

Foreword

Many women and children in Commonwealth countries experience violence at the hands of a stranger, or someone dear and well known to them, or those with responsibility for protecting them in difficult situations. This may take place at home, at school, at work, on the streets, and in detention camps for refugees and displaced persons. The effects of violence on victims ranges from psychological abuse to actual physical harm. Some women and children sustain very serious injuries and/or grievous bodily harm, and in the worst and most tragic cases the abuse results in death. Unfortunately, the perpetrators are not always held accountable by the social system or the criminal justice system. It is commonly assumed that anything that happens at home or within a relationship is a private matter in which other people should not interfere. The forces of custom, culture, tradition and value systems can therefore operate at the expense of the needs and interests of the female victims of violence, aggravating the effect of the actual violence sustained. Where violence against women happens in public, the case for proving that a crime has been committed that justifies legal action does not always work in a woman's favour. As a result, the culprits often walk away without punishment because there is insufficient evidence to file a case against them.

Violence against women and children is one of the 15 priority areas for action identified by the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development adopted by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Auckland, New Zealand in 1995. The Plan of Action encourages the elimination of violence against women, the protection of the girl-child, and the outlawing of all forms of trafficking in girls and women. Violence against women has been the subject of critical concern for Commonwealth Ministers responsible for Women's Affairs since their first meeting in 1985 and at their successive triennial meetings held in Zimbabwe, Canada, Cyprus and Trinidad and Tobago. Violence against women was also discussed by Commonwealth Law Ministers when they met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1996, where they supported the need for more work at national level to address the issue of violence against women.

The police have a fundamental role to play in protecting and promoting the human rights of women and children. Given gender-sensitive training and information, the police can be effective in supporting women and children who are the victims of violence, to ensure that perpetrators are dealt with appropriately and justly. The police can facilitate the effective implementation of General Recommendation 19 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the UN Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women, both of which emphasise the need of state parties to prevent, prosecute and punish those guilty of violence against women.

Like others, the police have undergone a process of socialisation that ascribes different roles and responsibilities to women and men, and which breeds expectations that many issues of violence against women should be dealt with in the private domain. This manual is therefore intended as a tool to increase the knowledge and skills of police officers, so that they are more able to comprehensively and effectively address the issue of violence against women and children.

The first edition of the manual was prepared on the basis of deliberations and recommendations of a Pan-Commonwealth workshop for police commissioners and senior police officers held in 1987. This second edition is an extensive revision of the first and introduces two new chapters on gender, human rights and the law, and crime prevention approaches to repeat victimisation. I hope that the manual promotes the implementation of the key recommendations made by Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, Law Ministers, and the Beijing Platform for Action.

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