

This article will argue that there are parallels between domestic violence and the plight of battered wives and the circumstances of the work environment of the police and the experiences of women officers. The police service recognises that equal treatment of citizens will be more likely if there is equal

Abusive relationships at work - policewomen as victims

Jennifer Brown looks at the impact of the police occupational culture on women officers.

treatment within forces for all officers (Brown 1997: 24). Initiatives such as the *Victim's Charter*, Quality of Service policy, Home Office Circulars on rape and domestic violence has led to a reconstruction of community based and victim focused policing. Yet recent evaluations (Jones, Newburn and Smith 1994; Temkin 1996; Lees 1997) show there still to be an ambivalence from front line police officers about women's victimisation which indulges a kind of paternalistic protectionism at one extreme to beliefs about women's contributing negligence at the other. There is frustration with women as repeat victims of domestic violence and a tendency to 'no-crime' rape where evidence is ambiguous. This ambivalence is also reflected in police men's

attitudes and behaviour towards police women with evidence of endemic sexual harassment (Brown 1998, HMIC 1993, 1996).

Cult of masculinity

Smith and Gray's (1983) participant observation study of London's Metropolitan Police revealed an informal culture in which stories of fighting and violence, conversations about sexual conquests and feats of drinking combined together into "a kind of cult of masculinity" (p87). It was not a climate that readily accepted women's equal participation in the full range of policing duties or occupancy of senior rank. First introduced into policing during World War One, women remain a minority within the police in England and Wales, currently about 14%. About 5% of chief officers are women as are 3% of superintendents. There is, despite over twenty years of equality legislation, differential deployment of women, with their being disproportionately under-represented in duties still considered unsuitable such as traffic, certain types of criminal investigations, firearms and public order. There remains a perception that women officers are best suited to deal with the "emotional labour" of police work which pushes them into the marginalised social services policing. Fielding (1998) found "*The WPC [woman police constable] belongs to the feminine world of emotion, sensitivity and academic niceties like paperwork, the PC is the man of action and strength*" (p163). Acceptance by men of 'weak', 'emotional' and 'community service orientated' women destabilises their own sense of identity as police officers. This invokes behaviour to maintain the differences between men and women officers thereby creating feelings of insecurity and powerlessness in those that are dissimilar to the dominant norm.

Abusive domestic relationships

Mezey and Rubenstein (1992) compare the dynamics operating in the workplace and in the home where violent abuse has occurred. They suggest that work, like home, can be represented as a caring, self-contained unit. Both have hierarchical structures with unwritten rules and codes of

conduct, usually defined by the more powerful members. The less powerful members are often passive and dependent performing servicing functions in exchange for care and protection. In many families and workplaces, the most powerful tend to be men. Less powerful members, usually women, who 'cause trouble' tend to be isolated and frequently scapegoated as a mechanism to preserve the power relationships. Glass (1995) documents coping mechanisms of women who elect to stay in abusive domestic relationships: denial, in which the victim at first claims no harm was done or that the intention was not to harm; minimization, in which the harm is discounted or trivialised; reform, where the woman believes that ultimately their man could be changed.

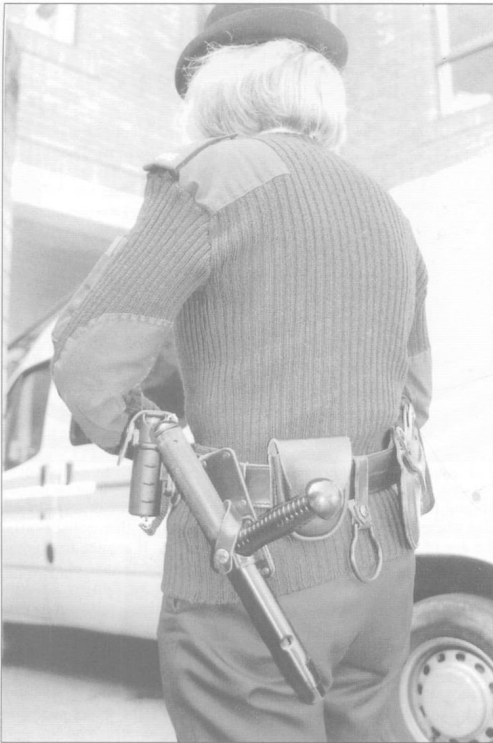
Police women's coping adaptations

Research on women police officers suggests they cope by emphasising either their gender identity or their police identity. Brewer (1991) describes 'Hippolytes' who attempt to retain as much femininity as the bureaucratic regimen permits, who eschew operational duties preferring support roles or retreat to safer gendered tasks such as training and work with victims. 'Amazons' on the other hand not only gave as good as they got but competed with the men in joke telling and swearing. There are costs to policewomen when adopting either style: affronts to their femininity or to their professionalism. It seems to be difficult to retain your femininity and be accepted as a professionally competent police officer.

Participants in a study conducted by Anderson, Brown and Campbell (1993) of police and civilian women's experiences revealed a range of coping strategies reminiscent of women in domestically abusive relationships. Examples were found of:

- **Minimisation** - *a bit of jovial banter makes a good shift. If everyone took offence at everything ever said we would all be paranoid.*
- **Suffering in silence** - *I believe over the years I have built up a defence mechanism. To respond only serves to increase the behaviour. If you*

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ignore it for long enough it will go away.

- **Appeasement** - *Sexual harassment is part of the police culture. Conformity within the system makes life easier as acceptance into work groups is an important part of survival in the organisation.*
- **Denial** - [Anderson, Brown and Campbell's research] *gives an inaccurate portrayal of women officers as being weak and naive, undermining our authority and ability to perform police duties... It invites ridicule and does little to enhance the reputation of women officers... Competent policewomen by their very nature in my experience give as good if not better than they get. I would suggest that those who cannot cope with such situations cannot possibly cope with the harsh realities of police work. Those allegedly forced to resign because of sexual harassment did not obviously possess the desired character traits to become women police officers.*

It became apparent that women were reluctant to use the available grievance procedures for much the same reason that women did not want to report rape or domestic violence to the police: fear of reprisals; further victimisation; lack of sympathy; complaints being trivialised, not being believed. Examples can be found from amongst the policewomen of experiences that look remarkably like those of women in abusive relationships (reported in Brown 1997:28)

I went through the force grievance procedure. It was a waste of time. Many of the incidents were witnessed by PCs on the section but all denied witnessing the incidents, whereas the civilian witness backed up my story. It resulted in the person being counselled for 'man' management skills. When I was informed of the results of the inquiry, I was disgusted. The superintendent asked me 'what do you want? The man's head on a plate?'

No one wishing to pursue a career in the police force would be so reckless as to complain to the

Equal Opportunities Commission about sexual harassment e.g. Alison Halford. The attitude is if you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen. I don't agree with it but I want a career in the police.

Conclusion

In the same way that not all women are domestically abused, it is not suggested here that all police women suffer sexual harassment. What is argued is that the organisational structures, gender ratio and male constructed images of police and policing create an environment that has parallels to domestic relationships in which men maintain control through violence or paternalism. The reasons for policemen's reluctance to be drawn into policing violent behaviour perpetrated on women by men lies in attitudes that somehow women precipitated it, asked for it or enjoyed it. Unless the victim is 'deserving' in some manner, by for example, the nature or seriousness of her injuries, police officers decline to abide by their own policy guidelines. The persistence of these attitudes provides a measure of explanation about instances of abusive relationships in the form of sexual harassment that occur within the police. The structural realities of a male majority in control of resources within the police mirror those in domestic relationships. Women's investment in either job or home can make it difficult to leave so some adaptation takes place. The cost of adapting to the police occupational culture for a woman officer can be the adoption of a style that minimises her professionalism or her femininity, either or both are likely to increase her stress levels, result in poorer job performance or serious consideration being given to leaving the police prematurely (Brown, Campbell and Fife Schaw and Fielding 1995).

Jennifer Brown is currently the director of the forensic psychology programme at the University of Surrey. She was formerly the research manager of the Hampshire Constabulary.

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