

**SECTION I**  
**POLICE ATTITUDES AND SENSITISATION**

## **Section I: Police attitudes and sensitisation**

The role of the police in strategies to confront crimes against women and children is crucial and central. Research from Canada, the United States and Britain has indicated, however, that the response of the police has not always been as satisfactory as it could be, crimes against women and children being treated with less seriousness than crimes against men or property unless the manifestations of those crimes were particularly serious. Thus, in general, the criminal justice system has been resorted to only unusually in crimes involving women and children that occur within the home, the police preferring to take on the role of conciliator or mediator in these circumstances.

The unsatisfactory response of the police in this context has had various effects, the most important being that women themselves who have been the subject of such treatment within the home are not confident of the response of the police, being of the view that the police will not treat their complaints with the seriousness that they deserve. This has meant that women are wary of reporting any such crime to the police. This results in the woman suffering further victimisation.

It is important that the police response in this area is more sensitive and effective both so that the individual complainant can be assured of an appropriate and useful response and also so that societal attitudes towards activity of a violent nature can be shaped to the position that such activity is regarded as unacceptable.

Police response in this context is a result of a number of factors, including the wider societal trivialisation of violence in the household, but can be ameliorated if the attitude of the police is more appropriate and if the police are sensitised to the particular crimes and their role in the resolution of such behaviour. Fundamentally, attitude change within the police must stem from two strategies. First, the seriousness of crimes against women must be acknowledged by each police officer, through informal force norms and through formal force policy and second the crimes must be viewed from a victim centred philosophy, where the question to be addressed will be what do such complainants want.

The acknowledgement of crimes against women and children by each officer, informal force norms and informal force policy interacts and produces a more sensitive policing system. Such interaction can be achieved by the recruitment of particular officers such as women or ethnic minorities, through training, both at recruit level and later and by placing recruits with trained partners who can act as role models. Peer pressure within police forces is very powerful, providing informal attitude shaping. Such informal norms do, however, reflect the seriousness the formal policy that a force adopts. In the context of domestic violence, formal policy may acknowledge the seriousness of the behaviour by advocating a charging policy, thus removing the onus of laying an information against the offender from the woman or a pro-arrest policy. Formal policy could also stress the importance of maintenance of careful records, so that the seriousness of the behaviour and the adverse effects it has on individual women and children and the wider community become clearer. Such record keeping will also serve as a tool for attitudinal change within the police, it being the case the police will acknowledge the existence of a problem revealed by records.

Police attitudes are, however, merely a reflection of attitudes held within the community. Fundamental change and the acknowledgement of violence against women as serious issues will only occur within the police if it also occurs within the community. Community attitudes must be addressed by education of a formal and informal nature occurring at all levels, from primary school to the professions. It is critical here that the legal profession receive sensitisation so that the seriousness of the issues is reflected in trial procedure and sentencing practice.

Within the police itself, attitude sensitisation will only occur through appropriate training. This training must be appropriate to the economic, social and political context of each system. High level officers must be sensitised to issues of family violence and encouraged to adopt a victim centred approach to the investigation of such crimes. The status of police work in regard to these crimes should be raised so that the crimes are not trivialised. Higher status could be provided by providing financial and promotional incentives to officers who revealed an appropriate response to crimes of this nature. In general serious attention should be given to training at all level. Police forces, further, should take advantage of help that they might receive from the community. Thus, for example, women's groups could be involved in police training. So also should the police attempt to train within the community, explaining their perceived role and practice to community groups and schools.

Police training can be enhanced by the use of particular tools. Thus for example, video training could be used and kits and protocols and systems such as victim examination suites.

Training is critical and must be accompanied by the recruitment of officers who can come to the force with particular skills for crimes involving women and children. Women for example, must be recruited as officers, forensic scientists and police surgeons. Where they are recruited, however, they must be trained and so must the male members of the force, it being essential to recognise that the recruitment and training of women officers will not change the perspective of all members of the force and that the training of women officers alone will place too much strain and responsibility on a certain section of the force.

Training and appropriate recruitment is an ongoing process. It is important for all forces to recognise that training must be continuous. New information regarding crimes against women - such as the existence and effect of the rape trauma syndrome - is revealed continually and must be passed on to all officers as it is revealed.