

The role of women's police stations in widening access to justice and eliminating gender violence

Presentation to United Nations 63rd Commission on the Status of Women, NGO Sessions, New York, 21 March 2019

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The role of women's police stations in widening access to justice and eliminating gender violence ⁱ

Presentation by Kerry Carrington and María Victoria Puyol, to the United Nations 63rd Commission on the Status of Women, NGO Sessions, 21 March 2019, New York

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Introduction

This address is relevant to the priority theme of the 63rd meeting of the UN CSW of providing access to sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women in order to eliminate violence against women and girls. First, outline the case for sex segregated policing, then briefly describe the emergence of women's police stations, next we outline the results of our study on the role of women's police stations in Argentina in responding to and preventing gender violence. Finally, we present some policy and practice lessons for UN Women to consider in relation to achieving the sustainable development goal of eliminating violence against women. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council and includes a multi-country team of researchers from Australia and Argentina whose contributions we gratefully acknowledge.

Shortcomings of traditional policing models in responding to gender violence

The United Nations recognises that gender violence is 'one of the most significant issues to be addressed in our time' (2015). Yet an international review of policing in 23 member countries concluded that 'There was very little evidence that United Nations policies or agreements on women's employment or the protection of women against crime, translated into practice within police

departments' (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013, 128). Why? Because policing is a male dominated profession, where masculine culture is pervasive (Prokos and Padavic 2002, 242; Loftus 2008, 757).

The traditional model of policing in English speaking countries emerged in the 19th century as a male only occupation. Women were not permitted to enter policing until the 20th century. Historically women were assigned as assistants to male detectives (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013). By the 1990s women still only comprised around 10 per cent of sworn officers in Australia, England and United States (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013, 116). In more recent times women represent about a quarter of the police service in Australian jurisdictions, but only 12 per cent in the US (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013). Few women are represented in senior police management (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013). The gender disparity in traditional policing matters because police officers, the majority of whom are male, have a significant role in the front-line response to domestic and sexual violence as they are often the victim's first contact with the justice system (Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016, 1; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse [Royal Commission] 2017, 17; Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland [Special Taskforce] 2015, 215; Voce and Boxall 2018, 1).

The shortcomings of police responses to sexual and domestic violence are well documented and include:

- ambivalence and lack of empathy toward the victims of domestic and sexual violence (Douglas 2018; Royal Commission 2017, 382-88; Taylor et al. 2013, 98-99, 107);
- failure to provide women with adequate information or follow up about the process (Special Taskforce 2015, 230; Standing Committee on Social Issues [Standing Committee] 2012, 167; Westera and Powell 2017, 164-165);
- lack of referral to appropriate support services in emergency and non-emergency situations (Ragusa 2013, 708; Westera and Powell 2017, 164-165);
- not taking threats and harassment seriously (Standing Committee 2012, 169; Powell and Henry 2018, 301);
- victim blaming (Taylor et al. 2013, 99, 108, 154; Goodman-Delahunty and Graham 2011, 36-37),
- reluctance to believe or take victims' complaints seriously (Powell and Cauchi 2013, 233; Taylor et al. 2013, 102, 156; Royal Commission 2017, 504; Special Taskforce 2015, 251)
- 'siding with the perpetrator' and regarding victim's complaints as 'too trivial and a waste of police resources' (Special Taskforce 2015, 251).

Given the shortcomings of traditional models of policing in responding effectively to victims of gender violence, the case for sex segregated policing is worth serious consideration.

The emergence of women's police stations

Women's specialist police stations first emerged in Brazil in 1985 and shortly after in Argentina in 1988, during a period of re-democratisation after the overthrow of brutal military dictatorships. Women's police stations played a role in both legitimising democratic rule of law by the state, in addition to widening women's access to justice. Since then, thousands of women's police stations have been established across the world—in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru, and Uruguay, and more recently in Sierra Leone, India, Ghana, Kosovo, Liberia, the Philippines, South Africa and Uganda (Jubb et al. 2010). An evaluation of women's police stations in Latin America found that the stations enhanced women's access to justice and their willingness to report, increased the likelihood of conviction, and enlarged access to a range of other services, such as counselling, health, legal, financial and social support. Of the communities surveyed as part of the evaluation, 77 per cent in Brazil, 77 per cent in Nicaragua, 64 per cent in Ecuador and 57 per cent in Peru felt that women's police stations had reduced violence against women in their countries (Jubb et al. 2010, 4).

A more recent study of women's police stations in Brazil used female homicide rates as a proxy measure for assessing their effectiveness. The authors assessed shifts in female homicide rates in 2074 municipalities from 2004 to 2009, controlling for a number of variables. The study found that where women's police stations existed the female homicide rate dropped by 17 per cent for all women, but for women aged 15-24 in metropolitan areas the reduction was 50 per cent (or 5.57 deaths reduction per 100,000) (Perova and Reynolds 2017, 193-194). On this basis they concluded that 'women's police stations appear to be highly effective among young women living in metropolitan areas' (Perova and Reynolds 2017, 188).

Women's police stations in Argentina: Study findings

We now turn the results of our study of women's police stations (*Comisariías de la Mujer y Familia* (CMF)) in the Province of Buenos Aires Argentina, the first of its kind. Our project aims to discover, firstly, how CMFs respond to and work with local communities and local boards to prevent the occurrence of gender violence and, secondly, what aspects could inform the development of new approaches to responding and preventing gender violence elsewhere in the world. The project reverses the notion that policy transfer should flow from the Anglophone countries of the Global North to the Global South (Connell 2007).

Women's police stations were introduced in Argentina during a period of re-democratisation largely in response to feminist demands that the new democratic state must support female victims of male violence (Carrington 2015). Buenos Aires established its first women's police station (initially called *Comisaría de la Mujer*, now called *Comisaría de la Mujer y Familia (CMF)*), specifically designed to address violence against women in La Plata in 1988. The number of women's police stations in Buenos Aires province grew slowly at first—with only 37 established over an 18-year period between 1988 and 2010. On 11 March 2009, Argentina introduced Law 26.485, *Comprehensive protection law to prevent, punish and eradicate violence against women*.ⁱⁱ A Department for Gender Policy in the Ministry of Security, Local Boards (*Mesas Locales Intersectoriales*) were also established to integrate all the municipal and provincial services involved in preventing and responding to gender violence. A further 91 women's police stations have been established over the last 9 years in the province of Buenos Aires as part of the action plan. By the end of 2018, Buenos Aires Province had 128 women's police stations employing around 2300 officers and multi-disciplinary teams of lawyers, social workers and psychologists, who respond to around 307,000 clients and 150,000 formal reports per annum.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2012, the offence of femicide was incorporated by Law 26.791, as an amendment to the Criminal Code to strengthen laws against lethal gender violence.

CMFs are staffed by multi-disciplinary teams that include varying combinations of police, social workers, psychologists and lawyers. By working with local boards, CMFs provide women with access to integrated services in policing, medical care, legal support, counselling, and housing and financial advice to help address the multi-dimensional problems experienced by survivors of domestic and sexual violence. They work predominantly from converted brightly painted houses with play rooms for children situated within the community to strengthen confidence, widen access to justice and encourage reporting (see photos). One of the commanders interviewed described the organisational aim of women's police stations is to break the cycle of violence by empowering women through access to justice and other victim support services. She explained:

The goal is to break the circle of violence. It's a whole process, often the victim returns, ... But she does not have to believe that an insult or aggression is normal because she suffers it for 10 years. This police station provides this information ... that nobody should hit you or insult you, that you have to be respected.
(Commander, Station C)

The stations where we conducted interviews were the larger ones in the city areas of La Plata and Buenos Aires with caseloads of between 300 to 700 per month. This presentation is based on interviews undertaken with 51 employees from five stations, 82 per cent were employed as police, and 18 per cent worked as lawyers, psychologists or social workers. The majority (72 per cent) were aged between 26-45. The median length of service in a woman's police stations was 8.7 years, with the longest 30 years. Between the 51 employees we interviewed they had approximately 445 years of service in women's police stations in Buenos Aires Province (see Table 7). This makes them well qualified and informed to answer our questions. Over the last two weeks we completed a further 49 interviews in Azul, Bahai Blanca, Mar del Plata, Olvarria and Tandil. The data in this presentation only relates to the initial 51 interviews, with the exception of Table 1.

Table 1: Interviews with Women's Police Stations, La Plata, Buenos Aires

Station	Female	Male	Total	Police Officer	Lawyer Psychologist Social Worker
A	12	1	13	10	3
B	8	1	9	7	2
C	11	0	11	10	1
D	8	2	10	9	1
E	7	1	8	6	2
F	10	2	12	10	2
G	10	2	12	10	2
H	8	1	9	7	2
I	7	1	8	6	2
J	8	0	8	4	4
Total	89	11	100	79	21
Percentage	89%	11%	100%	79%	20%

Of those we interviewed, 89 per cent were female (Table 1), 68.6 per cent had public security qualifications, and 70.6 per cent had received specialist training to work in the women's police station. Police can transfer from the general police to the women's police stations as part of a chosen career move in law enforcement; however, it is primarily women who choose this career pathway. Four of the five women's police stations were led by female commanders. The sole male commander in the group of interviewees had transferred from the general police, where he'd been for 12-14 years, to act as the commander temporarily. While women's police stations are structurally embedded in the police within the Ministry of Security and report to the same Minister, women's police have their own

career pathways and report to Zone and Station level Commanders and Sub-Commanders. They have also had a wider impact on the culture of policing, as one of our interviewees remarked:

The existence of our women's police station made a difference that transformed the institution of policing. The women's police station is an engine of change.
(Psychologist, Station C)

Teamwork is essential with 92 per cent of interviewees describing themselves as working in a team. Women police work in multi-disciplinary teams with psychologists, lawyers and social workers and have multiple professional roles that bridge the local informal groups and provincial state agencies.

Table 2: Routine roles of employees at Women's Police Stations

	Which one of the following best describes your role at the Women's Police Station?								
Station	Prevention action in the community	Working with victims	Receive complaints	Investigate complaints	Child care	Provide victims access to justice	Assist victims to leave violent partner	Provide information on gender violence	Raise complaints with other agencies
A	9	8	11	6	9	9	7	8	4
B	9	9	7	7	7	8	3	7	7
C	6	9	6	2	5	7	7	6	6
D	8	8	4	6	6	6	4	6	4
E	4	7	3	7	3	7	7	7	7
Total	36	41	31	28	30	37	28	34	28
Percentage	70.6%	80.4%	60.8%	54.9%	58.8%	72.5%	54.9%	66.7%	54.9%

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one answer

Around 71 per cent of those interviewed described prevention as part of their role at the women's police station (Table 2). When we asked what kind of prevention activities they undertook we discovered that prevention took many forms, but can be divided into three principle strategies. The first is work with women to prevent re-victimisation, the second is to work with the community to prevent violence from occurring by transforming the cultures and norms that sustain violence against women, and the third is to work with other agencies in an integrated way to prevent gender violence.

Working with women to prevent gender violence

Women's police stations have a number of similarities and dissimilarities from traditional models of policing that enhance their ability to respond to female victims of gender violence. Like traditional policing models they offer a 365-day emergency response service, wear police uniforms and weapons, have the authority of the state, and the same powers and training as general police. Unlike traditional policing models, they have additional specialist training to respond to gender violence, they work from brightly painted converted houses in the barrios that provide childcare and reception rooms tailored for women and children. They have emergency provisions of clothing and other items for women who seek their assistance. They also work from a gender perspective in framing their road-map and strategic interventions to prevent gender violence and strategically respond as an intersectional team (*Mesas Locales Intersectorales*, BA Provincia, undated).

When asked what groups they worked with to prevent violence almost half said they worked with women's groups (Table 3). Several of the police stations organised women's support groups, and on-line chat groups, some more successfully than others depending on resources. One of the psychologists who had convened a victim support group for 11 years, described its importance to prevention:

The group of women has functioned since 2007. In principle, women are guided to recover their self-esteem and ability to decide. ... Here they lose the fear. Generally, about 15 women come weekly. Then we have a follow-up chat group. We are in permanent contact. The group of women helps them not to feel alone, to sustain the decision to report or get away. (Psychologist, Station B)

Another police officer interviewed described prevention as a process of 'denaturalising' domestic violence, of working with women to help them escape a violent partner. In fact, over half (54.9 per cent) of those interviewed described their role as one of helping women leave a violent relationship, (Table 2).

For me the goal is to reduce violence against women ... to aid to the person suffering violence and try to reduce the cases that end up as femicide. Prevention is the first step so that something more serious does not happen. (Police Officer, Station A)

Working with communities and organisations to prevent gender violence

In the province of Buenos Aires, women's police stations are mandated under the national action plan to undertake community prevention and campaigns to eliminate violence against women. When asked what kind of prevention activities they undertook with the community 68.6 per cent said they worked with schools, and 64.7 per cent with the local neighbourhood or community groups. They also work with religious organisations, women's groups and hospitals (Table 3).

Table 3: Working with organisations to prevent gender violence

What other organisations do you work with to reduce the impact of gender violence in your community?						
Station	Religious	Women's Groups	Schools	Neighbourhood or Community Groups	Hospitals	Other
A	2	5	7	8	6	0
B	7	7	8	8	8	1
C	4	7	10	7	0	0
D	2	6	6	6	0	2
E	0	0	4	4	0	0
Total	15	25	35	33	14	3
Percentage	29.4%	49.0%	68.6%	64.7%	27.5%	5.9%

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one answer

Women's police stations organise community prevention campaigns around the annual program of festival and events, such as days of protest against femicide (*Ni una Menos* en Junio) days to celebrate international women's day (*El día de internacionales de las mujeres, en Marzo 8*) and rights of the child (*el día de los niños*). A Police Officer from Station C explains how they take advantage of festivals to engage in prevention work.

The interdisciplinary team organises prevention days on specific dates also, on March 8 and 25 November. On the day of the child, we gather toys and take advantage when giving them out there to say 'No to violence' and show our work. These activities occur in the public space. We also deliver brochures to schools. (Police Officer, Station C)



Photo A & B: Community prevention work

Every Christmas the entire team from Station A, gather donations of toys and lollies to distribute to the local community. Dressed as Santa and Santa's helpers they rove the neighbourhood in their police cars with sirens blaring. When the children and their parents come out to see what all the noise is about, they are handed presents with the contact details of the women's police station (Photos A and B). They strategically do this at this time of year because they know domestic violence increase over the Christmas holiday season. The commander in charge of this station described the preventative work of her station this way:

The directive was to do prevention work at least once a month. ... So, we like it a lot. Beyond being something obligatory or not- we try to do something once a month.... The day to protest "*Ni una menos*", is the one day out there more fundamental to prevention work (Photo G). And other good days for prevention include the festival of the child and Christmas festivals that we always repeat, every year. We really like that interaction with the community... This year triple the amount of people came....(When) we travelled (the local barrio)... as we passed... the people applauded us, (and their photos and videos of) it went out in all the social networks. ... Oh!. Ay! ... seeing the kids jumping when the police

car arrived with Santa Claus. and ... it's very exciting. Very, very rewarding.'
(Commander Police Station A)



Photo C: Ni Una Menos (not one less woman) campaign to end femicide

More than two thirds of our interviewees undertook prevention work with schools (Table 3).

We go out to more humble neighbourhoods, we get together in the milk bars and in the schools. ... The children come to tell us about their mum, their dad. We deliver brochures, I give them my personal telephone number and that is a way to reach people and to make them feel confident. (Police Officer, Station C)

The proximity of women's police stations to citizens, was described by one of the Zone Commanders as key to their ability to prevent gender violence. Their presence and proximity sends a message to the local community that violence against women will not be tolerated, that it is a crime and that perpetrators will be held accountable. Beyond that, women's police stations are especially effective in strategically placing themselves deep within the local community, through varied and innovative forms of engagement, to turn around the norms that sustain violence against women and therefore prevent violence from occurring into the future.



Photos D and E Community interaction, International Women's Day, Mar del Plata

Policy and practice lessons drawn from the study

1. The UN has established two sustainable development goals directly relevant to ending violence against women—the promotion of gender equality, and the promotion of Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Empirical studies of women's police stations have consistently shown that women are more comfortable reporting to women police in a family friendly environment (Jubb et al. 2010; Miller and Segal 2014; Natarajan 2005, 91). As women's police stations are effective in enhancing women's willingness to report, this increases the likelihood of conviction, and enlarges access to a range of other services such as counselling, health, legal, financial and social support (Jubb et al. 2010; Santos 2004, 50; Perova and Reynolds 2017). Our research on women's police stations in the province of Buenos Aires supports the conclusion that they enhance women's access to justice.

2. Primary prevention, which seeks 'to intervene to prevent' violence before it occurs, is regarded by the UN as the key to strengthening human security and the elimination of violence against women and girls (United Nations 2015). Women's police stations have a mandate for prevention and work from a gender perspective with a road-map. Our research that has discovered that Women's Police Stations in Buenos Aires prevent gender violence in three main ways. 1. by working with women to prevent re-victimisation 2. by working collaboratively with other organisations to change the social norms that support gender violence and 3. through the educative impact of their community engagement activities.'. The research team does not have access to longitudinal data to measure this impact for the province of Buenos Aires. However, the results of a similar study in Brazil predict that the presence of women's police station will lead to a 50 per cent drop in lethal partner violence for

young women in urban areas, and a 17 per cent drop for women overall (Perova and Reynolds 2017, 193-194).

3. Relevant sustainable development targets require that all countries should have laws to protect women and girls from violence, to significantly reduce violence and related deaths by 2030. In 2009, Argentina introduced an offence called femicide, established a Department for Gender Policy in the Ministry of Security, implemented a national action plan to prevent, assist and eradicate violence against women to be driven at local level by Local Boards (*Mesa Locales*), and established an additional 91 women's police stations to translate the plan to eradicate violence against women into practice. Women's police stations provide a unique framework for policing gender violence as they strategically navigate the distance between women as victims of gender violence and an array of government and judicial agencies. Women police are insiders situated within close proximity to community, they belong to the same gender as the women who report to them, and this sense of connection enhances women's willingness to confide in them. However by also being outsiders with state power to enforce laws that criminalise gender violence, women's police stations are situated in the unique position of being able to challenge local norms that underpin gender violence, and take action against perpetrators (Bull et al. 2017). They are both regulators of the social order but also 'engines for change'. This unique regulatory framework enhances the ability of Argentina to translate into practice the UN SDG goals of promoting gender equality, empowering women, enlarging access to justice, and eliminating violence against women (UN 2016). Lessons can be learnt by other countries from Argentina's comprehensive framework for preventing gender violence.

4. Based on our research consideration could be given to the following:

- establishing the offence of femicide in other member jurisdictions of the UN
- recognising and valuing the unique work of the women's police stations in the primary prevention of gender violence
- enhancing the educational and career prospects for those who work in women's police stations
- adjusting the work rosters at women's police stations to be more family friendly and providing avenues for self-care and trauma informed best practice
- promoting the establishment of stand-alone women's police stations to eliminate violence against women, reduce violence related deaths and empower women across member countries of the UN

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End Notes

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ⁱⁱ *Ley de Protección Integral para prevenir, sancionar y erradicar la Violencia contra las Mujeres en los Ámbitos en que desarrollen sus Relaciones Interpersonales.*

ⁱⁱⁱ The figure of 307,000 is an estimate only based on information provided by Zone Commanders and averaged over 128 Women's Police Stations. Accurate data has been sought. The figure of 150,000 formal reports of gender violence is a figure for 2018 provided to us from the Ministry of Security for Gender Policy.