

When the Man Who Sexually Assaults You Is a Cop

Reforming the police has to include dismantling the toxic culture that allows sexual misconduct to flourish.

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When Officer Marie Mandal* finished her evening shift for a police department in the Mid-Atlantic, all she wanted was to unwind. It was February 9, 2017, and the young woman was looking forward to having the next four days off. As was the custom at the end of such shifts, she and her colleagues went to get some drinks at their local hangout, the Fraternal Order of Police lodge. After it closed, the group of cops migrated outside to the parking lot to continue hanging out. Marie needed to pee, so she snuck off into the surrounding woods for privacy. But as she made her way back, a man tackled her to the ground, thrusting his hands down her work trousers and sexually assaulting her.

The man—he wasn't a stranger. He was her lieutenant.

Many tend to think of police as the first line of defense for women in need of help. But just as police are tasked with responding to crimes against women, they can also perpetrate them. And when they do, victims often feel like they have nowhere to turn.

In recent years, police brutality has dominated headlines—and rightly so, given the many high-profile and unjust deaths of unarmed Black men at the hands of police. But police sexual misconduct is also pervasive throughout the profession, despite receiving relatively little attention. After excessive force, sexual misconduct is the second most commonly reported form of police misconduct, according to [research by the Cato Institute](#)—and that only includes what's reported. “We have no way of knowing how much of this behavior goes on,” Timothy Maher, a criminology professor at University of Missouri at Saint Louis who studies police misconduct, told me. “Many people are reluctant to report on the police when these incidents occur. They might report if someone else sexually assaulted them, but when a police officer sexually assaulted them, they often think twice about it. And many of them, frankly, don't report it.”

It's either you act like us, you talk like us, you think like us, or just get the heck out of here.

Police officers who commit sexual misconduct often target female civilians, especially at night when there are few witnesses. They may specifically pick victims who are on the margins of society, such as women with criminal records or with substance abuse issues, who may fear not being believed if they do come forward. While the spectrum of police sexual misconduct is wide,

it can include things like unnecessary strip searches or a sexual shakedown, which is when an officer extorts sexual favors in exchange for not ticketing or arresting the person.

But female officers, like Marie, can also be victims of police sexual violence. And when they are, they can face intense pressure to stay silent—or risk being ostracized by their fellow officers.

Marie didn't officially report the attack because she was afraid of how it might impact her career. She was only a few years out of the academy and her lieutenant had more seniority than her. But word got around, and eventually she was called into Internal Affairs and asked about the incident. After she divulged what happened, her lieutenant was charged with a second-degree sexual offense. And just as she feared, her career suffered. According to a lawsuit she filed against the county, she was bullied by her fellow officers and reassigned to a desk job. She received a threatening message and had rumors spread about her. At trial, fellow officers packed the courtroom in support of her attacker. He was sentenced to seven years behind bars and has appealed his conviction. By the time I discovered Marie's case, she was no longer working in law enforcement. Her career path had been completely derailed by an act of gendered violence against her.

I learned about Marie, and many other women like her, while making my new podcast, *What Happened to Sandy Beal*, about the violent and mysterious death of a teenager in Prince George's County, Maryland, in the 1970s. Sandy Beal wanted to be a cop, just like Marie. Sandy and Marie's stories are separated by four decades, but from what I've discovered during my reporting, the hypermasculine culture they both went up against as young women trying to break into law enforcement doesn't appear to have changed.

When Sandy was trying to become a cop, women made up only 2 percent of sworn police officers. Today, that number hovers around 13 percent—even though women comprise close to half of the labor force. The percentage of women in the police force has remained virtually the same for the past two decades. One reason the profession is still overwhelmingly male today is the hostility and abuse that many women face on the job. Maher told me that when he interviewed female officers, he learned that sexual harassment was common, but that most of them would never say anything about it. "It was just like, grin and bear it, just take it," he said. Female officers are often faced with two choices, he added: Assimilate to the male dominated culture or leave. "It's either you act like us, you talk like us, you think like us, or just get the heck out of here, because this job isn't for you," he said.

When police officers commit sexual misconduct—and their peers condone it—it's not only the victims who suffer the consequences. It also impacts us, the public. Because the police culture that tolerates sexual misconduct within its ranks is the same police culture that allows other misconduct—like excessive force and brutality—to flourish. And there's evidence that having more women in the room can actually change that. Studies over the years have found that female officers are generally less authoritarian and less likely to use excessive force. Women officers have been found to be better at defusing potentially violent confrontations before they turn deadly. And they may be uniquely positioned to help female victims of crime.

In 2022, the need for police reform has been realized. But as we prioritize what to reform, we must pay close attention to the culture within policing that allows sexual misconduct to thrive.

Because without more women in policing, our system is operating at a profound disadvantage. Gender parity is one way forward.