

CONFLICT, PEACE-BUILDING, DISARMAMENT, SECURITY

b) The police and equality between women and men

What aspects of policing should be considered from a gender equality perspective?

In considering the equality issues related to policing, the most important starting point is the services that the police provide, such as protection of the public, responses to complainants and victims of offences, and custody of suspects and offenders. In all of these areas, women and men have a right to equal protection and respect.

There are a number of notable gender-based characteristics of policing and crime. Policing remains a male-dominated occupation. Most suspects and offenders in the custody of the police are male. A major cause for women to approach the police to make complaints or seek protection is violence they experience at the hands of husbands or other men. These gender-based factors interact with broader social attitudes about the roles of women and men with the result that women gain less than equal protection and respect.

Consider for example:

- **Responses to violence against women.** In cases of violence against women (and particularly domestic violence) the gender biases of predominantly male police forces often limit serious consideration of a complaint lodged by a woman and the credibility accorded to her evidence.
- **Rights of suspects or offenders.** In many countries the lack of respect for the rights of suspects (whether male or female) is an issue. Another issue of rights concerns the protection of female suspects and offenders against sexual assault by police officers while in custody.
- **Rights of the public.** Harassment of the public is a form of abuse of police powers in some countries. Women who are market vendors or prostitutes may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation through implicit or explicit demands for money, goods or services to avoid conflict with the law.

These are equality issues that can be dealt with in the formulation of police policies, the preparation of operational guidelines, and in the training and professional development of police officers. Such approaches should be aimed at ensuring that all police officers serve women appropriately.

The police and violence against women

Violence against women has only recently been recognised as an issue for public policy attention, largely as a result of the persistent efforts by women's movements to expose the shocking extent of such violence, its impact on society and the lack of protection for victims.

The police have a key role in addressing violence against women due to their responsibility and powers for protecting the public. However, the attitudes and actions of the police have reflected and reinforced social attitudes that condone violence against women.

With respect to sexual violence biased attitudes are often expressed through assigning blame to the victim (she provoked the violence by her clothing, manner or actions). In cases of domestic violence, the tendency has been to underestimate the gravity of the issue and to view it as a private matter between spouses.

The police have been criticised for being suspicious of the motives of women who make complaints of sexual assault, for dismissing appeals for help, for reluctance to pursue investigations and press charges. Criticism has also focused on poor facilities and procedures for dealing with victims and gathering evidence.

However, there is no doubt that domestic violence is a particularly difficult policing challenge. Domestic disputes account for a large proportion of calls for police assistance. Police responding to these calls are often placed in danger themselves. In many countries, police powers to deal with such situations is inadequate or unclear. Women who lay complaints may later withdraw them in response to a variety of factors, including the economic and other consequences of causing a spouse to end up in jail. There are many conflicting views in society and the legal system about various aspects of the issue and what should be done.

The prevalence of violence against women -- and its impact on women's health, safety and quality of life -- mean that it is a critical human rights and equality issue. The ability of the police to serve the female half of their public effectively in large part means their ability to respond appropriately to violence against women.

POLICE RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

MODEL STRATEGIES & PRACTICAL MEASURES:

In 1997 the UN Economic and Social Council adopted a resolution that set out "Model strategies and practical measures on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice."

The section concerned with strategies for the police is set out below.

8. Member countries are urged, within the framework of their national systems:

- a) To ensure that the applicable provisions of laws, codes and procedures related to violence against women are consistently reinforced in such a way that all acts of violence against women are recognised and responded to accordingly by the criminal justice system;
- b) To develop investigative techniques that do not degrade women subjected to violence and minimize intrusion, while maintaining standards for the collection of the best evidence;
- c) To ensure that police procedures, including decisions, on the arrest, detention and terms of any form of release of the perpetrator, take into account the need for safety of the victim and others related through family, socially or otherwise, and that these procedures also prevent further acts of violence;
- d) To empower the police to respond promptly to incidents of violence against women;
- e) To ensure that the exercise of police powers is undertaken according to the rule of law and codes of conduct and that the police may be held accountable for any infringement thereof;
- f) To encourage women to join police forces, including and the operational level.

ECOSOC Resolution 1997/24, 36th Plenary Meeting, 21 July 1997. Recommended for consideration by the General Assembly.

WHY SUCH MODEL STRATEGIES ARE REQUIRED

A recent report by Human Rights Watch on state responses to violence against women in Russia illustrates why model strategies (such as the one in the left column) and concerted attention to the policies, procedures and training of the police are required to ensure adequate protection for women. The report states that:

"Bias against victims of sexual violence pervades the Russian criminal justice system. From their initial lodging of complaints until the final resolution of cases, victims seeking redress for sexual violence regularly confront law enforcement institutions and individuals hostile to and suspicious of their motives and intentions."

On the part of the police and investigators, this included:

- refusal of complaints – rejection of complaints without investigation, on the assumption that the complaint was likely to be false or malicious;
- mistreatment of victims – intimidation of complainants with threats about the exposure involved in pursuing an investigation and repeated harassing interviews;
- delayed referrals for forensic examination – blocking rather than facilitating examinations that provide critical evidence;
- unwillingness to investigate – demonstrating bias against the complainant through reluctance to pursue the investigation or the manner of pursuing the inquiry;
- invasion of privacy – with excessive attention to establishing the sexual history of the complainant;
- failure to protect complainants – indifference to harassment of complainants by the accused.

Similar problems were outlined with respect to violence in the home, exacerbated by the reluctance to intrude on family life and to understand domestic violence as a criminal matter rather than a private concern.

Too Little, Too Late: State Response to Violence Against Women. Human rights Watch Report on Russia, 1998.

WOMEN ON THE POLICE FORCE

WOMEN SERVING WOMEN

Several countries (including India, Philippines, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia) have taken the approach of setting up women's cells or women's police stations staffed by women to improve the ability to serve women. In most cases, much of the work of these units is related to violence against women.

Anecdotal reports suggest that many of these initiatives have been favourably received by women because they are receptive and supportive to victims.

WOMEN MAKING A CAREER

Although women have been hired by police forces in many countries and the numbers of women police officers has increased, women remain very much in a minority.

Resistance to women in police forces has taken various forms, such as excessive physical standards (height and strength) for recruitment, discrimination in training and promotion, and organisational cultures that condone various forms of harassment of women colleagues.