissed as harmless banter or locker-room talk, a dynamic that Mulvihill and Sweeting (2025) described as the “hero dividend,” wherein occupational status affords perpetrators credibility and cover, and unique powers and institutional advantages that can enable and conceal abuse. They highlighted that police-perpetrated abuse is a global problem and police institutions must address conditions that allow abuse to persist.

Literature and Knowledge Gaps

Despite a substantial evidence base, there is currently no comprehensive theoretical or conceptual model that explains how GBV is produced, sustained, and reproduced within police organizations. Existing studies highlight individual mechanisms, such as harassment, exclusion, and institutional betrayal, but few map the interactions among culture, structure, and informal networks. Developing such models is essential for advancing theory, informing policy, and intervention designs that address the full scope and complexity of GBV in law enforcement. This study responds by generating a grounded, conceptual model from women officers’ lived

experiences, showing how GBV becomes embedded, normalized and maintained within policing institutions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Methods

A grounded theory (GT) approach within a case study design was employed for the study.

Case Study Design

According to Stake (2006) "[c]ase study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied... we could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically, organically or culturally, or by mixed methods, but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case" (p. 435). For this study, I used a case study design to examine how gender-based violence operated within Canadian municipal and provincial policing organizations (Stake, 2006). The case was defined as the bounded institutional context of these police organizations, while the unit of analysis was the lived experiences of current and former women-identifying officers. This aligned with Patton's (2015) clarification that "often individual people… are the unit of analysis," meaning that the focus is on "what is happening to the individuals in a setting and how individuals are affected by the setting" (p. 260). It is also consistent with Yin's (2018) distinction between the case and unit of analysis, where the case provides the broader contextual system and the unit of analysis specifies the level at which the phenomenon is examined. Following Patton's (2015) guidance to "keep coming back to the criterion of usefulness" when determining "what data…will most likely illuminate the inquiry" (p. 263), the case was selected because it offered the clearest vantage point for understanding how GBV and coercive control may operate within police institutions. Consistent with Stake's (2006) view of a case as a bounded system, the officers' varied service types, ranks, and geographic regions provided multiple perspectives on how GBV and coercive control operated within and across institutions.

Purposive sampling was a methodological strength because qualitative inquiry is intentionally designed to study smaller samples in depth. As Patton explained, “qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even a single case (n = 1), selected for quite a specific purpose” and “what would be ‘bias’ in statistical sampling…becomes intended focus in qualitative sampling, and therefore strength” (p. 264). The aim is to select “information rich cases for in-depth study” that yield “insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (p. 264). Patton further observed that “qualitative studies are often ignored, or even dismissed, because of their small sample size,” yet “every discipline… has benefited from breakthrough insights generated by in-depth single cases” (p. 276). Accordingly, the modest sample size in this study was an intentional and appropriate choice that supported analytic depth, conceptual clarity, and a systematic understanding of the phenomena.

Grounded Theory Approach

GT originated with Glaser and Strauss, who argued that prevailing theories were not always applicable across participant populations and contexts (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). They proposed that theories should be grounded in data derived from the field to better explain complex phenomena. GT allowed for the development of a theory “of actions, interactions, or processes through interrelating categories of information based on data collected from individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 83).

This approach was well-suited to the study because no existing conceptual model adequately captured how colleague-to-colleague and organizational GBV manifested within policing to disadvantage and harm women-identifying officers. While the unit of analysis in this study was the lived experiences of women-identifying officers relating to the phenomena of GBV, these experiences were situated within the broader bounded system of Canadian municipal

and provincial policing institutions. The absence of an existing framework necessitated an inductive, exploratory design to identify and analyze the mechanisms and processes through which these forms of violence occurred. The study addressed this gap by employing qualitative data collection with a purposive sample of women-identifying officers, both current and former, who met the defined case boundaries. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews provided rich, contextualized narratives that illuminated both individual and systemic patterns, enabling the development of an empirically grounded understanding of the phenomena. In this study, colleague-to-colleague and organizational GBV were examined as the *phenomena of interest*, while the unit of analysis remained the lived experiences of women-identifying officers within the defined institutional context.

Partnership-based Framework

The GT approach aligned well with a partnership-based framework adapted from the patient-oriented research model (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2019). This framework was originally intended to facilitate collaboration with knowledge experts through ongoing consultation and guidance throughout the research process, ensuring that the study remained grounded in both lived experience and professional expertise. However, due to restrictions imposed by the research ethics board, this component could not be implemented in the final study design. The absence of this collaborative element meant that opportunities for co-interpretation of data, validation of emerging themes, and refinement of analytical focus were limited to the author alone. As a result, the findings may reflect a more researcher-driven interpretation, without the additional depth, nuance, and practical applicability that direct engagement with knowledge experts could have provided. Nonetheless, the consistent application of GT methods and

systematic reflexivity throughout the research process helped ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings despite this limitation.

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

I used non-probability sampling methods, specifically purposive and snowball sampling, to recruit participants. I did not offer incentives. Eligibility to participate was based on the case boundaries outlined earlier. My prior experience as a police officer, along with my current role as a researcher and supporter of police, provided credibility and facilitated access to potential participants.

I initiated contact by sending messages (e.g., email, text, Signal) to current and former women-identifying officers within my professional network. These messages included a brief overview of the study and its purpose and asked recipients whether they would like additional information. I also requested that they forward the message to others who met the eligibility criteria and who might be interested in participating. Additionally, I promoted the study on LinkedIn. I sent recruitment emails to associations, including the BC Women in Policing Association and Coming Out Cops.

When prospective participants requested more information, I sent follow-up emails to their personal accounts. These emails explained the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and potential benefits. I again asked recipients to share the email with other eligible women-identifying officers who were currently or previously employed by a municipal police department in British Columbia (BC). The initial study design focused exclusively on British Columbia; however, due to limited participant interest (three participants), I expanded the scope to include municipal and provincial police organizations across Canada. I continued this

recruitment process until I reached theoretical saturation, that is, when no new data emerged and the relationships between categories were established and validated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participant Data

I conducted interviews with 11 participants. The participants' ages ranged between 28 to 63 years. One participant identified as queer, while the other 10 identified as heterosexual. None of the participants identified as racialized. In terms of geographic representation, seven participants were from the West Coast, specifically British Columbia. The Prairie region (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) and the Central region (Ontario and Quebec) were each represented by two participants. Their years of service are represented in Table 2. In relation to rank, 10 held positions at the constable or senior level. One participant was in the mid-level management (Sergeant or Staff Sergeant).

Table 2
Years of Service

Years of Service	Number of Participants
0–5	1
6–10	4
11–15	0
16–20	3
21–24	2
25+	1

Note. Years of service categories (0 to 5; 6 to 10; 11 to 15; 16 to 20; 21 to 24; and 25+).

At the time of participation, three individuals were actively serving in police organizations, five were on leave, and three were former members of police services. Four participants reported having worked for more than one police department over the course of their careers. Notably, all participants described having had negative experiences with colleagues, as well as with supervisors or members of management. In addition, every participant indicated that

they had encountered at least one workplace situation involving a colleague or supervisor that had adversely affected their health.

Interviews took place between July 2024 and October 2024. Three were completed virtually and eight in person. Interviews with one participant took place both in person and virtually during two sessions. The total length of the interviews was 1984 minutes (33 hours and four minutes). The average interview length was three hours.

Data Collection Types and Data Recording Procedures

Informed consent. I obtained informed consent from all participants prior to collecting any data. I used the secure online platform DocuSign to present and obtain signed consent forms. Once received, I saved each signed consent form to the University of Manitoba OneDrive. I then deleted the original copies from both my device and the DocuSign platform.

Demographic questionnaire. Before each one-to-one interview, I collected descriptive data using a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). While some identifying data was collected (e.g., age), all such information is presented in a non-identifiable format, such as age ranges and broad geographical regions, to protect the anonymity of the participants. The completed questionnaires were uploaded to the University of Manitoba OneDrive and deleted from my laptop computer.

Document data (for triangulation and abstraction). In addition to interviews, I incorporated documentary materials to triangulate participants' accounts and test the robustness of emerging categories. Sources comprised (a) judicial and quasi-judicial reports (e.g., inquiry and inquest findings), (b) publicly filed civil pleadings, and (c) formal investigative/oversight reports relevant to Canadian municipal and provincial policing. Selection criteria were jurisdictional relevance (Canada; municipal/provincial or directly comparable contexts),

credibility (legal/investigatory provenance), public availability, and topical fit with gender-based violence (GBV). Documents included the *Broken Dreams, Broken Lives* report (Bastarache, 2020), the Nicole Chan Coroner's Inquest (2022), and a 2023 Notice of Civil Claim. Although the RCMP is a federal force, Bastarache (2020) was used as corroborative context rather than primary data, consistent with the study's case boundaries.

The conceptual model was developed from the synthesis of my interpretation of interview data with documentary sources, prior research, and reflexive professional experience; it therefore draws on multiple inputs while remaining grounded in participants' accounts. Drawing on labour legislation (British Columbia, 2025; CanLII, n.d.a; CanLII, n.d.b; Manitoba Laws, n.d.; Ontario, 2012), policing legislation (Alberta, 2023; British Columbia, 2023; Manitoba, 2023; Ontario, 2023; Saskatchewan, 2023), and mandates from oversight and investigative bodies (ASIRT, n.d.; IIO, n.d.; IIU, n.d.; LERB, n.d.; Manitoba, n.d.; OIPR, n.d.; OPCC, n.d.; Public Complaints Commission, n.d.; SSIRT, n.d.; SIU, 2025), I used targeted extraction (definitions, reporting pathways, jurisdiction, timelines) and analytic memos, rather than line-by-line coding, to compare with interview narratives, corroborate or qualify patterns, and specify external mechanisms. Interviews remained primary, while documentary evidence, focused on external factors, refined category boundaries, clarified terms, and provided context for participants' accounts.

Timing and analytic use. Documents were introduced after initial coding of all interview transcripts was complete. Documents were then open-coded separately and compared with the interview-derived categories during focused coding and memoing. Their role was to corroborate or challenge patterns identified in participant accounts, probe for negative cases and boundary conditions, and thicken context around mechanisms of GBV and institutional response.

Documentary analysis did not generate initial codes nor alter the unit of analysis, which remained the lived experiences of women-identifying officers; rather, it provided data triangulation that strengthened credibility and confirmability (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2018), while remaining consistent with grounded theory's systematic-yet-flexible approach to integrating supplementary materials after core interview coding (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Processing, Management, Protection, and Quality Assurance

All interviews were audio-recorded using a secure handheld device. Following each interview, recordings were promptly uploaded to the University of Manitoba's secure OneDrive system and permanently deleted from the recording device. Verbatim transcriptions were completed either by me, a professional transcriptionist, or a student assistant; all signed confidentiality agreements. I personally transcribed a portion of the interviews, and I engaged assistance because the dataset was substantial, the narratives were highly sensitive and potentially traumatic, and selective outsourcing helped preserve my mental health, resilience, and analytic focus. This approach also supported timely completion without compromising confidentiality or data integrity. Delegating part of this work is consistent with qualitative research best practices, recognizing that managing researcher well-being is essential to maintaining analytical rigour and ethical responsibility (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Once transcription was complete, all audio files were deleted from OneDrive to maintain data security. All transcripts were carefully redacted to remove any identifying information and ensure participant anonymity. To further protect participant identity, I assigned each individual a pseudonym of their choosing.

In keeping with grounded theory's iterative process, I aimed to conduct interviews and transcriptions sequentially so that emerging concepts could inform subsequent interviews.

Scheduling constraints and travel requirements, however, meant that transcription and coding did not always occur immediately after each interview. Online interviews one to three were completed within a short time frame and fully transcribed and coded before I travelled to one province for a week to complete interviews four to seven, which required extensive air and car travel. After returning home, I had a five-day window before travelling again to a different province to complete interviews eight and nine, which also required extensive air and car travel. These were then transcribed and coded before proceeding to interviews 10 and 11, which were conducted online.

This sequencing accommodated participant availability and logistical realities while still ensuring that later interviews were informed by emerging codes and categories. Although this meant that some interviews were conducted in blocks rather than strictly one by one, the approach remained consistent with grounded theory principles. This approach emphasises concurrent data collection and analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015) and treats methods as systematic yet flexible and the research process as non-linear, with movement back and forth between data and analysis as opportunities and insights arise (Charmaz, 2014). Accordingly, I returned to the data as soon as possible between travel windows to sustain constant comparison and to direct subsequent interviewing, ensuring that category development and theory building remain firmly grounded in participants' accounts.

To enhance the study's rigour and ensure accuracy, I implemented member checking by inviting participants to review selected quotations for accuracy, clarity, and contextual integrity. This took place after preliminary coding of all transcripts, when representative excerpts had been identified. Participants generally responded positively to this process; most confirmed the accuracy of their quotations, and three requested minor clarifications to better reflect their

intended meaning or preserve anonymity. These revisions were incorporated into the final dataset before focused coding began.

Data Analysis Procedures

I analyzed all data using open coding, constant comparison, and thematic analysis within a GT framework (Appendix B). The analysis followed first- and second-level coding and incorporated data triangulation (Patton, 2015). I illustrated emerging themes with direct quotations and paraphrased content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used MaxQDA software to manage and analyze demographic questionnaire data, interview transcripts, and document data. I applied GT analytical coding techniques which entailed systematically deconstructing, conceptualizing, and reconstructing the data to develop the GBV in Policing conceptual model.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing the study, I obtained ethics approval from the University of Manitoba's Research Ethics Board (REB# HS26230 (H2024:047). I outlined all ethical safeguards, including informed consent, participant anonymity, and strict data confidentiality. Although there were potential risks associated with participating in the study, I concluded that the anticipated benefits, such as advancing knowledge and improving organizational practices, outweighed those risks. I acknowledged that discussing experiences of coercive control could be emotionally difficult, uncomfortable, or distressing. Additionally, I recognized the potential for harm if the information shared were to be misused. Possible consequences could include career derailment, loss of employment, increased exposure to bullying, discrimination, and harassment within the participant's police agency, as well as exacerbation of existing mental health challenges or increased risk of suicidality. Given these risks, I implemented robust safeguards to protect the participants' identities and data as previously described. A list of mental health

resources and supports was also provided to each participant in the event that they felt they required care following participation. These steps were taken to ensure that participants were protected to the fullest extent possible.

Rigor and Validity

Given my dual role as a researcher and former police officer, I recognized the potential for researcher bias. To mitigate this, I practiced reflexivity and clearly situated myself within the research as articulated in Chapter One (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used several validation strategies, including triangulation, member checking, rich descriptions, peer debriefing, and the inclusion of conflicting data. Member checking occurred following the interviews, as participants agreed to be contacted by phone for follow-up conversations. Reliability strategies included reflective journaling and verifying transcripts to ensure coding accuracy. These approaches strengthened the study's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

In conclusion, this chapter offered a comprehensive overview of the methodological approach employed in the study, including detailed considerations of ethical protocols, strategies to enhance rigour, and measures to ensure validity.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Findings

Through semi-structured interviews I asked each participant about the factors that influenced their decision to join the police; their experiences during recruit training, both in the classroom and in the field; and how those experiences evolved over time (see Appendix C). For those who had since left or transferred to another agency, I also explored their reasons for exiting the original organization. I did not initially frame questions using the terms GBV or coercive control in order to capture the full nuance of participants' experiences, positive and negative, without leading them toward particular interpretations. Instead, when participants raised issues related to power, control, harassment, retaliation, safety, or organizational response, I followed up with non-leading probes (e.g., who, what, where, when, why). After initial coding of the early interviews, subsequent interviews incorporated targeted but open prompts aligned with emerging categories (consistent with theoretical sampling), allowing participants to reflect directly on these dynamics where relevant while avoiding prescriptive labels. Interviews concluded with an open invitation to add anything not yet discussed, ensuring participants could connect their accounts to these phenomena in their own words.

4.1 Decision to Become an Officer

I began each interview by asking participants why they chose to become police officers and what drew them to the profession. Three key themes emerged: a sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation, pathways to policing as a career, and transformative life experiences.

Sense of Purpose and Intrinsic Motivation

The interviews revealed that participants were drawn to the police profession by a strong desire to help others and make a meaningful impact. Many expressed a sense of purpose, with motivations rooted in intrinsic values like justice, fairness, and community service. Amy, Olivia,

Sarah, and Emma highlighted their desire to help others, with Sarah, PW1, and Amanda specifically seeking a profession that allowed for meaningful contributions. Emma mentioned wanting to have a positive impact and be a role model, particularly for girls. Roberta emphasized her commitment to justice and community service, while Sophia spoke about her personal drive for fairness and empathy for vulnerable individuals. Vanessa shared a strong sense of justice and moral responsibility, emphasizing the importance of standing up for others.

Pathways to Policing as a Career

The women's paths to policing were shaped by various experiences and influences, many of which intersected with their intrinsic motivation as noted above. Amanda's interest was sparked by criminology courses, various employment roles in the justice system, and volunteering with high-risk youth and victims' services. Amy also worked in areas related to policing before choosing to become an officer. Emily's decision was more serendipitous, influenced by academic experiences in criminology and psychology, as well as exposure to influential figures in law enforcement. Vanessa’s decision process was similar. With no lifelong aspiration, she developed an interest after taking academic courses in law enforcement.

Emma’s family knew members in policing, which influenced her choice, alongside her desire to be a role model. Roberta had policing in her family but didn’t consider it until she was older, influenced by a friend in a policing-adjacent field. PW1, older and dissatisfied with her civilian role, wanted to be "part of the action" after working in a civilian role alongside officers.

Sam, who was drawn to policing in adolescence, was exposed through family friends and career fairs, leading to an intrinsic drive to join. Sarah combined her desire to help others with the need for financial stability. Sophia, with a lifelong interest in criminal justice, was exposed to the field through education and personal family experiences with the justice system and mental

health. Olivia's desire to help others and make a positive impact came from her own transformative childhood experiences.

Transformative Life Experiences

Transformative life experiences, both during childhood and adulthood, significantly influenced the decisions of several of the women to pursue careers in policing. Olivia's aspiration to join the police was shaped by her childhood exposure to domestic abuse and the officers who came to her aid. Similarly, Amy had a chaotic upbringing characterized by domestic violence, parental addiction, homelessness, and time in foster care. This environment led her to take control of dangerous situations, effectively becoming a caretaker for her parents and siblings. She recounted,

> *I grew up in a really difficult family where there was a lot of violence and alcohol abuse. And I kind of grew up being the parent of my parents and the parent of my siblings. And so, I'm just kind of used to taking control of chaotic and violent and dangerous situations.*

Thus, she felt that policing was a natural fit for her. Sarah, who came from a poor, single-parent household, viewed policing as a viable career that aligned with her interests, despite facing financial and educational barriers. Sophia, raised in poverty and having had encounters with police due to a family member's mental health issues, recognized the critical intersection between mental health and the legal system. This awareness motivated her to bridge the gap between the two fields as a police officer.

Amanda, whose partner is a police officer, was inspired to join the force after attending the funeral of an officer, which instilled in her a desire to be part of the police "*family*." Emma's experiences living abroad, where she witnessed police corruption and noted the lack of women in policing, fueled her interest in the field. Roberta, from a country where political interference

affects law enforcement, was driven by her personal values and sought a policing organization that emphasized community-oriented principles. PW1 was in a transitional phase of her life and sought a role that was more exciting and aligned with her values. Lastly, Vanessa's career shift towards policing was motivated by her evolving self-awareness, which brought her interests and values into better alignment with the profession.

The decision to pursue a career in policing among the women in this study was shaped by a complex interplay of personal values, early life experiences, including interactions with police, and career influences. While each path was unique, common threads emerged, most notably a strong sense of purpose, a desire to help others, and formative experiences that deepened their connection to justice and community service. For many, policing was not a lifelong goal but a meaningful convergence of personal growth, academic exposure, and transformative life events. These findings underscore the depth of commitment and resilience that many women bring to the profession.

4.2 Recruit Training

Across Canada, recruit training unfolds in two main stages, an initial period of classroom instruction and practical-skills sessions, followed by supervised field training with a seasoned officer coach, and in some provinces, a brief return to the classroom for wrap-up. In these early phases, moments of pride and purpose did not exist in isolation but were inextricably entwined with a coercive culture. Cultural indoctrination allowed for the normalization of misconduct and funneled recruits into rigid gender norms, authoritarian control enforced compliance while simultaneously creating a culture of silence, and institutional complicity ensured that each of these forces reinforced the others, together shaping and constraining the women’s entry into policing, as elaborated on below. The major themes emerging from participants’ accounts during

recruit training included early pride and purpose, cultural indoctrination and normalization of misconduct, masculine ideals and gendered marginalization, authoritarian control and silencing, and bystander complicity, social isolation, fear of retaliation and disempowerment.

Early Pride and Purpose

Most interviewees stated that as recruits they began with genuine excitement and a strong sense of purpose. Amanda celebrated, “I had finally achieved this career goal of mine, and so…I was happy to be there,” while Emma recalled, “getting this badge is everything I’ve ever wanted.” Sarah similarly described, “I was very happy and excited, and my life was all wonderful…this new job…and this connection to people.” Amy’s pride overwhelmed her: “I cried like a baby right before…tears pouring down my face,” and PW1, balancing single motherhood, confessed she “loved every bit of it…very proud…I managed to get through.” Yet even in these high moments, recruits like Sarah admitted they had “blinders on,” unaware that the seeds of harm were already being sown.

Recruit Training as the Foundation for Abuse

Almost immediately, the women described experiencing deliberate cultural reshaping that taught them to accept harassment and bullying as part of the job. Sam described how “they sort of reshape how you look at the world…they prepare you for the way people are going to behave and teach you to have thicker skin,” while Vanessa noted, “we weren’t allowed to use the elevator…we had to march outside in the rain to get to the other side of the building” because of their recruit status. Sam added, “Normalizing harassment and bullying and off-color jokes and all that stuff” was presented as unavoidable. When two classmates struggled, Sam “could tell that those two women probably weren't going to do well…because the environment wouldn’t accept them,” underscoring that reform was the goal.

Masculine Ideals and Gendered Marginalization

Within this culture, rigid masculine norms forced women into narrow categories and pitted them against one another. Emily powerfully captured the dynamic: "a lot of women in this profession…eat each other up because…there are not a lot of us…you're one of three categories: useless, lesbian, or someone they'd back in a fight." For some, pride quickly turned to "dread." Emma admitted she found herself "wanting to quit" after being bullied by several female peers, yet she refused to report them for fear of "being seen as a rat." Sophia observed a "high school culture of sexual activity," where female recruits were labeled "promiscuous" for mere rumours. Even instructors reinforced these double standards: Emma recalled warnings to "keep your legs closed and head down," while identical behaviour by male recruits was celebrated.

Male officers compounded the exclusion with overt objectification. Olivia faced relentless catcalls, "Fuck, you have huge feet…what are you, like Mabel the Goon?", and one supervisor shrugged it off saying, "boys will be boys." She also endured negative stereotyping, with rumours and assumptions about her hiring and abilities based on her gender.

> *There* [were] *rumours, when I got hired that I slept my way into the job and that I only got hired because I slept with like multiple men. I had one of the guys…he said he couldn't field train me 'cause it would ruin his marriage.*

Olivia was issued ill-fitting female uniforms that made her uncomfortable and self-conscious, and when her service refused to provide men's pants, she had them altered to fit around her waist and hide her figure. She also commented on her body armour, opting for a men's version to "keep things tight" and avoid drawing attention to herself. Sarah echoed this strategy: "I was glad that I was wearing a bulletproof vest because then they couldn't look at my boobs. That's just because I felt like…I would be evaluated based on my body."

Authoritarian Control and Silencing

Amanda, Amy, Sarah, and Vanessa all described instructors who wielded authority through intimidation, public humiliation, and physical punishments. Amy reported that instructors used “screaming,” “humiliation,” physical punishments (e.g., “push ups,” “run you into the ground physically”), and personal space invasion to test emotional regulation, while PW1 believed the training was deliberately structured to push recruits beyond their limits, with instructors fully aware that the cumulative tasks assigned exceeded the recruits' abilities. Amanda explained, “as a recruit, you just don’t complain about anything…because you face isolation, slander, and ostracization.” She described recruits “being called a ‘piss kid’…told you don’t speak unless you’re spoken to…your job is to get ice for the cooler.” Sarah later reflected, “I can look back now and see lots of micro-aggressions, sexual violence, bullying…but at the time I didn’t have the language…I was just excited to be there.” Sam described the dualistic nature of police training, where recruits were

> *shaped into the idea that you were, not more important than the law, but that you were the law...you're the cream of the crop…you're authoritative...at the same time, there was a lot of rank and file and structure, militaristic type of thing.*

Amanda explained that she internalized the pressure, “buying into like, this is the way it is and you just, you know, shut up and get through it.” Sarah believed this conformity was the price to access policing benefits.

Favouritism. While most recruits suffered under strict rules, a few received special treatment due to connections. Roberta recounted that “they changed all of the hiring rules for her…because of her personal connections,” and Amy witnessed a male recruit “punching a female in the face with full force”, yet despite repeated complaints, instructors did not discipline the abusive

recruit. She recounted another recruit received special treatment due to personal connections within upper management. The sergeants acknowledged that "we all know who the elephant in the room is" and were "working at getting them out of here…looking at firing him because he's not suitable." Yet, despite him "struggling academically and physically," "it never happened" , he ended up being promoted. Such contradictions revealed an institution willing to bend rules for the well-connected (including women), while silencing those without privilege.

Gendered Dismissal and Unprofessional Conduct. Female recruits' concerns were routinely dismissed, even as instructors engaged in sexist and racist banter. Emma discovered an instructors' group chat "filled with racist jokes and sexual comments about us…talking about who was super-hot or horrible," and Roberta was stunned when her sergeant was removed as a training staff "because at the grad party he made out with a student." One instructor publicly humiliated one participant in front of her peers by announcing, "Your husband called me today, he was going to send you flowers," deliberately spotlighting her recent separation, a breach of professional boundaries that left the recruit feeling exposed. Roberta reported being dismissed when raising concerns about a malfunctioning use of force tool. Months later it was discovered that the issue was equipment based, not her ability, but the experience required her to do unnecessary work and caused her to question her own judgement. She firmly believes her initial concerns were dismissed because of her gender.

Resistance to Inclusion and Diversity Education. Despite formal diversity modules required as part of the training, Sophia noted many recruits openly mocked content on mental health, transgender identity, and racial bias. She recalled peers ridiculing an instructor's personal story: "They'd say, 'there are only two genders'…and complain about reverse discrimination," revealing that official training often clashed with rank-and-file attitudes.

Field Training Discrepancies and Poor Mentorship. On the street, academy protocols were frequently ignored. Roberta noted, “you go to the road and people would say, ‘forget what they told you, just do it our way.’” Amy lamented a high-risk stop where “no one following what they trained us to do…what’s the point of even training us if they’re just going to go, complete rogue.” She recounted a vehicle stop where the standard “protocol is you run them on CPIC [Canadian Police Information System] before you get out of the car…to know if they’re armed and dangerous,” yet her partner “just cowboyed everything,” abruptly jumped out, and was “obviously angry with me that I didn’t get out of the car fast enough.” He then got back in the car and was “screaming at me all the way back to [police station]” with such “blind rage” that she “considered getting out at a red light and just walking back.” All the while, she emphasizes, the CPIC check “just takes seconds…it's not like three minutes.” Sophia’s field training officer (FTO) brushed off her request for report-writing help: “Just write it. You can figure it out,” leaving her “begging for help.”

Street-Level Harassment, Bullying, and Exploitation. Except for Emily and PW1, on patrol gendered harassment intensified. Amanda’s first squad “was extremely misogynistic and like, there was some terrible bullying, but…I still loved being a police officer.” They called women officers “split tails,” and she was concerned when a member told her, “we don’t want any women on the team.” Similarly, Sophia's supervisor, a self-proclaimed "traditionalist," regularly made derogatory comments about women in policing. She explained that her colleagues called women “clamps,” a “made-up…word…to describe a female that…was being kind of whiny,” branding any woman “always going into the sergeant’s office making complaints” as “sensitive” or “clampy because she’s on her period,” and noted that this was the culture she faced “from day one.” He also mocked the division of "pink jobs" (feminine tasks) and "blue jobs" (masculine

tasks). These views were widely shared and normalized within the team, with Sophia's younger male colleagues either finding the comments “funny” or failing to challenge them.

Sophia said that one male colleague “took this time and opportunity when my coach was gone to essentially just start bullying me,” so that even innocent remarks like “How was everyone’s weekend? What did you do this weekend, Sophia?” would be met with “that’s fucking gay.” He would “make comments about my sex life or lack of sex life,” “walk around making sex noises, imitating a female moaning,” and then sneer at her, “How would you know? You don’t even have a fucking sex life.” Other officers “would either laugh or not say anything,” leaving her to wonder, “Who’s going to stand up and call this out?” She also spoke of “the objectification constantly of females, whether it was talking about other women officers, females on the street or female crown attorney.” Sophia shared that it was more than comments about their attractiveness, “It was like, she's whatever hot this…here's the sexual things I would like to do to her.” This individual made inappropriate, sexually explicit comments, objectifying women officers by accessing and commenting on their social media profiles, as well as those of women in custody. When Sophia's coach officer intervened to address the most egregious remarks, it was framed as “locker room talk” instead of being treated as unacceptable misconduct.

Emma also faced gender-based harassment from her male colleagues, including comments suggesting she would "ruin" a male officer's marriage if they were partnered together. Women officers, like Amy, were often subjected to derogatory labels such as "a bitch," "a slut," or "a lesbian." In contrast, male officers faced less severe criticism, often being described as "lazy" or "not good at tactics." Sam mentioned that women officers who struggled were referred to as "shitty cops" or "not cut out for the job," while male officers were given more leeway, and their mistakes were often dismissed as simply "a mistake." Amanda described how even

volunteering for overtime was met with hostility: “I was condemned for putting my name up as available to work overtime, not even working it, but told you, don't put your name up there.” One woman recounted that when she started her career on the road over 20 years ago, women were treated quite differently, having a "W" designation on their identification and women were not allowed to work together. The rule was “two Ws can’t be in one car, like we were less capable.” Although this policy is no longer in place, she acknowledged policewomen still encounter discrimination.

Emma, Roberta, and Vanessa faced gender-based discrimination, including inappropriate comments, unwanted advances, and unfair judgments for not conforming to traditional masculine ideals. Vanessa experienced overt marginalization within her team, where she was held to higher standards and given more work than her colleagues solely based on her gender. The male officers often belittled her for not being aggressive enough and for not "getting in people's faces," even though her effective communication style was consistent with her identity as “a small female” officer.

Sarah and Emma faced derogatory comments and inappropriate touching from their colleagues and supervisors. Emma mentioned that when she voiced her frustration about these behaviours, many male colleagues failed to intervene or challenge the actions, instead downplaying her experiences and dismissing them as "just the way that person is." Roberta’s first field trainer invited her to on-duty drinking at the shift’s end, “we do pops…to connect with the squad” but forbade her from drinking, while teammates proclaimed, “policing is not a job for a woman.” When a sworn member was arrested for domestic assault and brought to cells “as a courtesy,” her colleagues dismissed the victim as “a problem…She was crazy,” further underscoring the powerlessness Roberta felt.

Olivia endured questions of her anatomy: “are you sure you don’t have a cock down there or something?” creating “constant…belittling” that she found “humiliating.” She added that when she moved to another unit, “my first field trainer made a point of telling members there that I was incompetent,” and another colleague then “didn’t talk to me for three weeks.” Vanessa described a moment when her team, “in the middle of dinner…told me, ‘You’re lucky you have a senior guy, if not, you’d be leaving for that call right now.’”

Threats and Coercion. Some trainers used threats to coerce compliance. Vanessa received a veiled threat of sexual violence in a message, only to have her trainer “just shake his head…that was the end of it,” illustrating how coercion was normalized. One of Olivia’s field trainers engaged in unlawful behaviour by using police systems to impersonate her and set up a date with another officer. He then coerced her into attending by threatening her with a negative performance review if she did not comply. Out of fear, Olivia attended the meeting, but the other officer began to stalk her despite her repeated verbal expressions of disinterest. She also recounted being forced to stand with a rope around her neck during a suicide call for photos, threatened with a negative review if she refused. She reflected, “I didn’t really process that, but I think that was the start of me knowing I…couldn’t have a voice.”

Sophia recalled a story of her teammate’s treatment of a woman in cells, “look[ing] up her social media and talk[ing] about her in a sexist way,” while the sergeant “took that opportunity to educate me, quote unquote, on how females are the worst and the craziest or the most dramatic … when they’re intoxicated.” They “commented about her all night long,” showing no thought that “this person’s father’s gonna come pick them up.” The situation turned violent when one officer casually suggested “using [a pen] to shove it up this girl’s anus,” a threat of sexual violence that only prompted Sophia’s coach to murmur, “don’t talk like that.

There's females in the room." Sophia emphasized that such threatening rhetoric "was completely accepted and tolerated and normalized."

Bystander Complicity, Social Isolation, Fear of Retaliation and Disempowerment

Across both phases, women described a training culture underpinned by institutional complicity that turned a blind eye to rule-breaking and misconduct, and routinely silenced complaints, leaving them acutely aware of their social isolation, fearful of retaliation, and profoundly disempowered. Amanda tearfully remembered "bawling my eyes out…these guys are so mean to me," yet felt unable to respond: "I never said a word."

Sophia's FTO was "often absent," and senior officers offered "very little guidance." She described how her direct supervisor's "sexism, male chauvinist attitudes, stereotypes, [and] complete disrespect" were so "normalized" that, as "a rookie," it was "so hard" to speak up, one moment saying, "hey, that's not okay," and the next asking, "hey, can you teach me how to do something", a jarring reminder of the "huge power imbalance" she faced. Providing an example, Sophia shared how a male teammate made sexually explicit comments about her: "Well, I guess it's going to be a throuple tonight," later adding, "I guess she's flying solo," punctuating the remark with a crude "gesture with…his fingers." When her FTO finally intervened, "That's completely disrespectful. You don't talk to women that way", her harasser "didn't even respond" and simply "walked out of the room and ended his shift," while teammates dismissed her dismay as "just joking." Unbeknownst to her, the FTO then reported the incident "to a higher-ranking officer without [her] knowledge," prompting an admin sergeant to say, "I feel bad for you, Sophia…he's trying to become a sergeant, and this fulfills a competency for him." At Sophia's request and not wanting to make waves, she requested informal disciplinary measures be used with her teammate. To her shock, the harasser's own sergeant (the "traditionalist") delivered

only “conduct education” as the disciplinary measure, and no mediation was arranged. In their one-hour meeting arranged by Sophia, her teammate “denied” and “minimized” his actions and offered hollow apologies, “I would never say something like that, but if I said it or if I have ever said anything that caused you to be offended, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry”, which, as Sophia reflects, amounted to “just more gaslighting.”

Amanda endured written comments on the mobile data terminals, “she should get a boob job,” “She’s as flat as the Sahara,” “I feel your pain” relating to having to work with her, yet, in her words, “I never said a word. You just, you don’t.” Because those comments appeared on the one-to-one channel between cars, Amanda knew she was being talked about behind her back. There was no public forum in which to challenge or even acknowledge the insults, so she was left alone, cut off from any support or solidarity. Emails were sent from her computer when she stepped away to tag property, and a penis was drawn in her notebook, a document she would have to produce in court. By refusing to speak up, Amanda revealed that she understood questioning or confronting her peers would mark her as a troublemaker. In that culture, raising her voice risked ostracism, slander (“rat” accusations), or even career consequences, so silence felt safer than pushback. She was subjected to ongoing harassment yet lacked any avenue to defend herself or to see meaningful intervention from leadership, leaving her feeling powerless.

Emma’s induction to street duty was similarly undermined. One officer “was so excited for me to be his partner” when she arrived, only for others to tell their boss, “No, absolutely not…If you rode with him, you would have ruined his marriage,” and warn, “we won’t be partners anymore because we’d sleep together from the trauma bond.” In the report room, she noted the men’s change room was “jam packed” while the women’s was empty, then heard an officer joke, “oh, I would love to have you in my change room,” prompting men and women

colleagues to laugh, tacitly endorsing the behaviour rather than speaking up, as Emma stood "disgusted" yet uncertain whether to take it seriously. On calls, she was "mansplained" routine procedures: one sergeant "came up to me and grabbed me by the sidearm…gave a couple of the dudes fist pumps and was like good job guys and left," leaving her work partner to comment why he hadn't received "a special arm touch like that for my good work." When she voiced her frustration about these behaviours, many male colleagues failed to intervene or challenge the actions, instead downplaying her experiences and dismissing them as "just the way that person is."

Sam witnessed pornographic emails circulating among officers but chose silence "for fear of retaliation," a decision that deepened her social and professional isolation. She emphasized the existence of a widespread culture of silence and compared it to a "boiling frog," where small misbehaviours go unaddressed and gradually escalate over time. Sophia tried to appeal to her colleagues' empathy, asking them to imagine their own daughters subjected to the same treatment, only to have her concerns shrugged off as trivial. The lone exception was a senior officer who quietly admitted he would not want his daughter to join the force and even declined to host teammates at his home, a rare acknowledgment of the cultural toxicity. Similarly, Olivia described a toxic training environment in the field where sexual misconduct was either normalized or actively protected, leading to further escalation of such behaviours.

Document Triangulation

Bastarache's (2020) report, *Broken Dreams, Broken Lives*, corroborates the recruit training themes. Across Canada, police recruit training typically unfolds in two main stages: an initial period of classroom instruction and practical-skills sessions, followed by supervised field training with an assigned officer coach. In some provinces, this is capped by a brief return to the

academy for debriefing or final assessment. While many recruits entered training with a sense of pride and purpose, these early experiences were often entangled with a coercive institutional culture that normalized harassment, enforced rigid gender norms, and fostered silence through fear and intimidation. As Bastarache (2020) observed, “training at Depot is intended to break a cadet down and rebuild her in the RCMP mould, but the esprit de corps does not seem to extend to women,” and the environment often involved “sexualized conduct, drinking and abusive relationships” between instructors and cadets (p. IV). Bastarache’s report substantiated male-perpetrated harassment and institutional retaliation, and highlighted instances of female participation in silencing and gatekeeping, but does not provide a stand-alone, woman-on-woman bullying account.

During field training, recruits, particularly women, remained on probation and subject to the unchecked authority of their trainers, many of whom exploited this power, resulting in “abuse,” “sexual assaults,” or the deliberate withholding of mentorship. The absence of trauma-informed protocols, combined with internal policies that impose arbitrary deadlines for reporting misconduct, further silences victims. Bastarache’s report substantiated male-perpetrated harassment and institutional retaliation, and highlighted instances of female participation in silencing and gatekeeping, but does not provide a stand-alone, woman-on-woman bullying account. Bastarache concluded that the harassment reporting process was “horrific,” “resulted in retaliation” and was rarely effective (p. V) , a reality that fails to reflect the biological and psychological realities of trauma and deters meaningful reporting or recourse. This constellation of coercive training, gendered marginalization, authoritarian control, and institutional complicity continues to shape and constrain women’s entry into policing.

A combination of early optimism and deep-rooted systemic practices forever shaped these women's trajectories from the very start of their policing careers. The major themes emerging from participants accounts during recruit training included early pride and purpose, cultural indoctrination and normalization of misconduct, masculine ideals and gendered marginalization, authoritarian control and silencing, and bystander complicity, social isolation, fear of retaliation, and disempowerment. Across these narratives, threats of retaliation, whether subtle career-destroying warnings or the fear of physical harm, compelled women officers to stay silent. The result was a pervasive normalization of harassment, bullying, and discrimination that began in recruit training and persisted throughout their careers, eroding any sense of safety or belonging.

4.3 Experiences Over Time: Hostile and Toxic Work Environments

Across their careers, the women's accounts revealed that the same patterns of harassment, bullying, and coercion encountered during field training persisted, and often intensified, in their daily work. Three key themes emerged from the women's accounts of their immediate work interactions including sexual and gender-based harassment and bullying; sexual coercion, exploitation, and threats of violence; and abuse of power and corruption.

Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Bullying

Under BC Government policy (2025), harassment is defined as any inappropriate conduct or comment (e.g., verbal, non-verbal, physical, or online) that a person knew or reasonably ought to have known would humiliate or intimidate a reasonable person, creating an environment of fear or distress. Sexual harassment is defined as any unwelcome sexual conduct, advances, or sexist, discriminatory, or derogatory comments that negatively affect the work environment. These behaviours, excluding reasonable management actions, may be written, verbal, physical,

electronic, gestural, or any combination thereof. Bullying involves repeated or targeted actions aimed at controlling or dominating someone-usually behind closed doors-ultimately driving them toward breakdown or exit. Analysis revealed five interrelated sub-themes: sexism and gender-based harassment; exclusionary practices; psychological abuse (including gaslighting and mobbing); sexual harassment; and intimidation and retaliation.

Sexism and Gender Discrimination. Sexism and gender discrimination permeated every aspect of these women's work. Sam observed that calls were unofficially segregated into "boy calls or girl calls," so that on any matter involving violence "they would promptly replace me with a male because … 'oh, this is a boy call not a girl call.'" Roberta likewise found herself assigned to "pink calls", "mental health apprehensions, 'crazy ladies,' sex assaults", while "blue calls," the ones that "get the commendations" and aid in lateral promotions to "specialty" units were reserved for men. The double standard extended to mistakes: "If it's a boy call and you're female and you make a mistake, you get lambasted for it… but if it's a guy that makes a mistake… they just get made fun of and, you know, brotherly love," Sam explained.

Emily described daily reminders that "they really don't think we should be in this profession…you need the male to be aggressive," while Vanessa was criticized for not "get[ting] into people's faces more." Roberta's supervisor even "reassign[ed] me to the wagon…it was so clear…he's putting me in my place." Roberta spoke of being repeatedly belittled by yet another supervisor, referring to her in a manner that called into question her experience, describing her work environment as "toxic and dysfunctional." PW1 recounted one partner bluntly declaring, "No. Chicks don't drive," ending their partnership on the spot, and later enduring a "practical joke" so intense (officers staged a fake arrest of a disguised colleague) she felt "uncomfortable and confused." These accounts reveal how rigid gender norms and stereotypes dictated

assignments, demeaned performance, and reinforced a workplace hierarchy that constantly undermined women's authority and confidence.

Exclusionary Practices. Exclusionary practices, rooted in the sexist assumption that women "aren't one of the boys", served to systematically isolate these officers. Vanessa watched her team "go to coffee or dinner…and I'd just see them on the map and be like, 'Where's my invite?'" Their secret "side chat[s]" shut her out, so she "showed up and worked by myself…[ate] by myself, not interact with anybody," only to be accused, "Why are you leaving before the rest of us? You're the junior one." They turned her distress into a cruel "game," deliberately excluding and targeting her to see who could make her cry, hiding her patrol car keys "to piss me off…until I had a complete breakdown." They even barred her from physically being in certain parts of the building.

Sophia faced a parallel dynamic: "because he had this group chat with the other officers, I wasn't a part of it," so when "they would go do a ride program, I'd be on my own…40 minutes away" with no one to turn to for guidance if needed. Even critical training sessions became off-limits, "we're going to go do [training], I wouldn't be invited", reinforcing that, as a woman, she didn't belong. Olivia described a "pack mentality" in which colleagues "ostracized" her and spread false allegations and damaging rumours to discredit her. Despite positive evaluations, she faced constant questioning of her abilities. Colleagues attempted to sabotage her career, fabricating conflicts and threatening to ruin her reputation if she did not resign. These tactics of social exclusion functioned as a gendered weapon: by cutting women out of both informal networks and essential duties, the department made it clear that women officers were unwelcome and unsupported.

Psychological Abuse. Gaslighting and mobbing are both psychological abuse tactics. According to the News Bureau at Middle George State University (2025), gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which someone deliberately undermines another person's perception of reality. It aims to sow confusion, shame, and doubt in the victim's mind. By consistently challenging the target's beliefs, values, memories, and experiences, the gaslighter prompts them to question their own judgment. Over time, this relentless tactic can leave victims uncertain of their thoughts and feelings, eroding their confidence and making them increasingly reliant on the abuser. Many of the women found their attempts to call out misconduct dismissed as "innocent fun," with them told simply, "you're too sensitive." As Sarah explained, "when I…finally tried to speak up, nobody would listen to me…They labeled me crazy. And that was the end for me."

Sophia's experience illustrates how insidious this could become. Her efforts to address issues of bullying and harassment with her superior were met with "gaslighting." Similar to Amanda's experience, Sophia began "isolating…feeling safer in my cruiser," until one day "I just broke down in tears…in the parking lot…I was drowning," realizing she was "not fit for duty." Summoning her courage, she called her sergeant: "I'm having a really hard time working around these guys…you're part of the problem." Rather than address her concerns, he "just justified and denied…excused the behaviour…didn't acknowledge it," instead recounting stereotypes of police women, "This one…only became a sergeant because she was the poster woman for being a lesbian…This officer would cry on call, so she was too sensitive", and doubling down on his "traditionalist" views that his daughter should "stay home and basically cook and clean." Though he closed with "I'm here if you ever need to chat," Sophia walked away feeling the conversation was meaningless.

Roberta encountered a similar pattern upon returning from a training course. After receiving glowing evaluations while away, she was summoned to a "documented sit-down meeting" and bluntly told, "You went to a [call], and you missed evidence on it." When she pointed out that she had, in fact, fully documented the evidence, her supervisor dismissed her expertise: "We don't do that here." Later, she failed a follow-up exam on a requirement that was "never…written down or explained," directly contradicting her recent training. Confronted with shifting standards and withheld information, Roberta found herself "not trusting my own judgment…and…on the defensive because I know anything that happens is like, 'Oh, my word.'" As she put it, "this is where the gaslighting comes in. Roberta's to blame, there is no problem with our operating procedures."

Mobbing occurs when an individual is driven from their job through coordinated, repeated attacks, such as baseless accusations, gossip and rumours, public shaming, ongoing harassment, emotional abuse, or outright intimidation and ostracization, carried out by one or more individuals (whether the organization itself, managers, peers, or subordinates) who enlist others to join in these systematic "mob-like" behaviours (Shallcross et al., 2008).

Mobbing took the form of coordinated gossip and exclusion designed to drive these women from their jobs. Sophia recounted, "All the rumours…they wouldn't talk to me, they wouldn't look at me if I walked into a room…they would look away, raise their eyebrows, and just keep doing their thing." Amanda's sergeant even instructed others "don't trust her, don't talk to her," prompting colleagues to "question my integrity and my character and not want anything to do with me," and she watched potential promotions evaporate, "men were up in arms" when another woman advanced in just seven years, and Amanda "didn't want that to be me." Olivia endured being singled out in front of her colleagues, "I found a typo on one of your reports," he

said, then refused to clarify which report, even as she was already “on a discipline” and threatened to “write you up.”

Amy, arriving in a new area for what she hoped would be a “fresh start,” was warned “we heard you had problems in [that] district” causing her to be “hyper-vigilant” in every interaction as no one on her new squad would work with her. She discovered that colleagues had seized the respectful-workplace mascots, “disfigured them with pins and bullet holes” and mounted the mutilated toys in a sergeant’s office as a contemptuous mockery of the initiative. Almost immediately reporting her concerns to the human resources department, her supervisor “ordered a performance assessment on me” out of cycle, part of what Amy later summed up as “mobbing, gaslighting, rumours. I was told once you can run but you can’t hide,” driving home that this was an organized effort to make her feel unsafe and unwelcome at every turn. Amy put it bluntly:

> *You've already…labeled me as a problem or that I'm a person with problems. I'm not a person with problems. I'm a police officer that keeps on running into shit rats that you guys will never fucking fire or hold accountable…this is a statistical problem. You have so many shit rats that have infiltrated you guys the chances of not running into a shit rat are slim to fucking none.*

Despite completing specialized training and returning to work after a serious injury, Olivia’s competence was immediately called into question. “Before I was even back on the road,” she recalled, “he started documenting me … to say I was incompetent,” and her supervisor “spent time picking me apart in front of my watch.” When she casually mentioned family planning, a coworker “started telling everybody … we were planning to have a kid,” as if building a case against her. Her supervisor even denied her medical needs, “called me a liar … I

just had surgery to have kids," before disparaging commenting that "you're not one of us if you're not religious."

Ultimately, her management verbally "terminated" her, citing "a whole bunch of made-up reasons", yet she "didn't receive any documents," only that "all these files on the desk are all your mistakes." Two days later, Olivia was summoned back to work: "We haven't technically terminated you yet, you haven't received your papers," she was told. Reluctantly, and aware of the financial stakes, she obeyed. The Chief then informed her that "nobody wanted to work with me, I was a danger, I was a risk," effectively declaring her "incompetent," and gave her a stark ultimatum: "you can quit, or you can come back, and nobody wants to work with you."

Although her collective agreement entitled her to "two union reps and a union lawyer" in. navigating the situation, Olivia was instead represented by "one union member … a very shady character" who sided with management, declaring, "I've seen this before…you're not going to make it … you're not meant for this job … nobody wants to work with you." Management then "suspended me with pay," ordering her to complete additional training yet barring her from retrieving her work and training materials, while threatening Police Act charges if she failed to complete the training. When her union representative "didn't get back to me," she felt compelled to hire outside counsel: "I felt like I was being set up … they were moving my training ahead … I felt like I was being suffocated."

Her legal defense was taxing and expensive, "$45,000 … just to keep my job", and even her lawyer, whom she praised as "a bull in a China shop," eventually withdrew after encountering "political blocks" at every turn. When she requested formal documentation of her termination, she was gaslit with "no, you were never actually terminated … I don't know where

you're getting that from," leaving Olivia trapped in a surreal nightmare of bureaucratic abuse and isolation.

Sexual Harassment. Amanda, Amy, Emily, and Sophia all endured a steady stream of derogatory labels that reduced them to crude clichés: "bitch," "slut," "dyke," "clamps," "split tails," "useless," or "lesbian." As Amy was warned by a veteran colleague, "If you're a female officer…you're in one of those categories…a 'switched-on' female means you're good at your job…otherwise you're still a slut or a lesbian," while her male peers faced only mild labels like "office cat."

Amanda once received "disturbing" messages from a superior, among the handful of "gross" texts she had ever saved, so alarming that she kept them rather than delete them. Although she could not share the details, that same individual was later investigated for sending similarly inappropriate messages to other women officers and even young women in the public. The women also endured relentless commentary on their appearance. Olivia recalled one colleague who would openly "catcall" her, describing him as "reckless, dirty…a polished predator…just disgusting all the time," and noting that "he just thought it was acceptable." Her peers compounded the humiliation by comparing her to fellow officers with taunts like "Swing those hips" or asking, "Are you sure you're not a man?" One supervisor even orchestrated a grotesque plum "demonstration," "thrusting his groin into [the other sergeant]…like he's humping him," then turned to Olivia and smirked, "How do you like my balls? What would you do with these?" When she refused to laugh, he threatened he would "have to write you up," weaponizing her disciplinary record to coerce her compliance.

Emma described how one colleague blurred every professional boundary with unsolicited, sexualized messages: first a direct Instagram message, a shirtless selfie accompanied

by “working out, going to come join me?”, and later a transmission over the police network declaring, “thank goodness night’s almost done…my pillow’s calling your name,” messages she found both “gross” and deeply invasive. Amy’s daily work was shadowed by unwelcome attention from a senior management member whose lingering gaze and comments left her feeling objectified and uncomfortable. “I would wear sweatpants to work,” Amy recalled, “and every time I saw him…he would stop me…looking me up and down. I did feel creep vibes.” He taunted her choice of attire, “Why do you wear sweatpants to work? Those are ‘giving up on life’ pants, you should wear something nicer”, and, on a hot day when she switched to shorts, smirked “That’s better” as he once again “looked me up and down.”

Amy endured a prolonged “grooming process for jokes” at the hands of a colleague she called a “complete fucking pervert, hardcore pervert,” whose behaviours escalated from crude banter to full-blown sexualization: “He would ask me little questions here and there…then the jokes would get more progressively serious, more crude, more dark, more inappropriate, more racist, more just all of that stuff… he was inching and slowly and slowly.” He pried into her private life, “I’m trying to Google search your [family member]”, then “sexualized me and my [family member] in front of the whole team,” and crudely described women he’d dated as “dirty sluts.” He even paraded “Tinder dates” through the office and live surveillance operations, dismissing the risk with “don’t mind…she’s just bringing me coffee.” Despite Amy’s boss being “aware of all of this,” he “didn’t care…didn’t do a single thing.”

On another occasion, the same officer “stood directly in front of [me] and watched the pat down like a complete fucking pervert,” smirking as he “looked us up and down”, so brazen that Amy found herself thinking, “she’s 15, you fucking idiot.” The final straw came at a scene with a deceased Indigenous woman, when he and others mocked her tragedy with the vile quip, “Ok,

who's going to fuck her first?" When Amy sought intervention, her sergeant dismissed her concerns as "a personality conflict," which effectively "flipped my role from victim to offender" and forced her into hypervigilance, "inventorying my day…That is not sexual…That's not sexual…I kept my head down and my mouth shut. That's not sexual." In an orchestrated sit-down meeting organized by her supervisor, five teammates united in recasting her trauma as mere interpersonal friction, "Five guys is a show of force", Amy saw no option but to quit the team, unable to endure the relentless intimidation and self-doubt any longer.

During formal training exercises to work undercover, Amy and another female member endured a series of degrading performance "tasks" designed solely for the instructors' amusement. In one scenario, they were sent into a crowded restaurant to "order something for our lunch break," then, upon receiving a text, to "re-enact a scene from When Harry Met Sally", even though neither had seen the film, and instructed, "You have to eat dessert and fake an orgasm," so trainers at other tables could listen in. "My colleagues want to hear what it sounds like when I'm having an orgasm. This is fucking crazy," Amy recalled. In an even more humiliating assignment, the same instructor told only the women to "set up a threesome with a random member of the public" using a "cucumber," "strawberries and whipped cream" to "help exaggerate it." "Not a single guy" was ever subjected to an orgasm scenario, Amy noted, only women.

On another occasion in an upscale coffee shop, Amy and a fellow female member were instructed to attend a "sit-down" interview for a "phone sex operator job," sharing "our best sex stories," then call the instructor's personal number to leave a "one-minute…dirty, filthy…sexual voicemail message." When the evaluator turned out to be a civilian, "not a cop, not employed by the…police service" but the instructor's relative, Amy was brusquely told she "looked uptight

and stressed and…on the verge of tears," a critique that left her "honestly disgusted" and questioning whether "I'm cut out for this."

Vanessa endured harrowing "games" of sexual humiliation at the hands of her supervisor, who lobbed "horribly vulgar, sexualized questions" like, "Would you rather have sex with the guy across the table or lick so-and-so's balls?" He even dragged a friend of hers into the scenario, asking, "Would you rather give her oral sex or lick the inspector's bald head?" Although she wasn't physically isolated, Vanessa felt trapped: "I'm in a really weird position… I'm not being like isolated. And I'm scared to make waves 'cause I don't want to get worse… so I'm like, okay, I guess I'm playing along."

As Sarah observed, "Your value is based on your appearance and your sexual attractiveness…you are less than your male coworkers," yet "the people who saw it…and didn't do anything about it, that's another thing." Even high-ranking officers wielded "power over me": asking her if she found them "sexually attractive" or "interested in women." Sophia, too, exposed how that power extended into their systems, recalling that she was privy to teammates misusing police databases "to compare photos of other women officers," effectively turning law-enforcement tools into instruments of objectification. In hindsight, many agreed that harassment was "just acceptable," not realizing then that they were enduring "lots of micro-aggressions, sexual violence, bullying, harassment" simply because they "didn't understand it, didn't have the language" to name it.

Intimidation and Retaliation. Retaliation often followed any attempt to report misconduct, transforming the workplace into a minefield of intimidation. Olivia filed both a formal complaint and submitted a workers' compensation claim over repeated sexual harassment, only to have

colleagues "start narrowing in on anything I wasn't doing in the file." She was "ostracized from coffee," "yelled at," and branded "a liar" almost immediately after lodging her complaint.

Amanda endured a public dressing-down when her sergeant "yelled and screamed so loud at me that members from the other patrol districts could hear about how I was usurping his authority…and how dare I," then abruptly reassigned her to a new district without explanation. When Amanda considered formally complaining about her sergeant's threats and bullying, he warned her "if I submitted a complaint, he would destroy my career." Colleagues messaged her saying "I can't say anything because I'll be next."

Amanda later learned that an officer on her specialty-unit interview panel was the very same person who had told her that she was unsuccessful in the competition. She was later contacted by the Inspector of the unit, congratulated and told that only one other officer had ever scored as high in an interview. The Sergeant who told her she was unsuccessful was the same person who attempted to turn peers against her, upset that the (female) Inspector had superseded him and hired her for a highly sought after role. Soon after, a high-ranking member pulled her aside "to contact the union," admitting "[the Sergeant] did not want you coming here…you need to file a complaint. And then I was flabbergasted. But all of this other stuff made sense then." In that moment, Amanda realized every obstacle she'd faced was calculated retaliation.

Amanda's integrity was openly questioned, and she found herself socially isolated to the point that she "submitted a workplace harassment complaint…it went to the workers' compensation board…it went to human resources." She never read the resulting investigator's report, "he wrote a report. I never did read it", because her union lawyer warned, "We're going right to the chief. Don't read that report. It's so horrendously written…it's so flawed. And he [the harasser] is up for promotion; if this gets submitted, he will not be promoted." In the end,

management simply told her, “We’re going to shred this report, and you can go anywhere in the department that you want,” while her workers’ compensation claim was denied. The person assigned to assist members with compensation and injury claims never told her that claims were often denied, then appealed, and she did not know this was an option. The reality was the department wanted to promote this member and the report that was written would preclude him from promotion.

In another instance, after being compelled to testify as a witness in another Police Act complaint, Amanda described how the accused officer, a senior ranking member, “drove by and sat in his car and stared at me” when she was alone on a call. She “didn’t say anything,” knowing he would claim, “‘I didn’t know that it was her’ or ‘I just went because I knew she was alone,’” and recognized the tactic as pure “intimidation.” He even “made phone calls to other…witnesses, asking, “‘Why are you complaining against me? Or I heard you got me in trouble.’”

Amy described how reporting a colleague’s violent behaviour triggered a chain of retaliatory actions. Early in her career, she was partnered with an abusive male officer who had “violent outbursts” and spoke of “killing his significant other.” She recalled feeling trapped: “I do not have a choice… do I turn a blind eye and become his therapist all shift... or do I report this because this is wrong?” Despite her concerns, and the police service’s directive that “if you see something, say something”, she faced the impossible choice between being labelled “a rat” or putting herself “in physical danger with a guy... carrying the firearm.” Her report was ignored, and the officer remained on the force.

Amy explained that “everyone in the district knew” when her first partnership abruptly ended, and “if you’re in a partnership one day and you’re no longer in partnership the next day, everyone is going to speculate…come up with their own conclusions” about why “it didn't

work.” She felt immediately branded “a problem right out of the gates,” especially in contrast to this officer who was universally admired. As a result, she realized “I can't have any other additional fuckups,” because “if I…report another partner…that's going to confirm that I'm the problem.” That stigma, she says, makes it “open season for…anything…they can do anything…because they know you’re probably not going to complain a second time.”

A new sergeant bluntly warned her, “you’re either with me or you’re against me,” and when Amy responded, “I'm just a police officer here trying to do police work,” the sergeant began “treating [her] like an outsider,” resulting in Amy feeling “increasingly isolated.” During a routine debrief, a male officer attempted to intimidate her by stating, “women in policing have tones in their voices… maybe you need to take a fucking course.” When Amy reported these issues to upper management, they threatened her with an ultimatum: “You either leave the team or we're going to start creating paperwork on you for every single mistake that you make on this team, we're going to start making a file on you and we're going to run you off the team,” and even admitted they would “fabricate an employment record” to force her out. When she escalated the matter to the inspector, he dismissed her request for help, saying, “Too bad, so sad. It sounds like you’re quitting the team… let us know what district you want to go to.” Although Amy asserted that the situation was “not fair” and “corrupt,” and made it clear, “I’m not resigning my position,” the inspector replied, “That’s not how it goes. You will go back to the street,” a decision Amy recognized as a “career killer,” designed to mark her as the common denominator in two troubled teams. She believed this treatment came from a higher-ranked clique that “acts like a gang together”, where crossing one meant you had “crossed all of them.”

Further retaliation arose when Amy reported a colleague described as a “complete fucking pervert” who repeatedly made inappropriate advances toward her and civilian women.

Despite following protocol, the department trivialized her complaint as a "personality conflict" and failed to take meaningful action. Feeling increasingly unsupported, Amy transferred to another division, hoping for a fresh start. However, her decision to report misconduct led to her continued labelling as a "problem officer," despite her demonstrated professionalism and investigative excellence. In her new post, she continued to experience inappropriate behaviour, including blatant sexual harassment from a partner, leaving her feeling trapped and uncertain about how to navigate the toxic environment.

After her sexual assailant, and colleague, was arrested, Sam refused to be uprooted despite overtures designed to displace her:

> *I was offered transfers, time off, any course I wanted. If I wanted to go to a specialty section, they would put me there and I said, no, I'm going to stay right where I'm working because I didn't do anything wrong.*

She saw these offers as deliberate attempts "to uproot the victim, to try and make everything as unfamiliar and uncomfortable…to start painting the picture that they're crazy…to start painting the picture that they can't cope." Having "watched people get stuffed in corners" only to wind up "on the sixth floor in a corner cubicle pushing paper… that's what her police career became when she complained about whatever it was," she stood her ground: "I said, no, I'll be here and I'm not moving. And they didn't know what to do."

Officers like Olivia were pressured to return to work before they were ready, further complicating her recovery and increasing her vulnerability to abuse. Highly detailed forms were drafted just for Olivia, asking her doctors to certify she was fit for full duties, even though she was still battling severe anxiety and physical complications: "Mine were very specific…to make me go back." She noted that management "made me get my doctor to sign these forms."

(Threats of) Violence, Coercion, and Exploitation

Unwanted Touching. Amy recalled an incident early in her career when her male partner crossed a clear boundary by unzipping her sweater in front of their team, a demeaning gesture that was both public and physical. He later dismissed her complaint, compounding the disrespect she felt. PW1 described a similarly disturbing encounter during an off-duty outing. A male colleague suddenly unzipped her top in front of others. She zipped it back up and warned him, “Don’t you ever do that again.” Though the act was never repeated, she was shaken by it, especially given that “even all the other people on the team saw that.” She noted that this occurred within a “macho, jokey” team culture, where such behaviour was normalized rather than addressed.

Other women echoed these experiences, describing ongoing patterns of unwanted physical contact and attention. As Sarah put it, “There’s an unwanted attention and unwanted touching in ways that made you feel uncomfortable.”

After being reassigned yet again, Amy began working with a new partner. Within just two weeks, what initially appeared to be innocuous physical proximity during shifts quickly escalated into unwanted contact. While riding together, their hands would “graze” each other reaching for the radio, incidents she initially brushed off. But as it continued, she began to feel uneasy: “After it happens a couple of times… you’re like, ‘OK, this is starting to get a little bit weird.’” Soon, his hand began to “accidentally graze” her thigh, touch she did not consent to and felt powerless to stop.

The boundary violations intensified. On one particularly unsettling occasion, Amy was reviewing dispatch information in the driver’s seat when her partner leaned into the vehicle and brought his face within inches of hers, “our lips… probably… 3–4 inches apart.” She

immediately "jerk[ed]" back, startled by what felt like an imminent attempt to kiss her. But even reacting to defend her space felt dangerous; she feared any protest would trigger his anger or prompt accusations that she was "sexualiz[ing] everything" or "overreacting."

Amy's past complaint of sexual harassment left her doubting herself: "Is this because she did this to another guy… complained about sexual harassment with the other guy?" She reflected on how such histories are "compounding" and can be used to discredit and isolate: "They choose to victimize you. You're done. You're totally done for the rest of your career."

Her partner's behaviour soon crossed further professional lines. He began leaving "greeting cards… love letters in my mail slots," praising her as a "wonderful person" he "admired," and hiding small gifts for her on shift. The messages extended into her personal time, including unsolicited emails on her days off listing "all the wonderful traits about you."

The emotional manipulation culminated in a disturbing episode while on-duty. While the two sat in their cruiser, he broke down crying and confessed he believed they were "soul mates." Amy, still in uniform and trapped beside him, feared for her safety and her professional integrity: "I'm going to have to get out and walk down the street in a police uniform… because of some policeman [is] losing his fucking mind." Amy approached her sergeant, bringing the cards and emails as evidence, and bluntly stated, "This guy's a fucking nut." Her sergeant was "apologetic" and admitted that "a lot of other policemen are like that on the job." Confronted with his relentless boundary violations, Amy concluded with weary clarity: "I'm not dealing with this shit anymore."

These accounts illustrate how repeated, seemingly minor acts of unwanted touching reinforced gendered imbalances in both physical and professional boundaries. Often dismissed as

harmless or routine within a culture of masculinized humour and entitlement, such behaviours normalize disrespect and can lay the groundwork for more serious violations.

Physical and Sexual Violence (and Threats of). Sophia described how violence against women was normalized through offhand remarks by her sergeant and peers. She recalled a couple frequently involved in domestic calls, and one day the sergeant joked, "well, she deserved it," referring to the woman being hit. He often made similar comments, such as, "sometimes women deserve to get a hit, that doesn't mean you do it," which were echoed by male constables with laughter and agreement: "well, sometimes they deserve it, huh Sarge?"

Amanda recounted a disturbing incident involving a male colleague who "used to hide in his car in the parking lot to watch when we would leave." She later discovered he had been suspended after two female members filed complaints, and his firearm had been seized. Fearing retaliation, her agency warned her to report "any strange vehicles around my house," but provided no threat assessment, even though she "had young kids" and was "quite junior" at the time. Forced to manage the risk herself, she told her children, "You don't answer the door," despite being uninvolved in the original complaint.

Olivia shared how two sergeants, both in positions of authority, spent minutes "joking about raping me with a rifle," with one saying, "I could bend you over and shove this up you," and the other adding, "you'll need some lube for that" while the rifle sat on the desk between them. This left her "incredibly afraid" and ultimately fleeing the room in tears.

Amy was training in a "scenario day," when without warning, one officer "broke the line," abandoned his post, grabbed his riot baton, and "struck me overhanded and hit the back of my tricep." When she raised her hands and said, "OK, you fuckin got me," he delivered "a second gratuitous crack in the back of the arm." Those running the training later deemed the

force “completely disproportionate” and shut down the training altogether. Amy was taken for X-rays, spent weeks in a sling, and still carries a tender lump from the injury.

One woman recounted a disturbing incident during a training exercise where she was pressured to attend a wet T-shirt contest. After refusing, “No, I’m not… I’d rather firebomb the place”, the situation escalated into physical violence. “One of them grabbed me and put me in a chokehold around my neck,” she recalled, while “the other picked up my feet.” They carried her down the stairs as she “thrash[ed]” and clung to the railing, fearing they were taking her “to the basement.” Instead, “they forced me into a van” and applied a “transport wrist lock”, a pain-compliance technique used on combative prisoners, while driving her to the bar. As one officer escorted her to the entrance still in the wrist lock, she warned, “‘You’re going to let go and let me leave peacefully, or I’ll start screaming for someone to call 911.’” He released her, but she was left stranded without her wallet, uncertain how to get back. She eventually managed to return to the training base on her own.

The following day, the violence continued during scenario training. The woman described how a male colleague “came up behind me, took a spit hood…put it over my head so I couldn’t see…body-checked me to the ground…mounted on top of me…pressed his groin directly on my pelvis so his dick is literally touching my pelvis.” She described how in the moment she summoned the strength to “bench-press him off me…flipped him onto his fucking back, and put my hands around his throat,” warning

> *him I was going to fucking kill him if he didn't back off and leave me alone. And right at that moment…the commander…leaning out the window just watching it like it was a fucking fun event to watch…he’s like, ‘Everything OK here?”*

The woman concluded with great sadness,

> *There's no point in reporting any of this…What am I going to say? 'Hey [commander], you know that thing you just watched that looked like assault and sexual assault right in front of your eyes? Yeah, that's an assault and sexual assault. Maybe it would be clearer to you if the victim and offender both weren't cops."*

She added, "I still to this day I don't know… What do you do when you're the police reporting a criminal offense to the police?"

Emma described being sexually touched by a male recruit: "As I'm walking away, he grabs my ass…I turned around and I'm like, 'stop that,' but I didn't want to make a big scene." When she turned around, "he does it again, and [colleague] saw the second time." When Emma reported the behaviour, the service launched a "suitability review." What emerged was a disturbing pattern: the same recruit had "sexually assaulted six of his classmates," including a male classmate whose genitals he grabbed in the change room.: "He thought it was hilarious and was making fun of him." The male classmate "didn't want to report it because he's a guy and [because of] the stigma." Women recruits also disclosed "butt grabs and different things… he would come and try and massage you." But, as Emma explained, "they were scared because they're like, 'Well, we're low on the totem pole… we can't, we don't have anyone we can talk to.'" The investigation also uncovered a prior sexual assault at his previous workplace. Eventually, the recruit was charged criminally with four counts of sexual assault.

While participants did not consistently reference police chiefs, the specific role of a police chief in shaping the outcome of an investigation is clearly demonstrated in Emma's account. Emma's case reveals how institutional processes can reframe and minimize officer-on-officer sexual violence, stripping the survivor of agency while protecting organizational interests. She was coerced into a sexual encounter by a police officer before joining the force but chose not

to report the incident as he was in a position of power. After she was hired, she learned that the assault had been videotaped without her knowledge and shown to colleagues. She shared, "someone who had seen the video recognized me and reported it to Professional Standards." The matter was not pursued criminally; instead, "the [police agency] did like their job but then also they're like yeah, we're going to talk to [provincial oversight body] and see if they'll take it... they said if it was two years earlier, they would have." When the oversight body declined jurisdiction, "now all of its coming internal."

The matter proceeded under the Police Act. Emma explained: "So now this is all internal… the assault, the sexual assault, grooming, luring." She described how she was excluded from meaningful participation: "I get no representation in this at all. None of my lawyers could go in there" because the chief was named as the official complainant, not Emma. She became a witness in her own sexual assault case.

Emma's attempt to open the hearing to the public was met with institutional resistance. "They don't want to be in the media… they're saying it's to protect me," she said, adding, "we can still protect me and have… a publication ban." Her lawyers told her the presenting officer had been instructed, "under no circumstances you let this thing get opened" to the public. She initiated a formal application to open the hearing but was told that she could not use her union's legal support or firms, and that "it has to be a lawyer, and I would have to pay out of pocket." Eventually, the police union intervened privately: "They said fuck [police agency], we will pay."

Emma recounted the emotional toll of navigating conflicting legal advice and organizational messaging. She was warned that moving forward on the non-consensual recording charge could harm her credibility in an upcoming internal trial: "They said… if we taint you as a witness… that could harm how the people that decide see you for the second [sexual assault]

trial." She responded, "I said, I would feel like broken if you did that." Despite initially being reassured that her sexuality would not be targeted, she later learned that "there's something there… that will harm her credibility and embarrass her deeply," but the Crown's office refused to share it with her legal team, stating, "if we share it… she could alter and taint her testimony."

Emma expressed frustration with the double standard: "So [the officers] get to know that information and taint their testimony… but I don't?" She reflected, "I've been so honest," referencing her sex crimes interview: "I was very honest with everything." She concluded, "They're trying to scare me and they're trying to get me to shut this down."

When her application to open the hearing was finally approved just days before trial, she struggled to ensure media access. Fearing retaliation, she could not notify media directly. Her lawyer sought written permission from the chief to allow Emma to speak publicly about material already made public. Only after media attention intensified did the hearing's status change: "They secretly, without letting us know, put it onto that website… So then we just sent the link to the media."

During the hearing, she noted, "I wasn't allowed a support person; I wasn't allowed wellness support." The defense portrayed the officer as "a family guy… this was just a stupid immature moment." She shared, "Let the record show… he has no negative stuff on his [HR] file… and 30 note-worthies," but added, "he doesn't have any [negative paper] because he keeps getting off on them." Emma recalled that both the officer and another colleague had previously faced misconduct allegations for "doing the starlight tours with a homeless person… but the homeless person moved away and wouldn't show up… so they had to drop it."

Emma also described how public misunderstanding of her case added to the harm. A staff member reported that one officer dismissed the incident by saying, "another girl just films a

video with her boyfriend and then is upset that it got shared." She remarked, "People not knowing the full story…And the amount of people that don't know that it's a criminal charge to distribute a video that someone does not consent to you distributing."

Despite the court-imposed restrictions, Emma was permitted to write a victim impact statement, however, it was heavily altered because it had to match the statement of facts as set out by the chief (the complainant in this case):

> *It has to be shared with defense before its shared with the presenting officer. And they can take a black sharpie to whatever they think is not okay to be shared. And also, my victim impact statement, it can't talk about anything that's to come, and it can't talk about being filmed secretly in any of that, it can only talk about him and what he, what it's been like after him sharing the video. But there's so much more to it, and I can't even [say], so then that was like, working with the lawyers on like, okay what can I say.*

Initially advised to keep it short, her legal team ultimately supported a more direct approach: "Let's go hard… and attack [police agency] as well… maybe they'll see we're not going away." Emma's participation required extensive emotional labor: "I've gone through a lot of therapy for it too," she explained.

During this time, Emma explained that workers' compensation was pressuring her to see a new psychologist because her current therapist, although fully qualified, was not recognized under their system. "I have to start with this new chick and I don't know her, don't trust her at all," she said. "I'm just playing the game now... but I'm not doing trauma work with you. I'm not off because I need trauma work; I'm off because my stress was so high with the upcoming trials. I needed to figure out how to manage my sleep because I was having nightmares." Emma also shared that she refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement relating to the incident.

Emma’s account illustrates the mechanisms through which institutional actors, chiefs, legal representatives, and internal processes, can reframe officer-on-officer sexual violence, obscure the survivor’s role, and prioritize organizational self-preservation over accountability and justice.

Exploitation and Coercion. According to the Devon County Council (2017), exploitation involves leveraging another person's vulnerability or a specific situation for personal or third-party gain, typically causing harm or disadvantage to the affected individual. Exploitation often involves coercion to create or deepen a person’s vulnerability, making them more susceptible to abuse or manipulation. Coercion refers to the practice of persuading someone to do something by using force or threats. Sexual coercion refers to situations where an individual is pressured, manipulated, or forced into engaging in sexual activities against their will (Devon County Council, 2017). This can include situations where the perpetrator abuses their power, such as a superior pressuring a subordinate to engage in certain behaviours or sexual activity in exchange for career advancement or continued employment. The coercion may be subtle (through emotional manipulation) or overt (involving threats or direct force).

In some cases, women officers were subjected to direct sexual exploitation by colleagues or superiors who abused their positions of authority. This exploitation was often masked as attention or mentorship, creating confusion and vulnerability, particularly in hierarchical structures where power is unevenly distributed.

As Sarah reflected, what initially appeared to be welcome attention ultimately revealed itself as calculated manipulation:

In the beginning it was exciting to have the male attention, right? And I viewed it as positive because I was like, oh, like I’m cared about, right? But then if I can look back on it for what it

was, it was not about caring about me whatsoever. It was about exploiting me for their own needs and their own entertainment…and the truth be known that I have relived much of the trauma through my nightmares.

For others, the coercive abuse of power escalated into physical intimidation. Olivia feared for her life when the same superior who had earlier joked about sexually assaulting her with a rifle later tried to intimidate her while driving a police vehicle in a separate car: “I thought he was going to push me off the road … I actually thought I was going to die … I thought I was going to go off the road and hit a tree or … kill someone.” An investigative report confirmed he had been tailgating her “from a second to under a second behind me, driving…lights and sirens,” in clear breach of emergency protocol, which requires officers to maintain distance. Coupled with earlier threats of negative performance reviews and degrading sexual remarks, these incidents formed a pattern of coercion, rooted in a system where power could be weaponized without fear of accountability.

Some officers were subjected to coercive practices under the guise of training or team expectations, reinforcing their subordinate status and exploiting their vulnerability. In one case, PW1 and her female partner were deliberately set up in a fabricated scenario involving a “resisting male” suspect. Only after subduing and arresting him did they learn the man was an officer and the scenario had been staged by colleagues to “test” their physical capability, an act that exploited their professionalism and placed them in a potentially dangerous situation for others’ amusement or judgment.

Vanessa similarly described a pattern of coercive control and exclusion in her daily work. She recalled being forced into hyper-visible productivity while her male colleagues were afforded flexibility and support. “I had to be the first one at work,” she explained, “and wasn’t

allowed to leave before everybody else." Even when her shift had ended, she would sit idle at the station while others asked, "'Can I take your keys?'…I cannot leave until the rest of the team get back." Despite being told she "wasn't allowed to use the gym on shift because [she] had to be available to take the greasy calls," male colleagues faced no such restrictions. When a new male officer joined, Vanessa encouraged him to seek the same gym access she had been denied. "He was using the gym on shift. We're covering him, people were taking calls from him. He was welcomed with open arms." Meanwhile, Vanessa remained "outcast" and burdened "to take all the work." PW1 and Vanessa's experiences illustrate how workplace norms and informal practices were manipulated to isolate and control women officers, enforcing compliance through unequal treatment and the constant threat of exclusion.

Sam was sexually assaulted by a colleague during an off-duty event that occurred in another jurisdiction. Because of this, she reported the incident to the local police service, deliberately requesting that they not inform her own department. Her decision was rooted in a deep mistrust of her agency's internal handling of such complaints: "The number one thing I was adamant about when I reported it…was not to tell my agency because I knew that they would interfere." She explained that municipal departments like hers had "the ability to manipulate an investigation to shut it down," often by discrediting the complainant: "The number one thing that they try and do is paint the victim as crazy…that's what they do, and I wasn't going to allow that." Drawing from over a decade of experience hearing similar stories, Sam realized that most cases dismissed as exaggeration or delusion were, in fact, likely "completely true," but had been strategically discredited.

After her assailant was arrested, her department's response further reinforced the coercive dynamics she had tried to avoid. Sam was summoned to Human Resources and offered what she

called “everything except genuine support”, "transfers, time off, any course I wanted” , attempts she viewed as efforts to quietly remove her from visibility. She refused, insisting, “I’m going to stay right where I’m working because I didn’t do anything wrong.” When asked how she would handle encounters with others involved, she responded bluntly: “That’s not my problem…that’s yours.” Soon after, she was called into a meeting with two of the highest-ranking men in the department alone. She immediately recognized the tactic: “a fact-finding mission…you’re like, how much trouble are we in?” Refusing to cooperate under pressure, she held firm: “I’m not going to say anything … I just said, It’s bad, it’s really bad…I’ll wait until the court.” This case illustrates how institutional power can be leveraged not only to suppress complaints but also to control the narrative and coerce silence. Sam’s experience underscores how even after reporting, survivors are often subjected to manipulative offers, reputational risk, and interrogative scrutiny that shift accountability away from the perpetrator and onto the victim.

Power Abuse and Corruption

Power abuse occurs when an individual in a position of authority exploits that role to intimidate, mistreat, manipulate, or inflict harm, physically, emotionally, or psychologically, on someone with less power. It also includes coercing others into engaging in illegal or unethical actions (EBSCO Research Starters, n.d.). Moreover, power is abused when someone uses their authority in ways that do not align with the original purpose of that power relationship (Dorsey, 2023). Corruption is a subset of power abuse, referring to unethical or unlawful conduct, particularly by individuals in positions of power, often for personal or organizational gain and at the expense of the public good (Transparency International, 2025).

Sam shared harrowing details about her assault, emphasizing that it occurred “at a police function where you should be safe, but you're not.” She later learned the perpetrator had

assaulted another woman a decade earlier, and that complaint had been "swept under the rug, exactly the way you think it would happen." Following her own report and his arrest, she discovered that the earlier victim's case had been closed without accountability, "[they] investigated it and then shut it down and she quit." The officer had been allowed to go "unchecked" for ten years, continuing to wear the uniform and "go into women's apartments and do whatever." This reflects an egregious abuse of power, where institutional authority was manipulated to shield a known offender and suppress prior allegations, failing both victims and the public.

Similarly, Olivia recounted a moment that laid bare the everyday misuse of authority within her service. While processing an impaired driver, her supervisor ordered, "'Don't you write him in the report, I know him, he's a good kid.'" When Olivia pushed back, "'No, he's part of the report'", he doubled down: "'I'm going to remove him from the report, I know him, you're not writing him in the report.'" By pressuring her "to change a legal document" to protect a personal acquaintance, her supervisor engaged in a clear act of corruption, coercing her to violate legal obligations for someone else's benefit. This manipulation of power not only undermined her role as an officer, but also exemplified how institutional trust is eroded when ethical boundaries are ignored in favor of personal connections.

Amy described witnessing systemic abuse of power and entrenched corruption under her supervisor's leadership. Despite explicit directives from security operations not to engage a particular informant, her supervisor, a long-time "cowboy" from the gang unit, continued to "run treacherous informants," disregarding institutional policy. He operated from a secluded office, which Amy believed was deliberately chosen "so he could do whatever the fuck he wanted with no witnesses around." According to Amy, he openly encouraged others to "make criminal

charges vanish" for certain informants, a practice that violated clear legal and procedural norms. This represented not only a misuse of authority for potentially unlawful ends but a deliberate manipulation of the justice process for strategic or personal gain. When Amy later attempted to register an informant through proper channels, adhering to policy, she was berated by security operations, "what the fuck do you think you're doing?" Her compliance had inadvertently exposed her supervisor's ongoing misconduct, and by simply following the rules, she was framed as having "filed a complaint." This response illustrates how corrupt power structures can punish ethical conduct, coercing subordinates into silence and complicity.

Sam described how abuse of power was normalized within police culture through coercive expectations of conformity and silence. Officers were expected to "drink the kool-aid", that is, to adopt unspoken rules that required them to socialize within certain circles, ignore wrongdoing, and endure mistreatment without objection. "In order to fit into the culture," she explained, "you have to go to the parties, turn a blind eye… to not report… be willing to be the brunt of it." Failing to comply, she noted, "affects your career [and] your ambitions." This expectation to tolerate misconduct in exchange for acceptance and advancement reflects a systemic form of coercion, where silence becomes a condition of professional survival.

Amanda echoed this sentiment, observing that "when you want to be promoted, you'll turn a blind eye." Her reflection underscored the emotional toll this culture exacts: "I love that job, and I think I made a difference… you need people that have the passion for it and that will make a difference and that don't buy into the old boys club." Yet, the depth of institutional betrayal became clear in her conclusion: "I don't want my daughter to be a police officer… I don't [want] any of my children to be." This illustrates how systemic corruption not only undermines ethical conduct but deters future generations from entering the profession.

Document Triangulation

Across the reviewed documents, the accounts of police women consistently reveal that the patterns of harassment, bullying, and coercion they experienced during field training not only persisted throughout their careers but often intensified in their daily policing work. In the *Broken Dreams, Broken Lives* (Bastarache, 2020) report, women described how the toxic, hyper-masculine culture they encountered at Depot training carried over into postings, where they were frequently isolated, subjected to hazing, and denied access to essential support systems. The culture of silence and complicity reinforced their vulnerability, particularly as many were posted to remote detachments as the sole female officer. This cultural continuity allowed sexual and gender-based harassment, exclusionary practices, psychological abuse, and violence to become embedded in their professional environments.

Similar patterns are evident in the *Notice of Civil Claim* filed in 2023, where women across municipal police departments in BC reported enduring unwanted sexual attention, coercion, and retaliatory threats from male colleagues and supervisors. Police women described being subjected to sexualized pranks, degrading tasks, exposure to explicit materials, and retaliatory workplace consequences for reporting misconduct. Nicole Chan's tragic case, as documented in the *Coroner's Inquest Verdict* (2022), illustrates how these abuses escalated over time. Her complaint of sexual exploitation by senior officers, who had influence over her career, triggered profound psychological harm, institutional indifference, and ultimately, the tragedy of her death by suicide.

The documents collectively illustrate how abuse of power and systemic tolerance for misconduct allowed these violations to thrive, turning daily police work into an environment marked by fear, retaliation, and institutional betrayal. While the recruit-training themes chart

how women's initial pride and purpose are systematically undercut by formalized cultural indoctrination, rigid gender norms, authoritarian silencing, and bystander complicity, post training themes show how those same dynamics play out, and often worsen, once women are posted to the street. In training, misconduct is normalized through structured drills, hazing, and "locker room" talk under the guise of building thicker skin; on the job, however, that normalization gives way to overt exclusion, sexual coercion, explicit threats of violence, and corruption by supervisors who wield real career-ending power and the upper echelon who appear more concerned with reputational management than justice. Where training instructors masked abuse as "toughening up," field colleagues and higher-ups weaponize rumours, mobbing, and false performance reviews to enforce silence. Both environments share bystander complicity and systemic double standards, but whereas recruit training abuses appear in orchestrated exercises and hushed "teachable moments," the workplace versions are unregulated, legally actionable betrayals of trust that leave women isolated, fearful, and profoundly disempowered and deeply impacted.

4.4 Impacts

The impacts these women experienced was wide-ranging, with many developing symptoms akin to or receiving diagnoses of "complex PTSD," "PTSD," "anxiety," "panic disorder" and "panic," "depression," "major depressive disorder," "specified trauma and stress related disorder," and suicidal ideation.

Several participants noted shifts in their perceptions of both policing and the wider world. Several women began crying when speaking about their experiences. Amy shared, "it just changed my outlook on life. I am not the same person. I have a completely different worldview

than I had before.” Sarah divulged, “the truth be known that I have relived much of the trauma through my nightmares.”

This excerpt, drawn from a victim impact statement analyzed as part of the extent document data set, reveals the following:

> *I dream of being the person I was before, but that is impossible. Being so personally violated has murdered much of who I was.* [The] *assault has re-wired my brain and is worse than any physical injury I could have ever sustained. I am left with a lifetime of psychological rehabilitation and relapse in a vicious cycle of shame, blame, anger, and disgust, with no end.*

She also shared she is no longer able to travel alone because of the sexual assault. Olivia noted she “can’t even see a police car sometimes without shaking…still” and had to sell her vehicle because it “reminded me of one of my police cars ‘cause I would have panic attacks in it.”

Table 3 categorizes participants’ impacts into physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domains.

Table 3
Impacts

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioural
• exhaustion/ fatigue • weight fluctuations • skin conditions • insomnia • panic attacks • difficulty breathing • living in a heightened arousal state • physiological reactions/changes	• suicidal ideation • burnout • disengagement • lack of autonomy • brain fog • poor concentration • hyper-vigilance • nightmares • loss of trust/mistrust • lowered self-esteem • lowered self-worth • lowered confidence • altered worldview • disillusionment	• depression • anxiety • emotional exhaustion • apathy • detachment • defensiveness • sadness • hyper • loss of control • feelings of immobilization • rejection • anger	• isolating • avoidance/aversion (daily tasks, geographical locations, people) • disconnection • difficulty completing simple tasks • difficulty in daily functioning (personally and professionally) • work absences

• on edge • chronic pain • insomnia • stomach aches	• mind “unraveling” • catastrophizing • spiraling • mentally drained • decreased motivation • negative self-talk • self-blaming/internalization • loss of/questioning identity • intrusive thoughts • paranoia • disturbed thinking • desire to escape • obsessive compulsive thinking • decreased feelings of safety • worry • confusion • disorientation • desire to lash out • desire for new identity • apprehension of surroundings • memory issues	• helplessness • hopelessness • guilt • distress • PTSD • unwellness • betrayal/ organizational betrayal • grief • discomfort • unsafety/diminished sense of safety • vulnerable • fear (of retaliation/retribution, personal and familial safety) • inadequate • discouragement • resignation • shame • turmoil • embarrassment • uncertainty and unease • feeling trapped • dissatisfaction • feeling on-edge • irritability/short fuse • inability to escape • disconnection • heightened emotional reactivity • numbness • overwhelmed • frustration	• long term disability use • resignation from job • increased use of exercise • difficulty coping • inaction due to coercion • fragmented social connections • obsessive compulsive behaviours - intense organizing behaviours, meticulous routines and activities • crying • homelessness*

Note. Impacts identified by the participants.

Physical Impacts

Amy described drastic weight fluctuations: "I've lost and gained probably 100 lbs... [in] a two-year period." Emma echoed this, stating, "I had to completely change my wardrobe, replace all my police uniforms and get to know the new body that I saw when I looked in the mirror. Due to the continuation of stress on my body I have had to take a medical leave from work." She also experienced extreme stomach issues, so much so her doctors sent her for a "colonoscopy." Upon going on leave, her "body…[got] back to normal" after "three months." Sophia described being "in a frozen state" upon going on stress leave: "for the first three days…I was almost like, physically stuck in my body…I couldn't do anything. I was immobilized because of the experience." Amy spoke of pervasive exhaustion and distress: "I'm exhausted all the time... severe issues... I can't even quantify how much that affects your life." Sophia, PW1, and Olivia noted sleep issues as well.

Sophia broke down in her cruiser, overwhelmed by stress: "I couldn't physically drive away … I was almost having a panic attack of like just all the stress just got to me." Olivia felt trapped and physiologically rattled during a harassment incident: "I felt paralyzed…started sweating and panicked. I remember my hands were shaking." Vanessa recounted that after "two years straight of abuse…[the] stress…I have like a chronic migraine thing; it would trigger my migraines."

Cognitive Impacts

Several participants described profound cognitive disruptions in the aftermath of their experiences. Sophia reported wrestling with "a lot of rumination … constantly a lot of anxious, negative thoughts," which she discusses regularly in therapy. Roberta likewise struggled with focus: "I had real problems concentrating … and then with my memory as well … always that

sense of just being on alert." Amy captured a deeper disconnect, feeling "like I have been operating on autopilot for like a decade … my identity has been overtaken," while Emma described her body reacting before her mind could keep pace: "my body reacted before my mind could catch up … my mind was millions of miles away." This chronic state of hypervigilance was summed up by Amy's reflection where she likened her intrusive hyperarousal to a "light switch": "with PTSD, it's like your brain is...on or it's off... I'm desperately trying to just please go off," feeling "hypervigilant all the time."

Emotional Impacts

Many participants described a deep swirl of anxiety and dread. Sophia reflected, "The day before I knew I was going to work … all I could do was dread going to work again." This often slid into depression and loss of self-worth: PW1 acknowledged, "I still feel I suffer … sometimes a little bit of depression," and Sarah admitted, "I think hating myself … for ten years I was like, I did this to myself. I'm a fucking loser." Shame and isolation compounded these feelings, Sophia described, "It was like a living nightmare," while Vanessa recalled being "a complete shell of a human being, just barely functioning." Underpinning it all was simmering anger and irritability, as Amy noted, "I've had an extremely short fuse at times."

Behavioural Impacts

One officer described withdrawing completely, "…I just want to be fucking left alone most of the time … it's changed me into a night owl," even walking her "dog in the dark every night because I don't want other interactions with humans and dogs." Another reflected that one of the earliest signs of her depression was that "you start isolating because you don't feel like a happy person," while a third spoke of "avoid[ing] places where I might encounter him or any member." Several turned instead to hyper-organized routines: "I'm very meticulous about things.

Cleaning and putting things in order … symmetry helps me feel relaxed. It's a control thing." Beyond these coping behaviours, numerous participants reported increased sick time, including short- and long-term disability usage, and a few even ultimately resigned from their positions. Many also sought professional mental-health support: one explained, "I always talk to my therapist about a lot of rumination … constantly a lot of anxious, negative thoughts," another shared, "The minute I started having nightmares … I would speak to a psychologist whenever I needed to." Three women spoke of taking medication, although it did not help for one, "I tried an antidepressant … it did not help."

Collateral Damage

Numerous women commented on how their personal relationships were negatively impacted. Amy isolates herself and is fearful of meeting new people. Amanda reflected on her depression's ripple effects, admitting, "I was very depressed … the people that suffered the most were my kids." Sam's marriage "has suffered dramatically with intimacy and anger issues," and the very idea of being touched again "makes me cringe with shame and disgust," believing her spouse is unable to look past "what was done to me" without seeing her as "gross." She carries so much "shame, blame, disgust, and so much anger" that she "snap[s] on [her] nine-year-old, who has no idea why," acknowledging that her child is "collateral damage." She confesses that she is "forever changed as a wife, mother, sister, and aunt," and that all of her relatives have become "collateral damage…in the debris field" left by the assault.

Many women found their career paths derailed by the very institutions meant to protect them. One was bluntly told that filing a complaint would "destroy my career," while another warned that even lodging a grievance "is career suicide," since any formal request "automatically trigger[s] an HR investigation" no one survives. Roberta watched roles she'd spent months

earning vanish overnight, “like they were trying to sabotage my career”, when leaders prevented her from moving to her dream assignment. Sarah, despite positive reviews, faced endless bureaucracy and bullying: “they sabotaged that … my reputation was muddied,” leaving her feeling she “had no hope … so I finally just quit.” Vanessa lamented that in a culture shielding perpetrators, “I’m never going to get anywhere … never going to be able to promote.”

Those who stayed described an insider clique: “You’re the wrong category, suddenly all the opportunities disappear, and you’re pigeonholed … you don’t even recognize what the opportunities are,” Emily said, capturing how toxic cultures quietly snuff out ambitions. When Sam broke “the blue wall of silence,” she was met with career-ending threats, told there was “no way you can prove beyond a reasonable doubt” and warned her complaint would be “the real nail in the coffin,” leaving her “career…forever negatively impacted” and herself blamed for speaking up, with “immense consequences and repercussions.” As one veteran put it, women who “come forward…your options are to kill yourself or quit,” or else “rot for the rest of your career” at the margins of the force. In these toxic environments, many women’s dreams were shattered: “What [name] did to me has shattered my world, my dreams and hopes for a normal career. It has derailed my path and future with [the] Police Service.” After she quit, Sarah was left with no income, and within months “I actually ended up homeless … I had no income,” forcing her into survival mode rather than seeking justice or support.

Document Triangulation

The psychological impacts described by women officers in their narratives are strongly corroborated by evidence from multiple legal and investigatory reports. The *Broken Dreams, Broken Lives* report (Bastarache, 2020) confirms that many women within the RCMP also experienced severe psychological injuries, including complex PTSD, major depressive disorder,

anxiety, panic attacks, and substance dependence, often linked to sexual harassment, assault, and a toxic organizational culture that tolerated misogyny and retaliation. Bastarache found that many claimants reported identity loss, hypervigilance, and a shattered worldview, with some sitting with service revolvers in their mouths contemplating suicide, only stopped by thoughts of their children or pets.

> *The full tragedy of what the RCMP's failure to provide a safe workplace has done to these women is overwhelming. Loss of potential, loss of mental health, loss of family and connection, irremediable personality change caused by years of internalized emotion, stress and anxiety.* (p. 50)

Similarly, the *Nicole Chan Coroner's Inquest* (2022) revealed that Ms. Chan experienced persistent depressive disorder following sexual coercion by superior officers and suffered a complete collapse of her career and mental health before dying by suicide. These themes are echoed in the 2023 *Notice of Civil Claim*, where plaintiffs alleged that gender-based harassment, coercion, and retaliatory abuse caused serious psychological damage and career derailment. Many women were warned that reporting misconduct would "destroy" their careers and found themselves isolated, punished, and stripped of professional opportunities. Across all sources, consistent patterns emerged: psychological deterioration, fear, helplessness, and despair were not individual anomalies but systemic outcomes of a policing culture that enabled abuse, silenced victims, and punished resistance.

Conclusion

In sum, this thematic overview traces each woman's journey from her deeply held motivations for entering policing, shaped by a sense of purpose, career pathways and transformative life experiences, through the two core phases of recruit training, where cultural

indoctrination, masculine ideals and abuses of power systematically marginalized female recruits, and into field training, characterized by poor mentorship, discrimination, harassment, coercion and social isolation; it then examined how these patterns persisted over time across immediate work interactions, revealing a pervasive cycle of GBV that shapes women officers' lived realities. Building on these insights into how gendered power dynamics evolve from recruit training through field service, the following conceptual model examines the ways in which such abuses become systemically normalized within Canadian policing.

CHAPTER FIVE: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF SYSTEMIC GBV WITHIN CANADIAN POLICING

A Conceptual Model of Systemic GBV within Canadian Policing

Chapter five translates findings reported in chapter four into a structured model, also informed by documents, research, and personal experiences. Each element below explicitly references its originating theme (e.g., 4.2 *Cultural indoctrination and normalization of misconduct* informs Recruit Training as the Foundation; 4.3 *Sexual and gender-based harassment and bullying* informs Hostile and Toxic Work Environments; and 4.2 *Bystander complicity, social isolation, fear of retaliation and disempowerment* informs Lack of Accountability and Retaliation).

The normalization of violence, abuse of power, and the lack of accountability within law enforcement create a toxic environment where systemic misconduct can thrive. Normalized abuse can take subtle or overt forms, such as sexist jokes, inappropriate comments, or a culture of silence that discourages reporting misconduct, as was demonstrated in the women's detailed experiences above. These behaviours, while some appear seemingly minor, contribute to a larger toxic environment that enables further harm (emotional, physical and sexual coercion, exploitation, and abuse). The women's stories made possible a deep examination of the pervasive issues that allow these behaviours to be normalized and perpetuated. Shining a light on these issues is essential for reform and ensuring a shift toward a more accountable, safe, equitable system of policing. Below, I detail the various behavioural patterns (during and after training) that contribute to the systemic normalization of gender-based abuse and violence. I follow this with the exploration of significant organizational elements that serve as a guide to how policing organizations uphold the normalization of GBV and abuse, reflecting the deep-rooted problems in these systems. I end by examining external factors that greatly influence the women's outcomes.

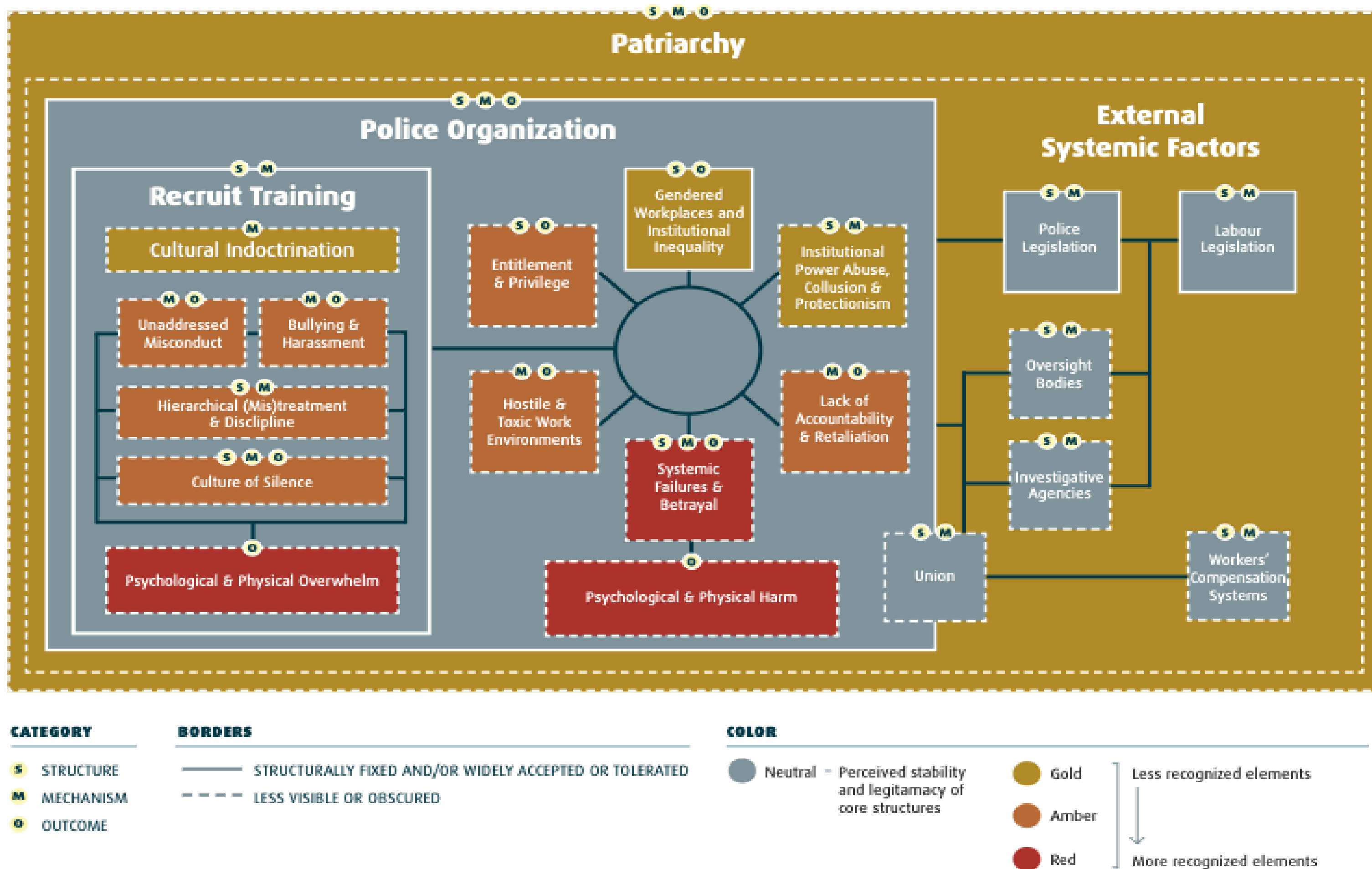
Model Overview

Chapter five presents a comprehensive, systems-level conceptual model of how GBV is produced, maintained, and reinforced within Canadian policing institutions (Figure 5). It illustrates that GBV is not solely the product of individual misconduct or isolated failures but rather explores it as a predictable outcome of an entrenched institutional design. While these patterns were consistent across participant accounts, variations in how these dynamics are experienced or enacted may exist across roles, ranks, or organizational contexts not represented in this study.

In this model, elements are categorized as structures, mechanisms, and outcomes because of their interconnected role in creating a reinforcing feedback loop: structures → mechanisms → outcomes → reinforce structures. Structures are durable, formal arrangements that serve as system-level anchors legitimizing other structures and practices, such as provincial police legislation or collective agreements. Mechanisms are the recurrent practices that enact these arrangements, typically formal policies or protocols that are widely recognized and relatively stable, such as complaint reporting policies. A mechanism may also be covert or obscured, operating in ways that are less visible but still influential in sustaining systemic patterns. Outcomes refer to the consequences, the resulting state or impact experienced at individual, group, or institutional levels. These outcomes may be visible, such as resignation or physical injuries, or invisible, such as psychological harm or erosion of trust. This cyclical relationship illustrates how outcomes can perpetuate and reinforce existing structures, sustaining systemic patterns over time.

Figure 5

Gender-based Violence in Policing Conceptual Model



Note. This conceptual model illustrates the multi-layered and intersecting systems that reinforce and sustain GBV within policing institutions

5.1 Recruit Training as the Foundation for Abuse

This section operationalizes section 4.2 *Cultural indoctrination and normalization of misconduct* by identifying cultural indoctrination, hierarchical mistreatment, the culture of silence, and bullying and harassment, and unaddressed misconduct as core elements through which recruit training establishes the model's foundation. Recruit training demonstrates how structures, mechanisms, and outcomes interact within this framework, with several elements operating across categories. As a structure, recruit training functions as a formal, durable arrangement mandated by policing legislation and institutional standards, anchoring organizational norms and practices. It also operates through mechanisms such as cultural indoctrination, hierarchical discipline and mistreatment, the culture of silence, bullying and harassment, and unaddressed misconduct. These mechanisms may be overt, such as formal instruction on protocols, or covert, such as reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and gendered expectations, discouraging reporting of misconduct through informal messaging, tolerating abuse, or failing to address wrongdoing.

Hierarchical discipline and mistreatment function structurally through a codified rank system that legitimizes authority and enables dominance, and mechanistically through practices that reinforce compliance and suppress resistance, capable of producing outcomes that sustain systemic inequality. The culture of silence is embedded as a structural value that prioritizes loyalty and non-disclosure, enacted through fear-based socialization that discourages reporting, and emerges as an outcome when silence becomes internalized. Bullying and harassment serve as mechanisms that control recruits through humiliation and as outcomes that generate long-term harm. These behaviours tend to be tolerated and accepted as part of the overall recruit training regime and reinforce and reproduce cultural indoctrination. Unaddressed misconduct similarly

operates as a mechanism by signaling tolerance and reinforcing silence and appears as an outcome when inaction becomes the organizational response to wrongdoing.

Outcomes of recruit training are both visible and invisible. Visible outcomes include conformity to organizational culture and adherence to hierarchical norms, resulting in inclusion, or non-conformity resulting in exclusion. Invisible outcomes include internalization of gendered expectations, psychological conditioning toward silence, erosion of trust in accountability systems, and psychological harm. Over time, these outcomes reinforce existing structures and perpetuate systemic patterns of gendered inequality and power imbalance. Psychological and physical overwhelm reflects the cumulative impact of these interlocking processes and contributes to expectations that persist throughout organizational life, shaping enduring patterns of exclusion, privilege, and institutional inequality.

5.2 Organizational Elements

> *I think it's a system. It's not one person. Unless you're willing to become a part of the system, you won't be successful. You'll always be an outsider. You've got to sell a portion of your soul. And the people that don't sell their soul never fit in.* Sam

Participants emphasized that policing is experienced not as the actions of isolated individuals but as an interconnected system of practices, expectations, and institutional arrangements. Organizational dynamics, training allocations, posting practices, and informal networks structured opportunities and control, reinforcing patterns described in Chapter 4. These dynamics collectively sustain institutional inequality and systemic harm. Recruit training sits at the foundation as the central structure through which core values, hierarchies, and behavioural norms are instilled and reinforced. These norms take root within gendered workplaces and

institutional inequality, a structural condition that shapes power, legitimacy, and professional value within police organizations.

Six organizational elements, namely gendered workplaces and institutional inequality, entitlement and privilege, hostile and toxic work environments, lack of accountability and retaliation, institutional power abuse and collusion, and systemic failure and betrayal, operate across structural, mechanistic, and outcome categories. Each contributes to the persistence of inequality, the normalization of harm, and the reproduction of organizational loyalty and silence.

Gendered Workplaces and Institutional Inequality

According to Acker (1992), a workplace is considered gendered not simply when gender is associated with individuals in certain roles, but when it is embedded within the structures, processes, and symbolic practices of the organization. In such environments, core organizational functions such as the division of labour, control over work, hiring and promotion, and systems of evaluation are shaped by gendered meanings and material inequalities. These dynamics reproduce and sustain power relations that privilege men and masculinity while marginalizing women and femininity. Drawing on Chapter 4 ("Experiences Over Time"), participants described masculinized norms, exclusion, and everyday undermining that reflect this broader structural pattern within police organizations. In this model, gendered workplaces and institutional inequality function as both a structure and an outcome. Structurally, they are embedded in organizational systems and processes that codify gendered divisions of legitimacy and authority. As outcomes, they manifest in the persistent marginalization, exclusion, and differential valuation described by participants.

Gendered workplaces and institutional inequality represent one of the six core elements of the police organization, and this condition is enacted and maintained through several

sub-elements, including gendered control, institutional gender bias, sexist treatment, and organizational cultural practices and complicity. Each sub-element demonstrates how gendered workplaces and institutional inequality are continually reproduced.

Gendered control functions as both a mechanism and an outcome, targeting individuals who challenge dominant expectations through retaliation, surveillance, and informal discipline, and reflecting a broader culture that suppresses dissent. Organizational cultural practices and complicity, including the code of silence, masculine contest culture, passive bystander behaviour, and bystander apathy, function as both mechanisms and outcomes. As mechanisms, they maintain discriminatory norms and institutional inaction by reinforcing expectations of silence, loyalty, and alignment with dominant masculine standards. As outcomes, they emerge from prolonged exposure to gendered structures and discriminatory practices, becoming normalized features of the organizational culture.

Sexist treatment functions as both a mechanism and an outcome within gendered workplaces and institutional inequality. As a mechanism, it comprises everyday practices such as demeaning language, exclusion from information and opportunities, and tone policing that enforce gendered norms and undermine authority. As an outcome, it appears in the documented loss of credibility, career harm, and psychological injury reported by participants, reflecting the cumulative effects of discriminatory structures and cultural expectations. Institutional gender bias functions as both a structure and an outcome. Structurally, it is embedded in hiring, evaluation, promotion, and leadership processes that codify gendered divisions of legitimacy and authority. As an outcome, it appears in the everyday interactions and decisions that privilege masculinity, undermine women's credibility, and reproduce unequal access to opportunity and advancement. Collectively, these sub-elements illustrate that gender inequality in policing is not

incidental or the product of individual prejudice, but structurally embedded and sustained through organizational culture, policy, and routine behaviours. This sets the groundwork for the discussion that follows on entitlement and privilege.

Entitlement and Privilege

Linking to Chapter 4 ("Experiences Over Time" and "Impacts"), accounts of privileged access, favoritism, and differential valuation of work correspond to the structure and reproduction of entitlement and privilege within policing organizations. Entitlement and privilege operate as foundational features, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and shaping organizational behaviour. These patterns historically rooted in the colonial and paramilitary formation of Canadian policing and the masculinized occupational identity it produced, as outlined in Chapter Two. Among the most pervasive expressions of this entitlement is the institutional privileging of masculinity. This privilege is not simply individual but systemic, embedded in the values, norms, and behaviours that define competence, authority, and professionalism within police culture. It operates through interconnected dynamics that normalize exclusion, impunity, and harm, including masculine dominance, arrogant perpetrators, casual violence and threats, and bystander apathy, complicity, and self-preservation and silence.

Entitlement and privilege function as both a structure and an outcome. As a structural condition, they are embedded in the cultural fabric of policing and reproduced over time through organizational expectations, practices, and historical arrangements. As outcomes, they appear in patterned advantages, leniency, and credibility afforded to those aligned with dominant norms. Masculine privilege operates as an invisible but foundational condition shaping perceptions of legitimacy. It is embedded in the occupational identity of policing, where traits such as

aggression and dominance are valorized and where empathy, collaboration, and emotional expression are dismissed or devalued.

This structural privileging marginalizes women and reinforces a professional identity rooted in gendered exclusion. This element is enacted through three interrelated sub-elements that function as mechanisms and outcomes. Entitled and arrogant perpetrators operate through intimidation, coercion, and impunity, illustrating how entitlement is enacted in daily practice while also representing an outcome of the broader organizational privileging of masculinity. Casual violence and threats function as mechanisms that normalize harmful behaviour through everyday language and workplace interactions, and as outcomes that reflect an environment where aggression is treated as a routine component of the job. Bystander apathy and complicity similarly function as both mechanisms and outcomes. Whether rooted in habituation or self-preservation, these responses enable harm through silence or passive reinforcement and signal institutional tolerance that sustains the status quo.

Hostile and Toxic Work Environments

Connecting to Chapter 4 (“Experiences Over Time: Hostile and Toxic Work Environments”), participants’ accounts of harassment, exclusion, and undermining correspond to recurring patterns consistent with hostile and toxic work environments. These environments operate as both mechanisms and outcomes within organizational contexts shaped by normalized sexism. Although frequently described by participants, they were often represented within organizational discourse as interpersonal issues rather than institutionally patterned dynamics, obscuring the systemic nature.

The normalization of sexism functions as both a structure and an outcome and serves as the foundational sub-element shaping hostile and toxic work environments. As a structure,

sexism is embedded in institutional values, expectations, and informal norms, influencing how women are perceived, evaluated, and positioned in policing contexts. These norms affect how women understand their professional standing, and participants described experiences shaped by gaslighting and other practices that undermine credibility. As an outcome, normalization develops when repeated acts of harassment, exclusion, and minimization blend into everyday routines and are accepted as a normal part of the work environment. It is reinforced whenever misconduct is disregarded, complaints are reframed as interpersonal issues, or reporting is discouraged, producing resignation, silence, and internalized expectations about what can and cannot be challenged, and creating conditions in which harmful behaviours persist and become difficult to challenge. This foundational condition enables and protects other mechanisms of harm, allowing them to operate with limited scrutiny. Hostile and toxic work environments therefore function both as outcomes of these discriminatory conditions and as mechanisms that produce further harm, including psychological injury, exclusion, and ongoing professional and personal consequences.

Three additional sub-elements operate as mechanisms and outcomes within hostile and toxic work environments: sexism, harassment, and lack of support; bullying and intimidation; and undermining and ambush. Sexism, harassment, and lack of support are enacted through routine workplace interactions, heightened performance scrutiny, and restricted access to mentorship, and appear as outcomes in diminished confidence, eroded credibility, and persistent marginalization. Bullying and intimidation include public humiliation, targeted scrutiny, and repeated questioning of competence. These practices regulate behaviour, instill fear, and discourage resistance, resulting in enduring psychological and professional consequences. Undermining and ambush tactics, such as abrupt procedural changes, targeted disruptions during

assessments, or deliberate setups for failure, destabilize, discredit, and isolate women. These practices reinforce exclusion and restrict career advancement opportunities, further contributing to hostile and toxic work environments.

Lack of Accountability and Retaliation

Echoing Chapter 4 (“Lack of Accountability and Retaliation”), participants’ accounts described a pattern of interconnected organizational dynamics involving the code of silence, retaliation, unaddressed misconduct and abuse, and investigation mishandling. This section examines how lack of accountability and retaliation function as interconnected organizational dynamics within policing environments. Together, these dynamics form the element of “Lack of Accountability and Retaliation,” a condition frequently reported by participants yet often reframed or minimized within institutional processes. Within this system, components operate as mechanisms, outcomes, and, in some cases, embedded structures that shape organizational responses to reported concerns and contribute to institutional betrayal.

A central feature of this element is the code of silence, which functions as both a structure and a mechanism. Although informal, it is deeply embedded in expectations surrounding reporting, loyalty, and discretion, and operates through everyday practices that govern how information is shared, how concerns or complaints are addressed, and how organizational scrutiny is managed. Participants described the code of silence as enabling accountability failures while preserving organizational deniability, particularly when misconduct involved individuals in positions of authority.

Psychological harm appears as a documented outcome for those who experience or witness organizational responses characterized by inaction, procedural failure, or neglect. Participants described emotional and mental health effects associated with prolonged exposure to

these conditions. Institutional responses to such impacts varied, often shaped by internal interpretations of responsibility or risk management priorities, leaving individuals unsupported and isolated while navigating the consequences of mismanaged complaints.

Four additional components define the broader pattern of accountability failure: retaliation against victims, unaddressed misconduct and abuse, investigation mishandling, and lack of accountability. Retaliation against appears in practices such as professional isolation, restricted opportunities, career sabotage, or formal and informal disciplinary actions following reporting. these responses raise the perceived risks of disclosure and contribute to fear, withdrawal, and diminished willingness to report. Unaddressed misconduct and abuse signal organizational tolerance when reported behaviour does not lead to formal consequences, shaping expectations about acceptable conduct and the likelihood of meaningful response.

Investigation mishandling is reflected in delayed, reframed, or procedurally redirected complaints. Although mismanagement may appear administrative, participants noted that these processes often reflected institutional priorities such as preserving internal loyalty, managing reputational risk, or avoiding external scrutiny. These actions were frequently accompanied by coercive pressures, whether implicit or explicit, or by career-related incentives designed to discourage reporting or cooperation. Mishandled investigations silence complainants and shield the organization from accountability, reinforcing patterns of institutional betrayal.

Lack of accountability itself shapes organizational responses by signalling tolerance for misconduct and reinforcing expectations of silence and deference. It also emerges from repeated failures to investigate, act, or support those who report harm. In this way, accountability failures influence reporting behaviour, investigative processes, and the handling of psychological and physical impacts associated with workplace harm. Collectively, these dynamics contribute to

environments in which responses to reported concerns are constrained, inconsistent, and shaped by broader patterns of institutional power abuse, collusion, and protectionism.

Institutional Power Abuse, Collusion and Protectionism

Connecting to Chapter 4 (“Experiences Over Time”), participants described gatekeeping, selective enforcement, and the protection of perpetrators through administrative discretion, procedural reframing, and informal norms. These dynamics shape how misconduct is addressed, reported, or concealed, and reflect enduring organizational priorities around internal loyalty and reputational control. Taken together, institutional power abuse, collusion, and protectionism operate across categories: collusion and protectionism function as structural conditions that are enacted through practices of gatekeeping and selective enforcement, while power misuse and abuse, and corruption and cronyism, generate observable outcomes such as impunity, uneven discipline, and career harm.

Organizational collusion and concealment influence information flow, documentation, and engagement with oversight by limiting disclosure, reframing allegations, and restricting circulation. Participants reported practices such as instructing staff to deem credible allegations unsubstantiated, diverting concerns from civilian oversight, and managing communications to preserve the organization’s image. Power misuse and abuse are enacted through intimidation, marginalization, punitive scheduling, denial of training opportunities, manipulation of performance reviews, and misuse of internal databases for surveillance or sexual objectification. These practices consolidate authority, deter reporting, and punish dissent.

Corruption and cronyism are embedded in informal networks that shape promotion, discipline, assignment, and access to resources. Participants associated these patterns with preferential advancement, selective discipline, and differential treatment based on loyalty or

affiliation. Such networks insulate certain individuals from scrutiny and determine whose conduct is examined or ignored. Together, collusion, concealment, power misuse, and cronyism channel complaints through discretionary pathways, weaken accountability, and align institutional responses with the protection of the organization over the redress of harm.

Systemic Failures and Betrayal

Systemic failures within policing institutions are represented in this model through the concept of institutional betrayal. Connecting to Chapter 4 (“Experiences Over Time” and “Impacts”), participants described the cumulative effects associated with internal responses to reported misconduct and abuse, including psychological injury, stalled career progression, adverse family impacts such as divorce or trauma to children, and in some cases exit from the organization. Participants frequently described not knowing where to report following dismissal by supervisors, receiving little or no union support, and encountering barriers within workers’ compensation processes. These experiences illustrate how institutional procedures shape outcomes following disclosure and can intensify harm.

In this context, institutional betrayal refers to compounding effects that emerge when colleagues and organizational systems fail to provide consistent protection, support, or resolution after harm is reported. Participants described experiences of disbelief, minimization, and procedural retaliation following disclosure such as being charged formally under their respective police legislation. Investigative processes were often delayed, reframed, or redirected with institutional responses shaped by internal procedures, risk management considerations, and hierarchical decision-making structures. These patterns signaled that reporting carried personal and professional risk, while meaningful redress was uncertain.

Internal policies and procedures play a central in how institutional responses unfold and institutional betrayal may be enacted. Participants described formal harassment or misconduct complaints that were diverted into informal resolution processes such as lateral transfers or informal and formal mediation approaches. Depending on the severity of the case, reporting protocols required disclosure through supervisory hierarchies that included individuals with direct authority over the victim. These procedural arrangements shaped power dynamics during reporting, influenced perceptions of safety, fairness, and recourse, and reinforced existing imbalances within the organization.

Some participants noted that inadequate support systems compounded this harm. Although wellness programs, peer support networks, and human resources offices may be formally in place, participants reported inconsistent access to trauma-informed or gender-responsive supports. Organizational expectations surrounded return-to-work processes, along with continued exposure to contested environments, may heighten distress and harm. Participants described being discouraged from accessing mental health supports, coerced to return to unsafe environments, or required to repeatedly justify their experiences to disbelieving managers. These systems were often experienced as aligned with broader organizational norms and constraints rather than as sources of support.

Unions were also described as influential actors in how reports of harm were processed. While a few participants reported positive outcomes related to union advocacy, others described unions as shielding perpetrators, undermining investigations, or discrediting complainants. Some recounted being denied representation, witnessing union representatives interfere with witness statements, or encountering procedural tactics that delayed or derailed accountability. Through

their control of collective agreements and grievance mechanisms, unions shaped whether harm was addressed, minimized, or ignored.

External systems, including workers' compensation boards, police oversight agencies, and legislative frameworks, further shaped participants' experiences following disclosure. These systems often relied on assumptions that did not account for the realities of gender-based violence within paramilitary organizations. Workers' compensation boards were described as denying psychological injury claims related to harassment or assault, or returning officers to work prematurely without considering cumulative trauma. Oversight bodies frequently treated officer-on-officer violence as a labour or performance matter, declining to intervene or redirecting complaints back to internal police mechanisms. Legislative frameworks were characterized as lacking trauma-informed protections or failing to address coercive dynamics within hierarchical command structures, leaving women officers unprotected by the very systems intended to provide recourse.

Across these internal and external systems, participants experienced responses to reported concerns that were constrained, inconsistent, or oriented toward organizational interests rather than individual safety. These cumulative dynamics produced institutional betrayal by reinforcing patterns of neglect, denial, and procedural harm. This section highlights how institutional structures, policies, and inter-organizational arrangements influence the trajectories that follow disclosure within policing organizations. The following section turns to the broader external systems, legal mechanisms, and institutional frameworks that either failed to intervene or actively contributed to the erosion of accountability and justice.

5.3 Broader External Systems

This section integrates findings from Chapter 4, including participants' accounts of

retaliation, uncertainty regarding reporting pathways, and limited or blocked access to supports such as unions and workers' compensation, with the documentary sources outlined in Methods. It examines the external systems that shape responses to officer-on-officer GBV, including labour legislation, police legislation, workers compensation, provincial oversight bodies, and criminal investigative agencies. Each of these systems functions as a structure that is enacted through administrative and procedural mechanisms and produces outcomes that influence reporting trajectories, access to support and accountability, and the handling of officer-on-officer GBV.

External systemic systems include provincial labour and police legislation and oversight mandates (e.g., British Columbia labour legislation, 2025; CanLII; Manitoba Laws; Ontario, 2012; Police Acts in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan, 2023; Alberta Serious Incident Response Team [ASIRT], n.d.; Independent Investigations Office of BC [IIO], n.d.; Independent Investigations Unit of Manitoba [IIU], n.d.; Law Enforcement Review Board [LERB], n.d.; Manitoba, n.d.; Office of the Independent Police Review [OIPR], n.d.; Office of the Complaint Commissioner [OPCC], n.d.; Public Complaints Commission [PCC], n.d.; Saskatchewan Serious Incident Response Team [SSIRT], n.d.; Special Investigations Unit [SIU], 2025). This following synthesis keeps the model grounded in participants' experiences while specifying the external legislative and oversight levers that shape institutional responses and influence officers' day-to-day realities with reporting, accountability, and support systems. This section outlines the legislative, administrative, and oversight frameworks that shape institutional responses to officer-on- officer GBV, with attention to how authority, discretion, and mandate boundaries influence complaint routing, investigation, and accountability.

Provincial Legislation

Provincial labour and police legislation form the structural foundation for how misconduct is defined and processed. Labour frameworks address general workplace disputes and injuries and are not well suited to intra-organizational GBV within hierarchical, paramilitary institutions (British Columbia, 2025; Canlii, n.d.a; Canlii, n.d.b; Manitoba Laws, n.d.; Ontario, 2012). Police-specific legislation (see Appendix D) grants chiefs substantial discretion in classifying complaints and determining whether matters proceed through internal administrative processes or are referred externally (Alberta, 2023; British Columbia, 2023; Manitoba, 2023; Ontario, 2023; Saskatchewan, 2023). Participants described instances in which allegations involving harassment, coercion, or abuse were categorized as human resources or interpersonal issues, which limited opportunities for external oversight. These statutory arrangements shape how complaints are categorized and processed, influencing whether misconduct is formally recognized, routed to appropriate bodies, or minimized within internal systems.

Workers' Compensation Systems

Workers' compensation systems also shaped participants' experiences following disclosure of harm. Legislation establishes the overarching legal criteria for what counts as a work-related injury, including whether psychological injuries are recognized, the requirement that harm arise out of and in the course of employment, and baseline timelines and benefit categories. In practice, board policies and administrative decision-making determine how these criteria are interpreted and applied. Adjudicator interpretations, policy manuals, medical assessments, case-management decisions, documentation demands, and return-to-work directives translate the statutory framework into operational thresholds that claimants actually experience. Participants noted that frameworks oriented to discrete incidents and physical injury often fail to

account for the cumulative psychological harm associated with GBV in hierarchical, paramilitary settings, shaping which injuries are deemed legitimate and whose claims are viewed as credible.

These mechanisms produce concrete outcomes. Participants described claims tied to harassment, coercion, or prolonged exposure to toxic environments being denied, minimized, or repeatedly challenged, and some reported pressure to return to work without adequate accommodation or recognition of cumulative trauma. The procedural trajectory of a claim thus determines whether injury is acknowledged or compensated and how recovery is supported. Resulting outcomes included distress from repeated re-justification of harm, feelings of dismissal and invalidation, interrupted recovery or premature return to unsafe settings, reduced trust in formal recourse, and the compounding of organizational harm, contributing to the broader pattern of institutional betrayal reported by participants.

Non-Criminal Oversight Bodies

Provincial complaint and conduct bodies such as the OPCC, OIPRD, LERB, LERA, and PCC serve as structural components of the broader accountability landscape. Their mandates are primarily oriented toward public complaints, and although they can examine officer-on-officer misconduct when statutory thresholds are met, their frameworks were not designed to address internal power dynamics, conflicts of interest, retaliation risks, or the relational complexities associated with intra-organizational abuse. Mechanistically, oversight bodies rely on screening decisions, mandate-based categorizations, and investigative protocols that determine whether a complaint proceeds externally or is redirected to internal processes. Participants described cases where allegations of harassment, coercion, or abuse were classified as human resources or interpersonal matters and returned to police leadership for handling. Staffing decisions within oversight bodies also shaped outcomes. When investigators were former police officers who had

internalized gendered norms or benefited from institutional protection, underlying biases influenced credibility assessments and the seriousness afforded to officer-on-officer misconduct allegations. In this way, staffing choices operate as a mechanism that reproduces existing power relations.

These structural and procedural features produce outcomes such as limited access to external review, inconsistent accountability, and a sense that officer-on-officer misconduct fell outside meaningful civilian oversight. The tendency to defer internal matters to chiefs or internal units, combined with investigator selection that may align with organizational norms, created perceptions of procedural dead ends and reinforced concerns that oversight systems are not equipped to address non-criminal harm occurring within police organizations.

Criminal Investigation Bodies

Independent serious-incident agencies (ASIRT, IIO, IIU, SIU, SSIRT) form part of the framework for external criminal investigations involving police. Their mandates and jurisdictional thresholds determine when officer-on-officer criminal misconduct is subject to external review. Participants described internal gatekeeping that influenced whether cases were referred; complaints often originated within the service, referral thresholds were applied inconsistently, and required pauses on internal discipline during criminal investigations were unevenly observed. External investigators' reliance on police services for evidence, access, and witness interviews further shaped investigative timelines and scope, limiting independence. These dynamics produced delays, narrow investigative focus, and inconsistent engagement, creating uncertainty about whether officer-on-officer criminal misconduct would receive meaningful scrutiny. Discretionary referrals and dependence on internal cooperation constrained the availability of external criminal oversight.

Implications

Across legislative, administrative, and investigative systems, discretionary classification, mandate boundaries, and procedural sequencing influence how officer-on-officer GBV complaints are processed. These processes affect visibility, access to external review, and the conditions under which accountability mechanisms are engaged, ultimately influencing institutional responses to officer-on-officer GBV.

When officer-on-officer GBV is routed through internal police disciplinary processes, a series of interlocking dynamics govern how complaints are handled. Police unions are legally required to represent both the harmed officer and the accused, creating structural tensions that shape advocacy, disclosure decisions, and the progression of complaints. Under provincial Police Acts, the chief becomes the formal complainant in cases involving officers, repositioning the harmed officer as a witness with limited procedural standing and fewer protections. This arrangement concentrates investigative authority in leadership structures that may hold institutional or relational conflicts of interest. Participants described explicit and implicit pressures to align with organizational narratives and procedural statements of facts, minimize harm, or withdraw complaints.

Access to independent legal support is also shaped by this structure. Institutional legal counsel represents the organization rather than the individual, and independent legal advice is often financially inaccessible. Participants reported variability in the availability and adequacy of representation, with some receiving only limited assistance and others forced to abandon legal avenues due to cost. These constraints further limit the ability to challenge internal investigatory decisions or pursue external remedies. The absence of an independent complainant also restricts

access to civilian oversight, which often relies on internally generated findings, particularly in cases involving allegations against senior personnel or abuse of authority.

External accountability mechanisms are closely tied to internal classifications and findings. Civilian oversight bodies, courts, and workers' compensation systems typically determine jurisdiction or eligibility based on how incidents are categorized and investigated within police organizations. When officer-on-officer GBV is managed internally, opportunities for independent review become limited or contingent on outcomes generated by police leadership. Across these systems, participants described constrained reporting pathways, inconsistent intervention, and limited recourse. The combined effect of internal routing, legislative discretion, and reliance on internal findings reinforces a pattern in which officer-on-officer GBV is minimized or deflected, contributing to broader concerns about access to justice and the erosion of institutional accountability.

Conclusion

Across this chapter, the model show a connected system in which recruit training lays the groundwork for norms that tolerate mistreatment and silence, organizational practices and uneven accountability entrench those norms, and external systems frequently mirror and reinforce internal decisions. External systems, including legislation, workers' compensation, oversight bodies, and criminal investigative agencies, often rely on internal classifications and discretionary decisions, and their involvement can be steered by who fills investigative roles, particularly when former officers bring embedded norms and biases into civilian oversight. Together, these internal and external dynamics create constrained reporting pathways, inconsistent responses, and limited access to justice, underscoring the need for coordinated

reform across training, organizational practice, and the legislative, administrative, and oversight levers that govern responses to officer-on-officer GBV.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Discussion

The study explored the pervasive and enduring nature of gender-based discrimination, harassment, coercive control, and violence within police institutions. It specifically focused on how structural, cultural, and psychological harms intersect to shape the careers and mental health of women officers. Drawing on an extensive body of literature, this discussion situates women's lived experiences within broader theoretical, organizational, and systemic frameworks. Key themes include hegemonic masculinity, structural discrimination, mental health impacts, sexual harassment, exclusion, informal power, and institutional betrayal. The discussion culminates with a critique of the institutional conditions that sustain these harms, while integrating qualitative findings generated from the present study.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Cultural Indoctrination

Policing remains defined by hegemonic masculinity, valorizing aggression, emotional suppression, physical dominance, and institutional loyalty (Angehrn et al., 2021; Bikos, 2016; Brown et al., 2020). Police women must navigate an occupational culture that systematically penalizes deviation from this ideal. Silvestri (2017) and Bikos (2016) described the masculinization of professionalism, wherein women are compelled to suppress femininity, adopt hypermasculine traits, and internalize institutional values that promote conformity over autonomy. This coerced conformity resulted in emotional dissonance, identity fragmentation, and burnout.

Even as policing organizations implemented diversity training and inclusion rhetoric, workplace norms remained embedded in "masculinity contest cultures" (Buhrig, 2024), which perpetuated exclusionary dynamics and reinforced male dominance. The present study confirms that these cultural scripts are not isolated anomalies but enduring institutional conditions that

serve to legitimize violence, excuse misconduct, and delegitimize complaints (Bastarache, 2020; Brown et al., 2025; Rabichuk, 2021).

Structural Discrimination and Professional Devaluation

Structural barriers further entrench gender inequality, particularly in career advancement, role assignment, and legitimacy. The present study confirms what other authors have identified (Aborisade & Ariyo, 2023; Silvestri & Tong, 2022; Somvadee & Morash, 2008): women are systematically steered into marginalized roles (e.g., community outreach or victim services) while being excluded from elite or tactical units. Such practices reinforced stereotypes that associate masculinity with competence and leadership and femininity with emotionality and auxiliary support.

These patterns are compounded by procedural injustice and stigmatizing narratives that framed women officers as liabilities or "diversity hires" (Bikos, 2016; Rabichuk et al., 2024). Labels such as "emotional" or "sensitive" function as gendered forms of professional devaluation (Hartley et al., 2014; Steinpórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2017). The cumulative impact of this structural discrimination was diminished access to professional development, delegitimization of authority, and elevated attrition rates among women.

Organizational Stress and Psychological Harm

While all police officers face occupational stressors such as trauma, shift work, and public scrutiny, women in this study reported compounded harm stemming from gender-specific stressors, including sexualized violence, social isolation, procedural betrayal, and hyper-surveillance of their competence and appearance. These findings align with prior research identifying elevated levels of anxiety, depression, role conflict, and sleep disruption among women officers relative to male officers (Angehrn et al., 2022; Bonner & Brimhall, 2021;

Brewin et al., 2022; Carleton et al., 2018). However, this study extends the literature by providing detailed, participant-driven accounts of how such stressors unfold within daily police work.

Participants described intense psychological distress resulting from harassment, gaslighting, and workplace mobbing. These stressors were not one-time events but cumulative harms, frequently ignored or exacerbated by colleagues and supervisors. One officer recounted how her entire unit conspired to emotionally break her (e.g., hiding her patrol keys, excluding her from team communications), while another faced severe retaliation for filing a formal complaint. These experiences resonate with existing concepts of institutional betrayal, but also deepen our understanding of its mechanisms as lived, relational, and psychologically corrosive. In this context, institutional betrayal as defined by Bikos (2021) and Rabichuk (2021) emerges not merely as a failure to protect but as a proactive system of harm.

Participants' narratives illustrate how women who reported misconduct were met with disbelief, retaliation, or further targeting. These accounts corroborate findings by Sands et al. (2022), who observed that formal support mechanisms are often culturally incompetent or weaponized against those who speak out. This study builds on those insights by documenting how these betrayals escalate psychological distress and reinforce a climate of learned helplessness and self-blame. As Maté (2018, p. 34) underscores, emotional pain activates the same brain regions as physical harm, underscoring the physiological reality of institutional betrayal. His observation that emotional rejection is not “abstract or poetic but scientifically quite accurate” helps frame these officers’ experiences as both psychologically and biologically injurious.

Sexual Harassment, Violence, and Hostile Work Environments

The literature overwhelmingly affirms that sexual harassment is widespread and normalized within police workplaces (Brown et al., 2017; Bastarache, 2020). This study substantiates those claims and contributes new evidence of the extreme and escalating forms that harassment can take. In line with prior reports from the RCMP and UK policing inquiries (Bastarache, 2020; Casey, 2023), participants described environments steeped in denial, minimization, and non-reporting. Covert practices, such as locker-room talk, rumour spreading, and peer silence, served to enforce misogynistic norms (Brown et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2023). When participants resisted or disclosed harm, they were often dismissed as oversensitive or accused of disrupting team cohesion, findings that echo Dukes (2025) and Morash and Haarr (2012).

However, this study offers a more granular portrait of harm. Women recounted being threatened with rape, subjected to unwanted touching, coerced into sexual scenarios during training, and targeted with professional sabotage. Supervisors were not bystanders but often direct participants in these harms. As Turner (2024) has argued, victim-blaming remains central to how misconduct is rationalized, often transforming institutional abuse into a problem of individual sensitivity or resilience. This study corroborates Turner’s critique and further demonstrates how complaints were reframed as labour issues to protect perpetrators. While much of the literature theorizes cultural normalization, the data here illustrate how this normalization is violently embodied, career-ending, and deeply traumatic.

Informal Exclusion and the Old Boys’ Network

Even in the absence of overt discrimination, informal exclusion was described as a powerful mechanism of control. Consistent with prior findings (Gasparini & DeWitt, 2024;

Lavender & Todak, 2022), women in this study were systematically denied access to mentorship, informal networks, and group activities critical for advancement. These social exclusions were not incidental but operated as coordinated practices of marginalization. One participant, for instance, described eating alone each day, deliberately ignored by colleagues, until she eventually broke down in her cruiser.

Bikos (2021), Rabichuk (2021), and Spasić et al. (2015) further contended that the “old boys’ network” serves as a parallel power structure that consolidates privilege and protects insiders. This study affirms and extends that observation: informal exclusion not only limits career mobility but also functions as a punitive strategy to discredit or isolate those perceived as disruptors. These exclusions thus serve dual functions, as barriers to success and as instruments of control, and are largely immune from formal oversight.

Institutional Betrayal and Retaliation

Retaliation emerged as a defining feature of participants’ experiences. In keeping with Bastarache (2020) and Bikos (2021), this study documents how institutions not only fail to protect complainants but often actively harm them. Participants described being labeled “problems,” denied access to legal counsel, or strategically reassigned to obscure roles. Some learned that their complaint files were erased or altered to preserve a male officer’s promotional trajectory. Such actions suggest not just passive neglect but coordinated organizational strategies to suppress dissent and shield perpetrators.

The literature acknowledges these dynamics, particularly around the limitations of internal complaint systems (Rabichuk, 2021). This study builds on that work (Williams et al., 2023) by showing how retaliation becomes routinized through opaque procedures, union complicity, and managerial discretion. Uniquely, the current study critiqued demonstrated unions

often side with the accused, as participants described unions blocking investigations or pressuring them to withdraw complaints. These institutional betrayals reinforced participants' trauma and deterred future disclosures, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of silence and harm.

Addressing the Gaps

This thesis addresses three targeted gaps. First, it presents an empirically grounded conceptual model that links structural, cultural, and interpersonal levels of harm and makes those links auditable by specifying structures, mechanisms, outcomes, and their hybrids. Second, it centers officer-on-officer GBV as an institutional process tracing incidents of harassment, bullying, coercion, and retaliation across careers rather than treating incidents as isolated anomalies. It also documents instances where women officers participate in silencing and gatekeeping. Third, it triangulates interview narratives with documentary sources to corroborate patterns of psychological injury and institutional betrayal.

Additionally, this model offers practical implications for policing reforms and practices, particularly in designing training programs, policy changes, and interventions aimed at reducing institutional violence and supporting women within law enforcement. By addressing both the organizational and external factors that sustain GBV, the model serves as a tool for law enforcement agencies to reevaluate their structures, enhance their approach to gender equity, and create safer, more collaborative work environments. For example, when internal grievance policies contradict police legislation or provincial reporting requirements, the model advocates for an external reporting process that protects officers' rights. It suggests that legislation should guarantee that officers who report directly to external investigative bodies retain full union advice and representation. Furthermore, it calls for separate firewalled union teams for situations

where both parties are members, declaring that any conflicting policy should have no force or effect.

In addition, the model supports the establishment of a clear sanctions regime with independent enforcement. This includes codifying a predictable, escalating matrix for retaliation, interference, and process manipulation (up to suspension or criminal referral), and publishing anonymized outcomes to ensure visibility and deterrence. Ultimately, this model is designed not only to deepen theoretical understanding but also to inform evidence-based practices that can lead to systemic transformations in policing institutions.

Theoretical Discussion

The study findings underscore that power in policing is not merely hierarchical or procedural; it is cultural, structural, symbolic, and deeply relational. Power operates as a multifaceted and often invisible force embedded in every layer of law enforcement institutions, from training academies to patrol divisions to management structures. The study drew on classical and contemporary theories of power, including those of Weber, French and Raven, Lukes, Foucault, and Bourdieu, to clarify how domination, coercion, and moral relativism are interwoven into institutional logics and everyday practices.

Institutional Legitimacy and Moral Duty to Obey: Weberian Domination in Policing

Weber's (1978) typology of legitimate authority, including charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational, helps frame how police institutions reproduce their authority through the normalization of subordination. The study found that recruit training was a crucial site where legitimacy was not only taught but imposed. The women's narratives revealed that authority was enacted through domination disguised as discipline. Instructors employed militaristic hierarchies, public shaming, and harsh physical punishments, compelling recruits to accept humiliation as a

condition of belonging. This process mirrors Weber's notion of legitimate domination, where subordinates comply not merely due to coercion, but because they internalize an obligation to obey, even when obedience entails psychological degradation.

Furthermore, the study further shows indicated that this sense of obligation was reinforced by moral narratives about duty, toughness, and sacrifice, which shaped the women's perceptions of suffering as a necessary rite of passage. The institutional legitimacy of these practices went largely unquestioned by peers and superiors alike; despite the evident harms they caused. This illustrates how Weber's framework remains relevant in understanding how both formal and informal authority gain acceptance. It also highlights the need to critically examine the moral relativism that enables such authority to be abused without challenge.

Power as Interpersonal Influence: French and Raven's Bases of Power

French and Raven's (1958) six bases of social power (coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, expert, and informational) provide crucial insights into the intricate power dynamics at play in both training and operational settings. Coercive power manifested through threats, intimidation, and public humiliation, creating an atmosphere of fear. Meanwhile, reward power operated more subtly; officers who conformed to masculine norms received informal praise or professional leeway, while those who challenged misconduct faced ostracism. Legitimate power was employed to enforce silence and punish dissent under the guise of maintaining respect for rank.

Importantly, referent and informational power operated covertly through exclusion from peer networks, gatekeeping of knowledge, and the manipulation of perceptions. Participants described being deliberately kept out of group chats, denied access to essential training, or excluded from critical briefings, mechanisms that reinforced their status as outsiders. These

overlapping power bases worked together to normalize inequality and hinder women's full participation in the organizational structure. While French and Raven identified these bases independently, the data here suggests that in policing, they are used in combination, mutually reinforcing and strategically leveraged to sustain male dominance. It is imperative to address these dynamics to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and psychologically safe environment in policing.

Lukes' Three Dimension of Power: Social Control Through Internalization

Steven Lukes' (2005) three-dimensional view of power, comprising decision-making, agenda-setting, and ideological control, is particularly salient in explaining how the women came to accept, normalize, or minimize their own victimization. In its most insidious form, power is not merely about forcing decisions or limiting debate; it involves shaping preferences and suppressing resistance before it even begins. This was evident in the ways the women rationalized their suffering as "just part of the job," dismissed harassment as "locker room talk," or blamed themselves for not fitting in.

Through institutional indoctrination, recruits internalized performance expectations that valorized stoicism, silence, and physical endurance. Gendered stereotypes of emotional weakness and over-sensitivity were so entrenched that women questioned their own legitimacy when they experienced harm. Lukes' third dimension of power, where individuals adopt the values of their oppressors, helps explain why many participants initially failed to identify their treatment as abusive, focusing instead on self-correction or overcompensation. This perspective also sheds light on the mechanisms through which organizational complicity persists, as resistance is not only discouraged but often deemed a sign of weakness.

Surveillance, Discipline, and Panoptic Control: Foucault in the Academy and Beyond

Foucault's (1977, 1982) insights into disciplinary power and surveillance resonate strongly in the experiences described by the women in both academy life and operational policing. Surveillance extended far beyond observation of technical performance; it encompassed scrutiny of physical appearance, demeanour, relationships, and even emotional expression. The field training environment functioned as a disciplinary mechanism, where non-conformity could lead to social punishment, gossip, or formal reprimands.

Participants shared how their bodies became sites of scrutiny, from uniform adjustments to obscure curves to unsolicited comments on their physicality. These forms of symbolic surveillance, often framed as harmless jokes, served to control behaviour and reinforce gender hierarchies. Foucault's concept of the panopticon is relevant here: women altered their actions not only because they were being watched, but because they anticipated being watched, judged, and potentially punished. Furthermore, Foucault's understanding of discourse illuminates how institutional language, terms like "clamps," "split tails," "bitch," "overly sensitive," shapes knowledge about gender and reinforces the perception of inequality as an objective reality.

Symbolic Violence and Habitus: Bourdieu's Reproduction of Dominance

Bourdieu's (2001) theories of habitus, capital, and symbolic violence are crucial to understanding how women navigate and reproduce institutional hierarchies. Habitus, the internalization of social structures, was evident in participants' self-regulation, which included avoiding complaints, adopting hypermasculine postures, or remaining silent in the face of abuse. These behaviours were not based on personal preference but were deeply embedded survival strategies shaped by repeated exposure to systemic exclusion.

Symbolic violence, the misrecognition of domination as legitimate, was pervasive. The women often blamed themselves for being targets, framed workplace abuse as personality conflict, or dismissed sexual coercion as flirtation gone too far. Even those with significant professional capital found that their symbolic worth was diminished by gendered expectations and aesthetic judgments. Bourdieu's framework also explains why women who conformed to these expectations were not exempt from harm; success under these conditions required complicity in structures that harmed others, leading to moral injury and institutional alienation.

Anti-Oppressive Analysis: Addressing Theoretical Blind Spots

While classical theories of power offer robust diagnostic tools for analyzing institutional dynamics, they were largely conceived within patriarchal, Eurocentric paradigms and often overlook the lived realities of women. The current study sought to expand upon these frameworks by incorporating anti-oppressive theory (Mullaly & West, 2018). Institutional responses to harm, such as blaming, gaslighting, or retaliation, reflect what Mullaly and West call "embedded oppression," where injustice is not just tolerated but structurally supported. These frameworks offer a critical perspective needed to examine the various forms of oppression women face and to move beyond explanations of harm that focus solely on individual cases.

Coercive Control as Institutional Logic

Finally, Crossman and Hardesty's (2017) notion of coercive control is validated by the study's findings. Coercive control refers to a sustained pattern of domination that restricts autonomy, instills fear, and manipulates behaviour. In the context of policing, this control manifested through physical threats, psychological manipulation, institutional silencing, reputational sabotage, and financial repercussions for women who reported misconduct and crimes. Recruits were taught not to complain, veterans were punished for reporting, and all

women were conditioned to expect backlash for noncompliance. This constellation of behaviours produced what participants described as a "condition of unfreedom," characterized by a psychological entrapment, learned helplessness, and suppression of identity.

Conclusion

In summary, the theoretical discussion shows that power in policing is not merely the result of a few individuals or isolated incidents; rather, it is an institutional logic that is cultural, structural, and relational. Weber helped explain how obedience is moralized and humiliation normalized. French and Raven identified the everyday mechanisms of coercion, rewards, legitimacy, expertise, and networks that police who belongs. Lukes addressed the internalization of harm as "just part of the job," while Foucault clarified how surveillance and discipline influence behaviours in advance. Bourdieu revealed how habitus and symbolic violence make domination seem legitimate and self-imposed.

An anti-oppressive perspective revealed how these dynamics intersect with gender, and the concept of coercive control described the patterned, systematic, and cumulative constraints that create a "condition of unfreedom." Together, these insights illuminate the persistence of gender-based harms and institutional retaliation, providing a conceptual foundation for the subsequent model that links structures, mechanisms, and outcomes. This model can be used to design, target, and evaluate reforms effectively.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The study used a strictly qualitative methodology, prioritizing depth of insight over breadth of representation. As such, its findings are not intended to be generalized to all women officers or policing contexts. Instead, the research offers a theoretically grounded exploration of how GBV may operate within Canadian municipal and provincial policing organizations. The

conceptual model generated through grounded analysis reflects the lived experiences of the specific participants who took part in the study and is therefore shaped by the social locations represented within the sample. Researcher saturation presented a notable limitation in this study, as prolonged engagement with the data may have constrained the researchers' ability to identify novel insights, an issue described by O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015), who note that saturation can sometimes narrow analytic sensitivity. Additionally, the absence of a formal research advisory committee limited opportunities for external guidance and oversight throughout the design, analysis, and interpretation phases. This lack of structured advisory input may have reduced the study's capacity to incorporate broader perspectives or challenge underlying assumptions.

The sample was limited in its diversity with respect to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and rank, which has important implications for both the study's findings and the resulting conceptual model. Specifically, the model may underrepresent how racism, heterosexism, colonialism, and rank-based power can intensify, mediate, or alter structures, mechanisms, and outcomes identified in the analysis. The predominance of participants in constable or senior constable roles further limits insight into how these dynamics may be experienced, resisted, or reproduced at higher levels of organizational authority.

Men's perspectives were not included as primary data by design, and this study did not explore how GBV within Canadian policing institutions may shapes men's experiences, responses, or roles within these systems. This includes how men officers might act as bystanders, reinforce institutional norms, or, in some cases, become secondary victims of the same structures and mechanisms described. While the focus was theoretically and ethically intentional, it limits the ability to fully assess how contemporary gendered power relations are maintained, challenged, and reproduced across Canadian municipal and provincial policing organizations. It

also constrains analysis of how masculinized norms influence behaviour, silence, and institutional loyalty.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that the model should be understood as a foundational framework rather than a comprehensive or universal account of GBV in policing. Future research should refine, extend, or challenge this model through studies that centre the experiences of racialized, Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+, higher ranked women and men officers, as well as comparative research across different jurisdictions and policing structures. Such work is necessary to examine how intersecting identities and positional power shape both exposure to institutional harm and violence, access to accountability, and potential divergences from the patterns identified here.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, I used data triangulation. After initially coding of all interviews, I compared the data with documentary sources relevant to Canadian policing, such as inquiries, inquests, civil pleadings, oversight reports. These materials were coded using the same codebook and compared to interview patterns to check for convergence, identify counter-examples, and refine category boundaries. This process corroborated key processes, qualified claims where evidence was weaker, and contextualized the model within the context of institutional rule, thereby enhancing credibility without changing the unit of analysis.

Although the conceptual model is based on a small, non-representative sample, its credibility is bolstered by its alignment with broader literature on gender-based discrimination and harassment, institutional betrayal, and organizational culture in policing. As such, the model contributes meaningfully to theoretical development in these areas, even while remaining context-specific. Practically, the model can serve as an audit and design tool for agencies. They can map their current policies and everyday practices to the model's structure–mechanism–

outcome schema to identify failure points. Each mechanism can be paired with targeted controls, such as protected reporting, time-bound investigation standards, and anti-retaliation safeguards. Additionally, policing organizations can monitor change using key performance indicators, including investigation timeliness and quality, as well as stress-leave and attrition rates.

The schema can also inform training and oversight by translating abstract concepts into actionable checklists and decision rules. For instance, institutional inequality, institutional gender bias, and blind promotional selection processes can be converted into practical guidelines for supervisors, investigators, unions, and regulators. Therefore, although the model is specific to certain contexts, it is readily applicable for organizational diagnosis and intervention.

Conclusion

The study suggests that GBV in Canadian municipal and provincial policing may not only arise from individual misconduct, interpersonal differences, or personal conflicts, but might also be influences by broader structural and cultural phenomenon that appear to be embedded in long-standing institutional practices. By combining classical power theories with an anti-oppressive framework, we gain a deeper understanding of how harm mat be legitimized, perpetuated, and resisted within policing institutions. The ongoing presence of these harms, even alongside diversity and inclusion policies, raises concerns about the current reforms and suggests the need for further systemic changes focused on accountability, transparency, and justice.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of these findings, along with the broader body of literature, are both far-reaching and urgent, impacting policy, practice, and future research. Below is a comprehensive breakdown of these implications, organized across key areas: organizational reform, accountability mechanisms, unions, workplace safety, gender-based harm and violence, future research, and systemic harm and operational integrity.

Organizational Reform Must Address Culture, Not Just Policy

The normalization of GBV and coercive control within policing environments demonstrates that formal policy reforms, such as harassment policies, inclusion training, and diversity statements, are insufficient when left unaccompanied by deep cultural transformation. The study's findings illustrate that such reforms often operate performatively: they exist in writing but fail in practice due to ongoing issues like hegemonic masculinities, informal codes of silence, and retaliatory peer dynamics. Participants reported environments where women were shamed, isolated, or punished for asserting their boundaries or reporting misconduct, even within units that publicly endorsed inclusion and equity.

The failure of these performative efforts is not merely a hypothetical concern; the Calgary Police Service (CPS) serves as a cautionary example. According to Toy (2024), the CPS hired Angela Whitney as its Human Resources Director in 2019 to lead a reform aimed at addressing harassment and improving internal accountability. Despite strong initial promises for change, Whitney encountered significant institutional resistance, obstruction from leadership, and overt retaliation. Her contract was terminated prematurely, and her departure was followed by public disclosures about the toxic organizational culture and a lack of commitment to real change. The case of Whitney illustrates how reform efforts, when poorly implemented or

politically undermined, can backfire, retraumatizing those engaged in the transformational process and reinforcing internal resistance to equity initiatives.

In the current study's context, participants echoed similar dynamics: organizational resistance, co-optation of equity language, and superficial commitments that masked continued harm. Officers were subjected to "resilience training" that functioned as ritualized abuse, and even those in leadership were powerless or unwilling to intervene. The outcome was not simply a failure of policy, but the perpetuation of harm under the guise of reform.

The gap between written policy and lived experience reflects the dominance of cultural indoctrination over procedural rules. Without directly addressing this cultural infrastructure, its beliefs, practices, and value systems, formal reforms will continue to be undermined by daily realities that disempower, silence, and harm women in policing.

Recommendation

To address these issues, police organizations must implement comprehensive cultural reform strategies that go beyond policy compliance. This includes:

- Conduct independent cultural audits and organizational ethnographies to uncover harmful informal norms and structures, with findings made public and acted upon with urgency;
- Integrate survivor-informed practices and external oversight into reform design, ensuring meaningful accountability for those who undermine change efforts;
- Create internal mechanisms for anonymous feedback and whistle blowing that are independent of the chain of command and union interference;
- Treat cultural change not as a time limited initiative but as a core competency embedded into performance reviews, promotions, disciplinary systems, and institutional mission.

The lessons from Calgary underscore that cultural reform cannot be symbolic, delegated, or marginalized. Without leadership courage, structural safeguards, and survivor-informed design, reform efforts risk becoming another layer of betrayal.

Independent, Trauma-Informed Accountability Requires Legislative and Oversight Reform

One of the most pressing implications of the study is the urgent need to reform the structures that govern internal accountability and external oversight in policing, specifically Police Act legislation and the mandates of civilian oversight bodies. The findings indicate that current systems for reporting and seeking redress fail to protect victims of officer-on-officer harm and, in many cases, actively contribute to further trauma, exclusion, and retaliation.

Currently, Police Acts in many jurisdictions delegate disciplinary authority with Chiefs of Police. This requires them, rather than the victim officer, to act as the formal complainant misconduct cases. This framework effectively disempowers victims, especially in cases where the Chief may be implicated in the harm, complicit in the institutional betrayal, or invested in protecting the department's reputation. Additionally, oversight agencies are often restricted to investigating public complaints, serious injury, or death. Consequently, issues such as systemic GBV, psychological coercion, and sexual misconduct committed by one officer against another fall outside their investigation scope.

This legislative and procedural gap allows for internal complaint mechanisms, which often lack transparency, impartiality, or credibility, to serve as the sole avenue for redress. Both existing literature and this study indicate that these mechanisms are frequently weaponized against complainants through tactics such as fabricated performance concerns, isolation, discrediting, and threats to their employment. Without accessible and independent alternatives, women are left to make the impossible choice of either remaining silence or risking retaliation.

Recommendation

To address these failures, police legislation must be reformed to ensure the following inclusions:

- explicitly include officer-on-officer misconduct and crimes as matters for external investigation;
- empower officers to file complaints directly to independent oversight bodies, without requiring internal approval;
- ensure oversight agencies are mandated to investigate supervisory complicity and failures of procedural justice.

It is essential that all accountability mechanisms, whether internal or external, are grounded in trauma-informed principles. This involves avoiding re-traumatization, recognizing and acknowledging the psychological impacts of systemic harm and GBV, and ensuring that processes are survivor-centred, procedurally fair, and culturally responsive. A trauma-informed oversight model should offer victims safe avenues to report incidents that are not restricted by time, provide timely updates, make appropriate accommodations, and grant access to independent support and legal counsel.

Without these necessary reforms, oversight systems will remain symbolic rather than effective means of accountability. The absence of structural independence and trauma-informed practices not only perpetuate and inflict cumulative harm, but also undermine the legitimacy of the institutions responsible for upholding justice and integrity within policing.

Unions and Professional Associations Must Confront Conflicts of Interest

Police unions and professional associations face a structural conflict of interest when they represent both victims and alleged perpetrators in cases of officer-on-officer GBV. Their default

allegiance to accused members, particularly those in senior or leadership positions, undermines trust, reinforces feelings of institutional betrayal, and delegitimizes internal justice processes. This not only silences victims but creates a chilling effect on future disclosures, effectively shielding systemic harm from scrutiny. The absence of safeguards against this dual role erodes the ethical foundation of unions and obstructs efforts to establish fair and trauma-informed accountability mechanisms.

Moreover, when unions resist or obstruct reform efforts, especially those focused on gender equity, they can serve as powerful barriers to cultural transformation. By using grievance processes and collective agreements to maintain the status quo, they hinder necessary change. To retain their legitimacy as protectors of member welfare, unions must acknowledge and address the gendered power dynamics that are embedded in their own practices.

Recommendation

To restore credibility and ensure ethical parity in representation, police unions and professional associations must undergo governance reform and adopt trauma-informed, survivor-sensitive practices. This includes:

- Separate Representation Streams: Create independent channels of legal and emotional support for female victims of officer-on-officer misconduct and crimes that are organizationally distinct from the representation of accused members.
- Victim Advocacy Divisions: Establish a victim advocacy entity funded by but separate from the union, staffed by trained personnel in trauma-informed practice, who are shielded from influence by disciplinary or bargaining units.

- Ethics and Equity Oversight: Introduce external audits of union practices related to harassment and misconduct cases to ensure decisions are procedurally fair and free of systemic bias.
- Collective Leadership Training: Renegotiate collective agreements to include explicit protections for complainants, including the right to access independent counsel, protection from retaliation, and procedural transparency.

Unless unions confront their own complicity in enabling silence and re-traumatization, they will continue to function as agents of institutional betrayal. Structural reform is not only necessary for justice, but also essential for rebuilding trust among women at risk of harm within policing organizations.

Workplace Safety Must Include Psychological and Relational Dimensions

The current occupational safety paradigm in policing fails to account for psychological trauma and relational violence that occur within the institution. This narrow definition of safety focuses primarily on physical threats from the public, ignoring the cumulative harm caused by internal issues of harassment, exclusion, gaslighting, and institutional betrayal. Consequently, the most significant threats to officers' long-term well-being, especially for women, remain invisible and unaddressed within existing health and safety frameworks.

The failure to recognize GBV as a source of psychological harm has significant implications for organizations. When the psychological harm caused by GBV is not officially acknowledged, it is neither measured nor addressed, leaving officers to suffer and cope in silence. This can erode morale and contribute to attrition. Additionally, the absence of formal recognition and protections delegitimizes officers' claims of harm, reinforces stigma, discourages reporting, and damages workplace trust. If police organizations continue to view emotional and

relational harm as personal issues instead of systemic safety concerns, they risk perpetuating unsafe work environments under the false pretense of operational integrity.

Recommendation

Police services must expand their definitions of workplace safety to include emotional, psychological, and relational well-being as core dimensions of occupational health. To achieve this, the following reforms are essential:

- Trauma-informed Risk Assessments: Adopt trauma-informed safety protocols that recognize internal, gender-based, and institutional violence as legitimate safety concerns on par with physical threats.
- Confidential, Independent Mental Health Supports: Implement confidential, culturally competent mental health services that are independent of command structures and free from professional stigma or reprisal.
- Wellness Metrics and Performance Indicators: Incorporate psychological safety indicators into organizational risk assessments, wellness audits, and unit performance reviews.

Unless workplace safety frameworks are redefined to account for psychological and relational conditions, police organizations will remain unsafe environments for those most vulnerable to internal violence. Recognizing emotional harm as real harm is not ancillary to public safety, it is foundational to organizational legitimacy, retention, and ethical leadership.

GBV is Structural

The persistent framing of GBV in policing as merely a problem of individual misconduct viewed as isolated incidents involving a few “bad apples” masks the systemic conditions that enable, conceal, and perpetuate harm. This narrative deflects attention from the organizational structures, institutional cultures, and policy frameworks that normalize abuse, silence victims,

and protect perpetrators. By treating gendered harm as a series of individual failures, institutions fail to recognize patterns, address root causes, or hold systems accountable.

This framing also leads to underreporting, victim-blaming, and a lack of effective action. When institutions do not acknowledge their collective responsibility in creating and maintaining unsafe environments, they absolve themselves from the need to intervene systemically. Without a structural lens, efforts to address harm remain reactive, superficial, and vulnerable to being undermined by internal loyalty cultures and informal networks of protection.

Recommendation

Policing institutions and oversight bodies must adopt a structural approach to identifying, responding to, and preventing GBV. This involves shifting accountability from the individual level to systemic design and organizational culture. Key recommendations include:

- Systemic Accountability Frameworks: Develop organizational protocols that identify patterns of misconduct across units, ranks, or time, using data to assess institutional responsibility, not just individual culpability.
- Root Cause Analysis of Misconduct: Implement investigative approaches that examine institutional factors (e.g., leadership inaction, cultural tolerance, flawed reporting processes) as part of every harassment or abuse case review.
- Transparent Institutional Reporting: Require annual public reports on gender-based complaints, institutional responses, policy changes, and outcomes, focusing on systemic patterns and organizational learning.
- Performance Metrics for Structural Change: Integrate equity, inclusion, and psychological safety into organizational performance evaluations and leadership reviews, shifting success criteria from operational metrics alone to ethical climate indicators.

- Culture-Based Audits: Regularly conduct internal and external reviews of organizational culture to identify the informal norms, practices, and hierarchies that enable gendered harm.

Recognizing GBV as structural reframes it not as a matter of individual behaviour, but as a consequence of institutional design, power dynamics, and cultural reproduction. Addressing it requires transforming the systems that silently authorize harm, not merely punishing those who are caught enacting it.

Future Research Must Center on Survivorship and Long-term Impact

Current research on gender-based harm in policing mainly focuses on short-term, incident-specific studies that discrimination, harassment, and misconduct. While these contributions are vital, they often overlook the cumulative and long-term effects of institutional betrayal, psychological harm, and coerced silence on survivors' mental health, career progression, and overall well-being. This gap limits our ability to assess the systemic impacts of institutional cultures, and hinders the development of sustainable, evidence-based reforms.

Without longitudinal research, institutions cannot fully understand how trauma unfolds over time, how survivors navigate internal systems, or how organizational responses, both effective and ineffective, affect professional and personal outcomes. Additionally, the lack of this data leaves policymakers and oversight bodies without the empirical tools needed to advocate for structural reform, track harm reduction, or evaluate the effectiveness of intervention strategies.

Recommendation

To address these gaps and ensure survivor-informed policy development, policing institutions and research funders must invest in longitudinal, trauma-informed studies that follow

survivors over time and center their experiences. This includes:

- Longitudinal Mental Health and Career Studies: Track officers who experience institutional harm across several years to assess health impacts, career outcomes, and attrition patterns.
- Evaluative Research on Institutional Responses: Examine how different complaint mechanisms, union interactions, and management actions affect survivor recovery, trust, and retention.
- Ethically Grounded Methodologies: Use trauma-informed, anti-oppressive approaches that prioritize consent, safety, and psychological support for participants.
- Survivor-Led Research Design: Involve those with lived experience in shaping research questions, methods, and dissemination strategies to ensure relevance and integrity.
- Translation of Research into Practice: Build formal pathways for research findings to inform organizational policy, wellness programs, leadership development, and legislative reform.

Long-term, survivor-centered research is a necessary foundation for building institutions that understand harm, respond ethically, and evolve responsibly.

Systemic Harm Undermines Operational Integrity

GBV is not only an issue of individual well-being or legal responsibility; it poses a direct threat to the operational integrity of policing organizations. When women officers are silenced, discredited, or driven out due to internal misconduct, organizations suffer from talent loss, diminished morale, and fractured team dynamics. These harms erode trust both internally and externally, weaken leadership credibility, and impair the institution's capacity to serve the public ethically and effectively.

Moreover, when systemic harm is left unaddressed, it signals to all members, particularly women, that safety, fairness, and integrity are conditional and equally available. This undermines recruitment, retention, and public confidence in law enforcement as a legitimate institution.

Recommendation

To preserve institutional credibility and fulfill public service mandates, police organizations must treat the prevention of internal harm as a core operational priority. This requires:

- Embedding Equity and Safety in Strategic Planning: Integrate gender equity, psychological safety, and ethical leadership into all levels of organizational goal setting and risk management.
- Redefining Performance Indicators: Expand success metrics to include internal trust, psychological well-being, and ethical climate, not just crime reduction and enforcement statistics.
- Leadership Accountability: Make integrity, emotional intelligence, and equity-oriented decision-making core criteria for promotion and performance reviews of supervisory and executive staff.
- Public Reporting on Institutional Health: Regularly disclose anonymized data on complaints, resignations related to harassment, wellness outcomes, and workplace culture audits to promote transparency.
- External Review of Organizational Culture: Periodically invite independent assessments of internal culture, leadership conduct, and equity practices to ensure alignment with stated values.

Addressing systemic harm is not a distraction from operational goals; rather, it is essential to achieving them. An organization that does not protect its own members from preventable internal violence cannot credibly promise safety, justice, or service to the communities it serves.

Conclusion

The findings of the study clearly indicate that GBV in policing is not simply a result of individual behaviour, but rather a manifestation of deeper systemic dysfunction. Across every area examined (organizational culture, internal accountability, union representation, legal frameworks, and wellness infrastructure) a consistent pattern emerged: current structures are inadequately prepared to recognize, respond to, or prevent the harm experienced by women officers.

The recommendations provided throughout this section present a clear and actionable path forward. They call for a shift away from reactive, policy-based solutions toward proactive, structural reforms grounded in trauma-informed practice. This includes redefining workplace safety to encompass psychological and relational aspects, amending police legislation to address officer-on-officer violence, restructuring union advocacy models to resolve conflicts of interest, and embedding equity benchmarks into leadership and performance evaluation.

At the core of these reforms is the need for institutions acknowledge their responsibilities not only as law enforcers but also as workplaces that must prioritize the well-being of their members. Genuine change will not come from symbolic gestures or procedural compliance. It requires a willingness and commitment to disrupt cultures of silence, share power, and engage in ongoing reflection and transformation that is led, in part, by those who have survived and resisted institutional harm. By implementing the recommendations outlined here, police services can begin to rebuild trust from within, create safer and more equitable environments for all

members, and strengthen the legitimacy of policing as a public institution. The stakes extend beyond organizational concerns; they are ethical, psychological, and systemic. Reform is necessary.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: Before we begin, I'd like to ask you some demographic questions. The information you provide will help me to describe the overall characteristics of the sample of participants. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, please let me know that you prefer not to answer and I will move to the next question.

1. What is your age? ____________(fill in the number)
2. Which of these commonly used terms would you use to describe your sexual orientation? Select all that apply.
   - Aromantic
   - Asexual
   - Bisexual
   - Demisexual
   - Gay
   - Heterosexual
   - Lesbian
   - Pansexual
   - Queer
   - Two-Spirit
   - My sexual orientation is not listed above o Please tell us how you identify: _______________
   - Prefer not to answer
3. Do you identify as a racialized person?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Prefer not to answer

     My race/ethnicity is: __________
4. Are you a current or former member? ______________

   If participant identifies as a current member, move to 3. If former, move to 4.
5. Are you on active duty or leave? ____________
6. How many years has it been since you left your role as a police officer? _________(fill in number)
7. With which police agency are/were you employed as a police officer? ______________
8. How many years have you been employed as a police officer? ____ 0 to 5 ____6 to 10

____11 to 15 ____16 to 20 ____ 21 to 24 ____ 25+

9. Have you been employed as a police officer with any other police agency?

   ____Yes____No

10. What is/was your current/ former rank? ____Constable/Senior Constable

    ____Sergeant/Detective/Staff Sergeant ____Inspector or higher rank

11. Have you had any negative experiences with colleagues? ____Yes ____No

12. Have you had any negative experiences with supervisors or management?

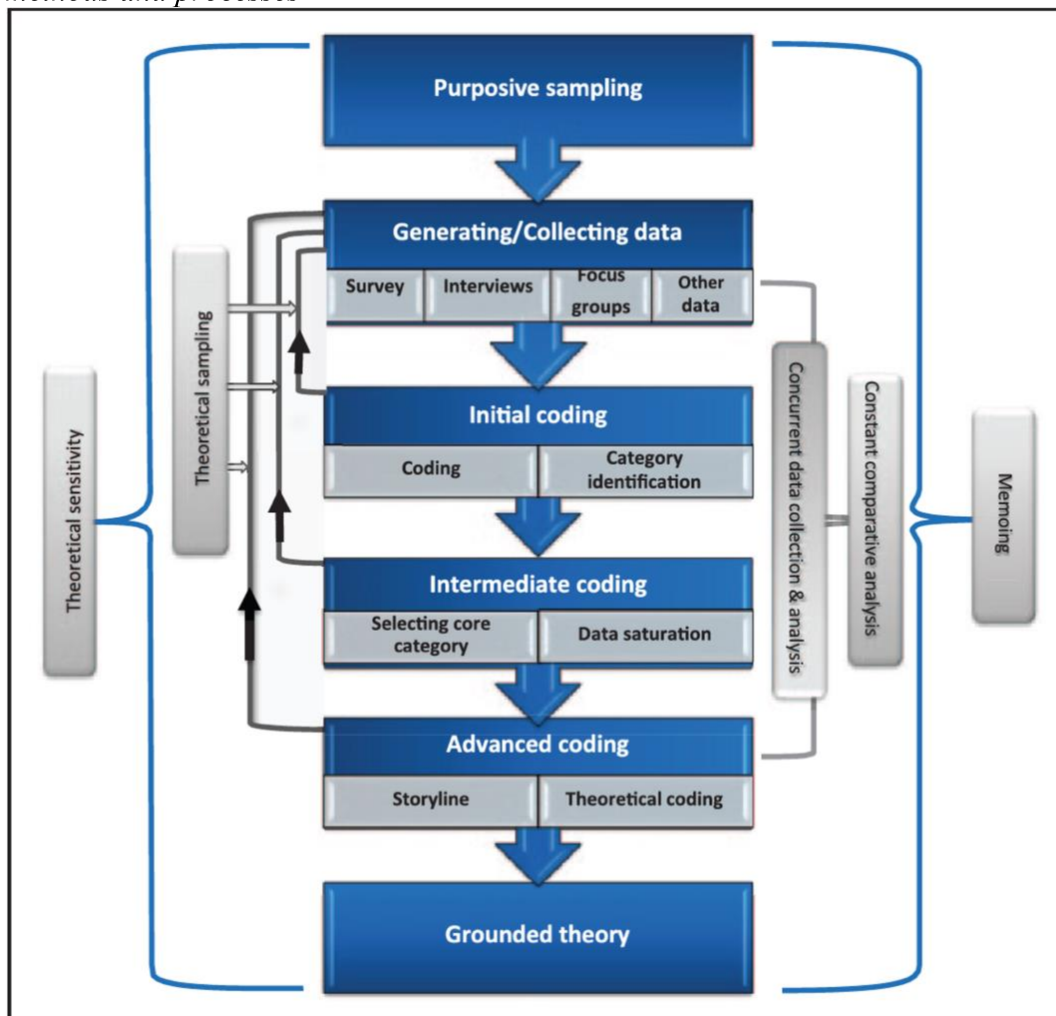
    ____Yes ____No

13. Have you experienced any workplace situation with a colleague or supervisor that has impacted your health? ____Yes ____No

Appendix B: Grounded Theory Research Design Framework

Figure 1

Research design framework: summary of the interplay between the essential grounded theory methods and processes



Note. Chun Tie, Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded theory research: A design framework for novice researchers. *SAGE Open Medicine*, *7*, 2050312118822927–2050312118822927. APA.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

This guide serves as an introduction to the interview; however, it will not be used to structure the interview in this grounded theory study. Participants will be free to bring up topics that are of importance to them that might not be covered in this interview guide.

1. Can you tell me about your decision to become a police officer? What drew you to the profession?
2. What was your experience like during training?
3. What was your experience like when you first came out onto the street?
4. How did/have your experiences change(d) over time?

To be asked if the participant is no longer employed with the police organization:

Can you tell me about your decision to retire/resign?

Appendix D: Connection Provincial Legislation and Oversight Bodies

Province	Criminal Investigation Body	Governing Legislation (Criminal)	Misconduct Oversight Body	Governing Legislation (Misconduct)
British Columbia	Independent Investigations Office (IIO)	Police Act – Part 7.1 (s. 38.01–38.13)	Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner (OPCC)	Police Act – Part 9 (s. 76–184)
Alberta	Alberta Serious Incident Response Team (ASIRT)	Police Act – s. 46.1–52.1	Law Enforcement Review Board (LERB)	Police Act – Part 5 (s. 42.1–48)
Saskatchewan	Saskatchewan Serious Incident Response Team (SSIRT)	The Police Act, 1990 – s. 91 – 91.5	Public Complaints Commission (PCC)	The Police Act, 1990 – Part IV (s. 32–74)
Manitoba	Independent Investigation Unit (IIU)	The Police Services Act – Part 6 – Part 7	Law Enforcement Review Agency (LERA)	Law Enforcement Review Act
Ontario	Special Investigations Unit (SIU)	Community Safety and Policing Act, 2019 – s. 173 – 216	Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD)	Community Safety and Policing Act, 2019 – Part VIII (s. 130–216)

Note. This table provides an overview of the criminal investigation and misconduct oversight bodies across various provinces in Canada, along with their governing legislation.

Appendix E: Non-Criminal Misconduct Oversight Bodies the Role of the Police Chief

Province	Oversight Body	Investigation Process	Police Act Reporting	Police Chief's Role
British Columbia	Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner (OPCC)	The OPCC receives complaints and conducts independent investigations into police misconduct. It can call public hearings and make recommendations.	The Police Chief is responsible for reporting complaints of officer misconduct; the Chief is often the formal complainant in internal investigations, which can create a potential conflict of interest.	May refer if there is a conflict of interest (Chief or senior officers are implicated or biased) or transparency concerns (sensitive cases that may affect public trust).
Alberta	Law Enforcement Review Board (LERB)	The LERB hears appeals of disciplinary decisions made by police services and investigates serious misconduct. It conducts impartial reviews and can make binding decisions.	The Police Chief Is responsible for reporting complaints of misconduct, particularly those requiring disciplinary action or involving significant allegations.	May refer when an officer challenges a disciplinary action or decision; when the internal investigation is insufficient or when the misconduct is severe or requires external scrutiny; if the officer faces retaliation, intimidation, or threats that jeopardize their safety or career.
Saskatchewan	Public Complaints Commission (PCC)	Municipal police; supervises investigations and may make recommendations.	The Police Chief or designated senior officers are responsible for reporting complaints of misconduct. The Chief must escalate unresolved or serious misconduct cases for independent review.	May refer if the internal investigation is biased or insufficient; to ensure accountability and transparency in high-profile cases.
Manitoba	Law Enforcement Review Agency (LERA)	LERA investigates non-criminal complaints and refers criminal matters to the IIU. It ensures fair process and	The Police Chief must refer non-criminal complaints if internal investigations are compromised or	May refer if there is a conflict of interest (Chief or senior officers are implicated or biased) or if the internal

		transparency in investigating police conduct.	conflict of interest arises, the Chief is responsible for reporting to the appropriate external body.	investigation is compromised.
Ontario	Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD)	The OIPRD investigates complaints involving police misconduct and can initiate its own reviews. It has broad authority to oversee municipal, regional, and provincial police services.	The Police Chief Is responsible for reporting all misconduct complaints, including serious misconduct and systemic issues that require independent review. The Chief must ensure that complaints are handled according to the procedures outlined in the Act.	May refer high-profile or public concern cases or if the misconduct reflects broader problem within the police service.

Note. This table outlines the roles of various oversight bodies and the Chief of Police across different provinces in Canada concerning police misconduct investigations. It details the process of reporting complaints, the responsibilities of the Chief of Police, and conditions under which cases may be referred to external agencies for independent review or investigation.

Appendix F: Criminal Investigative Bodies and the Role of the Police Chief

Province	Criminal Investigation Body	Investigation Process for Criminal Offenses	Police Act Reporting	Police Chief's Role
British Columbia	Independent Investigations Office (IIO)	Victims can report directly to the IIO for serious criminal offenses or the police jurisdiction within which the crime occurred.	Victims can report directly to IIO without involving the chief.	Once reported, the chief is not involved in the criminal investigation. They manage internal misconduct and policy violations separately.
Alberta	Alberta Serious Incident Response Team (ASIRT)	Criminal offenses must be investigated by ASIRT.	Victims can report directly to ASIRT; chief is not required to intervene.	Once reported, the chief is not involved in the criminal investigation. They manage internal misconduct and policy violations separately.
Saskatchewan	Saskatchewan Serious Incident Response Team (SIIRT)	Criminal offenses are referred directly to SIIRT for independent investigation.	Victims can report directly to SIIRT without the chief's involvement.	Once reported, the chief is not involved in the criminal investigation. They manage internal misconduct and policy violations separately.
Manitoba	Independent Investigation Unit (IIU)	Criminal offenses must be investigated by IIU.	Victims can report directly to IIU; chief does not need to refer criminal cases.	Once reported, the chief is not involved in the criminal investigation. They manage internal misconduct and policy violations separately.
Ontario	Special Investigations Unit (SIU)	SIU investigates serious criminal offenses.	Victims can report directly to SIU without going through the chief.	Once reported, the chief is not involved in the criminal investigation. They manage internal misconduct and policy violations separately.

Note. This table outlines the role of criminal investigation bodies and the chief of police across various provinces under their respective provincial police legislation.