

Submission Title: The Mother Cop Dilemma

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It was Christmas night 2014, a mere 20 days into my new job. I vividly remember sitting in the bathroom, holding a positive pregnancy test, staring at the dog in utter disbelief. My husband was at work, and he wouldn't be home until the next morning. I should have been elated, overjoyed, and ready to share my news with the entire world. Instead, I felt immediate dread and devastation. Having a baby had always been the future plan, but at that point, it felt like career suicide. I stayed up all night asking the internet if I could be fired for being pregnant while on probation and learning I would not be entitled to any state disability benefits, so my maternity leave would be unpaid. Fearful of the ramifications, I did not disclose my pregnancy for 20 weeks. During that time, I got into a fight and a foot pursuit, all while working nights, managing morning sickness, and being unable to button my pants.

I am a woman, a wife, and a mother. I am also a cop. I have been in law enforcement for 15 years and am currently the operations bureau lieutenant for a California police agency. When I promoted to sergeant, I was the second female to ever hold that position in the more than 100-year history of my department. When I promoted to lieutenant, I was the first female LT and highest-ranking female in the history of our PD. When I became pregnant with the first of my three children in 2014, I was (and still am in 2023) the only pregnant female police officer since the police department was established in 1915. You would be surprised to learn how rare all these firsts are.

There is currently an ongoing national dialogue around the need for police reform, including a push for the “30x30 Initiative” – 30% female representation in law enforcement by the year 2030. As a female already in law enforcement, this initiative is hard for me to comprehend – the industry does not support female involvement, the culture is not conducive to shift-working mothers, and the percentage of female officers has not increased in the last four decades. What is the incentive for women to become officers? Especially if they intend on having a family.

The 30x30 Initiative looks great on paper – agencies take the pledge to create a more supportive environment for women in policing through targeted recruitment, development of family-friendly policies and procedures, implementation of job-sharing and part-time options, and accommodations for nursing mothers. However, in practice – the recruitment efforts are misguided and misdirected, the family-friendly policies, procedures, and accommodations are already state and federal mandates, and job-sharing and part-time options sideline career-driven mothers, suppress their aspirations, and delay their ability to ever promote.

It is well-documented that law enforcement is a male-dominated industry and that we need more women. An estimated 10% of police officers are women, and only about 3% are in executive leadership positions. Evidence-based research supports the inclusion of women in law enforcement. Female officers are less likely to use force/excessive force, less likely to fire their duty weapons, better able to engage with diverse cultural groups, and less likely to have citizen complaints filed against them. Female executives positively influence policy and culture within their departments. We need women in law enforcement, especially in executive positions. But women who become cops should not have to choose whether they want to be police officers or

mothers. And we will not bridge the gap from 10% to 30% in the next 7 years without embracing the fact that our culture needs to drastically change to make that happen.

Law enforcement is just harder for females. I got my period on the first day of the police academy. I was selected as class sergeant – one of two females in a class of 40 recruits. I started the morning doing close to 150 push-ups without rest – 25 for being a female, another 40 for every recruit, 15 more for every drill instructor, 25 for being a personal trainer... you get the idea. At the first break, I sprinted directly to the bathroom to handle my situation. The drill instructor waited about 90 seconds and started calling out for the class sergeant to return to the grinder. A male recruit walked into the women's bathroom to get me so the rest of the class wouldn't pay for my tardiness. Without any other options for how to move faster, I told him my problem, ignored his stunned response, and said I would be out in a minute.

On day two of the academy, I dislocated my shoulder and was transported by ambulance to the emergency room to pop it back in. I refused to take any narcotics and begged them to relocate it quickly so I could get back to the academy to finish the day. The doctor instructed me to wear a sling and refrain from upper body exercises for the next 6 weeks. Relegated to squats and lunges while the rest of the class was doing push-ups, I was so sore most nights I could not lower myself onto the toilet without falling. I started doing push-ups at home to be ready for 500 a day again as soon as I was cleared. In week 3, when everyone else was struggling in the front leaning rest (plank position) for more than 2 minutes, the drill instructor called me out in front of the class as I held a squat position and announced that I was an embarrassment to his 13-year-old daughter, a disgrace to law enforcement, and the reason why women shouldn't be police officers.

In week 16, I was called into the training office and counseled by the academy director and my training officer from my sponsored police department about the perception of women in law enforcement and discouraged from dating other police officers. I noticed that none of the 38 male recruits received one-on-one counseling regarding the perception of men in law enforcement or the issues that arise from dating co-workers. Despite a chronically dislocating shoulder with a pending surgery date after graduation, I finished eighth in my class and received the academic achievement award for the highest GPA in the academy.

As a brand-new officer, I endured a field training officer whose MO was using me to get female drivers' phone numbers during traffic stops. I refused but worried that I would not pass training because of it. I got off training and met my future husband working nightshift patrol. We started dating but hid our relationship until I got off probation because I did not want to be the cliché I'd already been warned about – the new female who immediately started dating a co-worker. I knew I had finally been accepted when I was sitting in the report writing room at 2 a.m. and the boys passed around the cell phone with the funny meme and accidentally handed it to me before remembering there was a "girl" in the room. Part of assimilating as a female cop is passing the threshold of never-ending inappropriate jokes and passive-aggressive sexual innuendos.

I recall attending a training class and a sergeant from another department casually providing the advice that I shouldn't date another police officer. Tired of this unsolicited mansplaining, I asked him who he thought I should date if not another cop. He stumbled over his words and could not provide an alternative. I explained that only someone also in the business would understand working nights, weekends, holidays, birthdays; getting called into court on days off, mandatory

overtime, being held over shift without an expected end time; a female working on a team of all men, sitting alone in a car with a male co-worker for hours on surveillance, sending and receiving text messages and phone calls at all hours from other men. Most little boys dream of being cops. When they don't realize that dream, but their girlfriend or wife is the one carrying a gun, driving fast, and taking bad guys to jail... it can be extremely emasculating for most men.

With several years on as a detective, we ran into a sergeant from a neighboring agency at a training conference. While I was in the bathroom he asked my boyfriend, "So is she a girl, or is she a cop?" That pretty much sums up police culture when it comes to females. And, the female cops may actually be more critical than their male coworkers regarding the new girls trying to break through. If there can only be one of us on the team, then it better be me. And if you want to join our group, don't be \*that\* kind of female cop and ruin all the hard work we have already done to fit in and not get kicked out. Later in my career, working at that same police academy as a drill instructor myself, I would mercilessly lay into the female recruits until they cried. It's just harder to be a female cop – when everyone is bigger, stronger, faster than you and you begin every interaction with a physical disadvantage. And if you can't handle the stress of the academy, you may not survive the fight for your life someday on the street.

And I don't know why we tear each other down rather than build each other up. It only helps all female cops to have more of us joining the agency and reaching supervisor ranks. I work in a department of 40 officers from the chief down to the newest hire. There are a total of three female officers in my department. That's 7.5%. There have been times when the briefing room chatter turned into a trash-talking session about one of the female cops not in the room. And they

would look at me and say, “Julia, we know you have more information on this.” My response would always be, “There are only two people in this department who can give me a tampon. And it’s not any of you.” The first culture shift must begin with us – women supporting other women. Just because you didn’t go light duty until the seventh month of your pregnancy and only took a two-week maternity leave doesn’t mean that is what should be expected of every other pregnant cop. Just because you had to pump in a storage closet doesn’t mean that it’s okay for the next new mom.

As a mother of three, I was pregnant as an officer, a corporal, and a sergeant. After that 2014 Christmas surprise, I called the only female cop I knew in the county who had kids and asked her what to expect. She said, “When you tell them you are pregnant, don’t apologize.” Police culture makes it feel like the mother cops should apologize – I’m so sorry for this inconvenience, I hope it doesn’t affect staffing too much, I will stay in patrol as long as I can, I will shorten my maternity leave, I don’t need any special treatment or accommodations, don’t worry about me, my kids are sick but someone else will handle it. I’m not a female, I’m not a mother, I’m a cop. Mothers are universally revered, yet in law enforcement, it benefits us to hide our motherhood.

When I finally got up the courage to share my pregnancy news, I was shocked by my department’s response. They told me to decide for myself when I wanted to leave patrol and, once I raised the white flag, immediately reassigned me to a light-duty position in the detective bureau. This is how a department should respond. The chief called me in and congratulated me, but also questioned why I would have thought I needed to hide it or worried that it would be career-ending. He said, “You are part of our family, and your baby is a blessing to this family.” I

could not believe a chief and department like this existed. This is how a chief should react to this type of news.

Not everyone in my department was as accepting of my condition and situation. I learned that at the next management meeting, several sergeants were less than complimentary of the new female officer they hired who seemingly immediately got pregnant and went light duty. They judged me as I knew I would judge another female in my situation – *typical female, just got here and already pregnant and light duty*. However, one sergeant stood up in that meeting and told them to shut up (with more colorful language). He called out each supervisor and rhetorically asked how many kids they had. Then he asked what they would have done if they had to carry those babies instead of their wives. It is not the female officer's fault that she wants to start a family and must be the one to carry her baby. And it is to our benefit to acknowledge, advocate, and accommodate her to encourage more family-oriented cops to join our teams. That sergeant did not have to stand up for me, but he did.

I have always been an athlete and never had trouble staying in shape – I played college basketball and was a personal trainer before going to the police academy. I gained at least 20 pounds during each pregnancy and struggled mentally every time I would step on the scale at the OBGYN watching the number go up. For weeks after each baby was born, it was difficult to sit up without rolling to my side because my abdominal muscles had torn when my stomach expanded over those 9 months. In the early weeks with a newborn, I was learning my baby's feeding and sleeping routine but also already stressing about what I was going to do if they had difficulty taking a bottle, especially at night, when I went back to work in a few short months. I

started to pump in addition to nursing every three hours so I would have a supply that could sustain my baby when I was gone for 14 to 17 hours a day in three to four-day stretches. I tried to exercise, on top of the 500+ calories I was burning breastfeeding, while not sleeping consistently so that I could lose all the baby weight in less than 90 days to avoid buying new patrol pants.

Once I returned to work, I had to factor in three to four pumping sessions during every patrol shift to sustain my milk supply and provide my daughter's meals for the next day. There were many shifts when a call for service lasted four to eight hours and I could not break away to pump. It's hard to describe the level of difficulty ignoring the burning intensity of rock-hard boobs under a milk-soaked undershirt pressed against an unforgiving bulletproof vest. At the end of a long shift with no breaks, I would have to decide if it was better to go home immediately and nurse, knowing I had not made enough milk for tomorrow, or stay at the station an extra hour, huddled in the corner of the locker room with the pump machine revving, to make 16 ounces all at once and probably not nurse again until the next day.

Mother cops who can't breastfeed and pump will pay upwards of \$800 a month for formula to feed their baby. That's on top of diapers, wipes, clothes, childcare, medicine, doctor visits, nursery furniture, car seats, strollers... At some point, the cost of paying for all these in exchange for not staying home is greater than any benefit of trying to make it all work. Women in policing are not in an industry where you can put your career on hold, press pause, and come back when the kids are all in elementary school. The sworn officer certification expires in two years. There is no job waiting for you when childcare is finally no longer an issue. The mother cop will have to start all over again, having left behind seniority and any accrued vacation and sick leave.



When women leave a police department after having babies, they do not lateral to another agency that has a more inclusive culture; they leave the profession altogether.

Male cops have babies too. And they are great dads who deserve paternity leave and have childcare issues – a tension absolutely exists for all parents in law enforcement. But it is just different for the mothers. As early as the second week of pregnancy, there is a two-way flow of cells and DNA between baby and mother called fetal-maternal microchimerism. Even after the baby is born, the mother carries her child's cells in her body for the rest of her life. I do not need a fancy scientific word to know the connection between mother and child is overwhelmingly powerful. As a new mom, there were days when my work schedule made it so I did not see my baby girl at all. I worked all night and got home while she was still sleeping. She left for daycare; I woke up and went to work before she came home. I would return to work emotionally hollowed out and unsure why I felt so dejected. The lack of constant physical touch of my baby and interaction with her at least once a day felt like grieving a death.

I have always been Type A; I would argue 90% of police officers find themselves in this profession in large part because of this affinity. As a younger officer, and as a female in patrol and investigations, it was never an issue personally or professionally that I was so career driven. But having a baby changed everything (of course it did). Now I question if I am a good mother for choosing to leave my baby or have someone else care for and nurture her. I was a person who could work 24 hours straight, and never leave the office, without complaint or hesitation. Then I had this baby and now my heart was pulling at me with a strength I had never known to go home, be home and stay home.

It's quite the head trip to be a certified workaholic, and then suddenly you don't care about work anymore. With my first baby, I completely lost my sense of identity and purpose. Either I was a wife and mother, or I was a really good cop. I did not know how to do both and be both when our police culture requires us to be married to the department and to prioritize our agency over our personal lives. The number of times I heard "your childcare emergency is not my problem", from supervisors who publicly stressed the family-oriented department culture, is ridiculous. I'm a good soldier, I give 100%, I have trouble saying no. I always felt the obligation to sacrifice my family so I was not perceived as less loyal or unavailable. If an officer with no kids would say yes without hesitation, even if it disrupted their days off or previous engagement, my uttering that I have a conflict due to childcare shows I lack loyalty and value the wrong priorities. The reality is that childcare is my issue. I get tired of hearing my own narrative. But it is my narrative.

Police culture is about commitment and loyalty. Attending community events, volunteering for overtime shifts, taking on extra duties that may not have a pay incentive but will lead to connections with the right people, facetime with supervisors and decision makers, additional training and experience so you can promote. Male officers straight up told me I should quit and stay at home because it would be better for my baby. They bragged about their wives who worked full-time but still had dinner waiting, and asked what I was doing as a wife. They wondered why I would choose career development or special assignments when I had a child now, didn't I want to be home with them? Their questions were so incredibly hypocritical but also totally validated my own internal dialogue.

The first time I was passed over for corporal, I scored number one on the eligibility list but was told that I should leave the detective bureau “to prove myself” again in patrol. My male detective partner was promoted instead. The second time I was passed over for corporal, at a different police department, I was told that even though I was clearly prepared for the position they did not know me well enough yet. I am naturally more reserved and less gregarious than many of my co-workers, and I was told I should try to “smile more” to get promoted. The first time I was passed over for sergeant, I was told the male officer they selected had more years on than I did, even though I had tested better than him. It was suggested that I try to lower the pitch of my voice to sound more authoritative and assertive like Margaret Thatcher did when she aspired to become a politician. When I was passed over for sergeant the second time, I was told they did me a favor because I had just found out I was pregnant and now could stay in my administrative position without disruption. When I was passed over for sergeant the third time, I was told they did me a favor because I would be promoted last on the list and no one would be mad at me for promoting before them.

When I finally promoted to sergeant, my son was five months old and refused to go to sleep at night without nursing. He would not take a bottle and my husband had pretty much run out of solutions besides letting him cry until he passed out from exhaustion. My promotion came in the middle of a shift rotation, and I was plugged in working midweek nights. My partner nightshift sergeant hoped it worked for me because he needed full weekends for school. I now had a new baby, a toddler, and a husband working midweek dayshift patrol. I asked both dayshift sergeants to switch, and both said no. Both had stay-at-home wives and older kids, but in law enforcement,

the power of seniority always wins over what's best for the team. I didn't sleep for about 18 months. This is probably an underestimation.

One night, a captain walked into the watch commander's office while I was prepping for briefing. As I sat at the computer creating the shift roster, I had the baby monitor live on my phone, just listening to my son cry. Because that's what moms do. We torment ourselves with worry and carry the burden of our children's wellbeing regardless of where we are or who is caring for them. The captain asked what I was watching, and I matter-of-factly explained. He confirmed that my house was 3 miles from the station and that my son would immediately fall asleep if allowed to nurse for less than 10 minutes. He then encouraged me to go home to nurse after briefing as my dinner break.

A female dispatcher complained that I was out of the city and off the air for 10 minutes each shift (while my husband listened to my radio). The captain told her (and later told me), **“If we don't accommodate her, we will lose her.”** Other watch commanders – fathers with children – complained, “How come she gets to leave? Why can't I flex my schedule?” Rather than shutting them down with a quick explanation of the difference between fair and equal, I was asked to meet with each watch commander to explain my “situation”. I think this is where we lose mothers.

Despite the number of times I have been passed over for promotions, I have been very successful in my career. However, to maintain that momentum, I've learned the delicate balance of being a good wife and mother while also hiding my motherhood at work, and the internal conflict of

choosing **tactical silence** over speaking up or standing up for myself as a woman and a mother in situations of overt sexism, marginalization, patronizing, mansplaining, and flat-out harassment. Please don't misunderstand me; I'm not complaining. I'm not a victim of my circumstances. Being a police officer is the best job in the world and I don't want another career. Nevertheless, I would never recommend this career path to a young woman deciding how to fulfill her civic duty. Without the support of a department that recognizes the benefits of hiring female officers, and more importantly, retaining them after they become mothers, this profession will not be attractive for women to join or to stay at the expense of their health or family.

It gets exponentially harder at work the more kids that are added to the family equation. I am the mother. My husband is an amazing dad, and our kids love him very much. But no one asks for dad when they are throwing up. No one asks for dad when they have a bad dream. No one asks for dad at the end of a long day in preschool. When I get home from work, three magnets are waiting for me at the front door. And they don't care what happened on patrol. They don't care why I didn't come home on time. They don't care that I got called in and worked all night before they woke up. They don't care that I'm a cop. They expect me to be their full-time mother, regardless of what my job is.

When I was a detective, our work day started at 7 a.m. with the expectation of leaving by 5. Then inevitably the investigation would lead to a search warrant signed at 4 p.m. and the team gearing up to hit a location in another county at 8 p.m., and finally driving home at 2 a.m. to an empty house, aside from two hungry Labrador retrievers, and a waiting bed. This type of schedule is impossible to keep when you are a mother. After my daughter was born, the detective sergeant

encouraged me to put in for a detective position multiple times. I would have loved to be a career detective – it was the most fun and most fulfilled I have ever felt in my career. However, with a baby at home and a husband working shift work, I was unavailable for unplanned callouts or unexpected holdovers from a long day at work. We already had a full-time nanny who essentially served as a third parent in our family. I have turned down countless out-of-county and state, multi-day training conferences and overtime opportunities because I could not justify the expense of the childcare, could not find childcare, or could not imagine being away from my kids for so many days.

When I promoted to lieutenant, I expected my work-life balance to improve. I was no longer at the mercy of a patrol shift rotation, or a mandatory 12-hour workday. Boy was I wrong. I now spend a 40-hour week in the office and another 20 hours working from home. I am expected to be available for calls and respond to texts and emails 24/7/365 and be prepared to drop everything to come into the station at a moment's notice. As a mother of three, this type of constant availability without the opportunity to unplug is almost utterly impossible, unless your work-life balance is completely askew. Not only am I attempting to juggle these expectations, but I am competing to demonstrate my loyalty to the command staff and the agency with peers who don't have children, whose spouses do not work, and who are not the primary parent in their family.

I tried and failed to compete in this arena as a new lieutenant. I weakened my relationship with my husband, sacrificed my time with my children, jeopardized my health to be everything to everyone all the time, and maximize the 24-hour day to fit it all in. I have finally learned there is

no competition worth jeopardizing my family unit. I have embraced my narrative and doubled down on my priorities. I will not leave the arena, I have worked too hard to get to where I am, and as a mother cop, I have recognized my own ceiling. However, as long as I am able to maintain my position as one of very few female law enforcement executives, I will stand up for the mother cops and be the voice in the room that reminds my male coworkers of the essential human factor that is central to the health and growth of our industry. **Recruitment does not matter if there is no retention.** Retention based on inclusive culture begins from the top down – acknowledge, accommodate, and advocate for your mother cops.

The number of female police officers has not changed in over 40 years. Even as recruitment specifically geared toward hiring more women has increased significantly, the percentage of female cops has remained the same – attrition is probably close to 7% and the majority of the 3% breaking through to executive rank are doing so at the expense of their family or in exchange for ever starting one. Our industry and culture are not inclusive or supportive of women joining and staying. The 30x30 Initiative is well-intentioned but misses the mark by only focusing on numbers, policies, and self-assessments.

Law enforcement is a business of people, and our female officers should be recognized as human capital that will strengthen departments and improve relationships with the communities we serve. Real change will come in the form of organic culture shifts. Not by the females responding to recruitment posters showing women SWAT operators and school resource officers. Not by their male patrol team partners. Not by the mother cops who feel obligated to apologize for, downplay, or disregard their families. The culture change will be driven by command staff

executives who value their female officers, acknowledge the tension that exists for mothers in law enforcement, understand the need for more women in leadership positions, and advocate for the mothers so they are prioritized rather than lost.

**Bio:**

Lieutenant Julia Clasby has been a police officer for 15 years. She has worked various assignments including patrol, field training officer, bike patrol, investigations, emergency services coordinator, internal affairs, hiring, training, and support services. Lt. Clasby currently serves as the Operations Bureau Lieutenant. She oversees the patrol, investigations, and traffic divisions; supervises the Canine and SWAT programs; works as the department Public Information Officer; and proudly serves as a honor guard team member. Lt. Clasby holds a bachelor's degree in Business Management Economics and a master's degree in Emergency Services Administration. She is a member of POST Command College Class #71 with an expected graduation in February 2024. Most importantly, she is a police wife and full-time mother of three.