

# Police Perpetrated Domestic Violence

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## Family Secrets

It was the women's movement that brought the issue of domestic violence into the public arena in the late 1970's. By definition, domestic violence is a "family matter" that occurs in the seclusion of the home. Back then, when we even suggested that a woman call the police when her husband, her partner, her father or her son hit her, we were considered radical. We were challenging male entitlement to rule in the privacy of their homes. States then passed domestic violence laws in the 1980's, and domestic violence became a crime.

There are still many women who say, "I can't call the police on him." "I can't have my own husband arrested. I can't betray my lover, my husband, my friend." "He isn't a bad person, it's just that he's under a lot of stress," "he has a bad temper," or "he only hits me when he's drunk." Or she says it's her fault – she provoked him. She feels she must protect him because he trusts her not to tell, not to get him into trouble ...and because she loves him.

The police and the states' attorneys often find these remarks unbelievably naïve and frustrating. They have little tolerance for these excuses for a criminal; they want him held accountable in a court of law. The state, the police, and the domestic violence advocates tell the woman that her partner has no right to beat her – no matter how much stress he's under, no matter how much he drinks, no matter how much he professes to love her and trust her.

We tell her that the most profound way she can interrupt the cycle of violence is to hold him accountable – to disclose the "family secret". We know that he will not seek help unless he is forced to - by someone who does not love him the way she loves him. We encourage her to reach out for help, to call the police when he hurts her.

We assure the victim that the police will protect her, that the state will give her legal remedies for relief, and that domestic violence advocates will give her emotional support through the legal process. We urge her to go forward so that we can get the message to the abuser and to the community that domestic violence will not be tolerated.

Some police officers have been reluctant to enforce the law against domestic violence. Years ago, police commonly told us that breaking up "lover's quarrels" and "marital disagreements" was not police work. We frequently heard police trivialize incidents by referring to a call as "just a domestic". They told us that police should not get involved in "family matters". Over time, most police officers have come to consider domestic violence well within the range of legitimate police work.

## Similar Accounts

Over the last 13 years I have worked with thousands of victims. Too many of these victims have been intimate partners of police officers. Some of these victims are police officers themselves. Over the years I began to notice that the accounts of the abuse suffered by these women were so similar as to be almost identical. As I assisted them in putting their experiences into words, the

women expressed both surprise and relief that I knew exactly what they were talking about. I told them that I had learned from other officers' intimate partners.

I got several of the women together and we met weekly. We talked about the "typical" forms of abuse that civilian abusers use to gain and maintain control over their victims – isolation from family and friends, verbal degradation and humiliation, sexual and physical abuse. But beyond that, we identified patterns in police abusers behavior that seemed to be unique to this population.

We realized that the characteristics and skills developed in their professional training are the very same characteristics and skills that, when used in an intimate relationship, make these officers very dangerous abusers.

For example, police are trained to:

- Walk in and take control of any situation
- Intimidate by presence alone: voice, stance
- Obtain information through interrogation and surveillance
- Deceive and manipulate when necessary
- Use weapons and deadly force
- Attribute the level of force used to the other party
- Assume a position of ultimate authority

This training produces competent police officers. The problem occurs when the officer walks through the front door of his home with the same mind-set he has in his professional life.

## Abuse Tactics

Some of the spill-over women describe includes:

- Police abusers carry the same sense of entitlement to authority and respect from their intimate partners as from civilians on the street.
- They cannot conceive of an egalitarian relationship, they must always be dominant and in control.
- They cannot tolerate any challenge to their authority or questioning of their decisions. When his intimate partner disagrees with him or questions his authority he sees this as justification to use force and blame it on her, saying, "Look what you made me do". "I've told you not to argue with me"

Police abusers are skilled in verbal intimidation and degradation. Women tell us their abusers scream at them like they talk to criminals on the street – their voices and faces change; they use filthy street language; they tell the victim she is "just like the scumbags he deals with every day". Some women describe fearing that the abuser has lost touch with reality, that he has forgotten who she is while he is in this rage.

The accounts of the physical abuse these victims have described to me are far and away the most brutal I have ever heard. These perpetrators are trained in the use of force. To make it worse, they are of the mind-set that the victim, by showing any resistance to his will, is responsible for the level of force that is used against her. He is skilled in turning it all around to make even her believe that "she made him do it".

He then reinforces her feelings of isolation and hopelessness by assuring her that there is no escape. She can call the police, but who does she think they will believe – him, or her? She can

go to family or friends or a shelter, but he or his friends will find her. She can press charges against him, but she doesn't have enough evidence or credibility to make them stick. Or, if she does manage to get him convicted, he will lose his job and then she'll have no financial support. Or he will lose his job and then she will lose her life.

If the victim has ever tried to escape before, she hears the truth of what he is saying.

## System Response Inadequate

She knows that when the police arrive at the scene and learn that he is a police officer, a shift takes place. The responding officers are now responding not to the victim, but to "an officer in need".

Most police departments in the country do not even have a policy addressing the police perpetrated domestic violence, so it is the responding officers', the abusers colleagues who will be using their discretion as to how to handle the call. The responding officers are likely to try to dissuade her from signing a complaint. They advise her to think about his career, think about all the good things she has, think about their kids. They assure her that he's a good man and a good police officer, that he's just under a lot of stress. They promise to talk to him, to straighten him out.

Should the victim insist on pressing charges, she faces a legal system that is hostile and foreign to her, but his daily work environment. He knows the system and the players there are his acquaintances and co-workers. Historically, the court has been lenient with perpetrators, particularly those who are members of law enforcement. The Gun Law has had the effect of intensifying the efforts of the court to acquit the officer in order to protect his career.

The victim knows that he will find her if she goes to a shelter or family or friends. Most of her family and friends are afraid of him and afraid to get involved. Even domestic violence agencies and shelters feel inadequate and afraid to help. In general, the smaller the town the fewer options she has, and the higher his rank the fewer people who are willing to help her.

## Challenging the Police Family

We all know that police have a sense of family and have historically protected their own. They kept domestic violence in police homes a "family secret", and dealt with it "in-house" when they dealt with it at all.

We still see the same reluctance within the departments to consider police perpetrated domestic violence a crime as we saw in the general population 20 years ago. Police regress to talking about domestic violence in terms of "private matters" and "marital problems". They ask, "How can the department interfere in an employee's private life?" "The department shouldn't be involved in an officer's marital problems." "What the officer does on his own time is his own business". They ask, "How can we prosecute one of our own?"

Victims of police officers are not only challenging their abusers personal idea of the family, but they are up against the police family. The victim, not the abuser, is seen as the one who is causing problems for the department, she is identified as a traitor. The forces gather to silence her and to protect him. She has nowhere to turn.

If she is herself a police officer, she defies everyone's image of a victim. Her colleagues question her professional competence if she is a victim in her own home. If her abuser is also an officer,

she is breaking the police code of silence by exposing him. Her colleagues may well turn against her and side with the abuser.

## Law Enforcement's Embarrassment

If these were not typical scenarios, my program would not exist. It is an embarrassment to law enforcement that it does exist. The fact that I have gotten calls from victims and advocates all over the country testifies to the fact that we have a very serious, widespread problem here. Victims of police officer abuse are routinely denied protection of the law and no one knows where to turn.

I began this program to find alternative solutions for these victims. Because here, the protectors are the abusers, and we cannot use any of the resources or support systems we have worked so hard to put in place for other battered women.

## Departmental Integrity

Something is very wrong here. We should not have to search for alternative sources of shelter for police victims because the officers will hunt them down in established shelters. We should not need to persuade hospitals to give them free medical care because the victim is too terrified to use his medical insurance. We should not need to look for ways around the criminal justice system because we know that system is biased in favor of the police officer.

These "specialized services" should not be necessary for any victim, much less police-related victims. It is time for us to talk about ways to stop police departments from colluding with officers who abuse their families – both their personal families and the police family. How does any department delude itself into believing it is "taking care of its own" when it protects abusers within the department? And how can we allow any officer who abuses his own family to respond to domestic violence calls in our communities?

Instead of customizing services for victims of police abusers, we need to expect police departments to do what we ask battered women to do. We need to expect that the departments have the integrity to hold their own police family members accountable for criminal behavior.

The bottom line is that the police must decide whether or not they truly regard domestic violence as a crime. If it is a crime when committed by a civilian, then it is a crime when committed by a police officer. The consequence of losing one's job as a law enforcement officer as a result of perpetrating a criminal offense is not "holding police to a higher standard".

The fact that most police perpetrators' greatest fear is the loss of their job informs us that a department's policies and attitudes may be the most influential factors in deterring police officers from abusing their intimate partners.

Police departments have a responsibility to their employees and their employees' families to confront this problem. Specific policies must be written and it must be clearly communicated to all members of law enforcement that domestic violence within the police home will no longer be tolerated.