

Sensitive Policing Practices: Handling Women and Vulnerable Groups

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Abstract

The sensitive handling of victims of crime, specifically women and other vulnerable groups in society, has become a matter of great concern not only in most criminal justice organizations across the globe but also within international organizations, i.e. UN, EU, USAID, etc. This issue has become even more obvious in Pakistan where cultural and ideological beliefs and norms continue to support a male dominant society. It is critical that government, criminal justice, and law enforcement administrators ensure that proper training and understanding is provided to front line personnel and community service organizations to make sure that all victims of crime feel confident that their concerns are properly and professionally addressed.

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The sensitive handling of victims of crime, specifically women and other vulnerable groups in society, has become a matter of great concern not only in most police organizations in the world but also within the United Nations. In fact, the 10th United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders had this to say, "(m)ore than 50% of Victims around the world are unhappy about the way police treat them and many others end up severely traumatized by the Criminal Justice system" according to the International Crime Victims survey (ICVS) which has been carried out in more than 60 countries over the past decade. Victims interviewed by the ICVS most commonly stated that police "did not do enough." Globally one in five victims of domestic violence or rape has stated that "police were incorrect or impolite."

With the changing paradigm in policing from a law-enforcement to a service-oriented model, it is believed that police academies and law enforcement training schools ensure that the police are trained in handling victims, specifically women as well as all other vulnerable groups, in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This has been summed up most succinctly in the following words:

"The growing interest in victims of crime, the establishment of a new sub-discipline of victimology, and the emergence of the so called "victim's movement" marks one of the most significant changes which has occurred in recent years in a number of western societies" (Mathews 1994, p. 93).

This growing concern with the role and plight of victims has also had an impact on the training of police service personnel within Pakistan. Here, it has been realized that the police are the first component in the long chain of the criminal justice system, and that it is absolutely necessary that law enforcement officials, more than any other, are properly equipped with the knowledge, skills and capacity to deal with vulnerable groups, as it relates to both complainants/victims and offenders. Hence there has been a commencement of lectures and workshops at the Police College in Sihala, with the police academy following suit in pursuit of excellence in service oriented policing. In fact, police training institutes all over Pakistan are showing an increasing concern in issues related to human rights, the importance of due process versus mere crime control, and the difference between law enforcement and service oriented policing. This is largely the result of increasing public awareness and a very vibrant and free media. The public demand for a more service oriented and sensitive police force is growing by the day and criminal justice agencies have become cognizant of this fact.

It goes without saying that sensitive handling of these vulnerable groups cannot be achieved without in-depth, focused and intensive training. From a contextual perspective, the training about vulnerable groups must take place within the wider socio-cultural perspective and enable the officers involved in the training to better understand the concepts of vulnerability and sense of helplessness, and identify the factors contributing to this feeling of susceptibility. This will help them to develop a deeper appreciation of situations involving the treatment of different vulnerable groups.

As it relates to Pakistan, a discussion on the factors contributing to the vulnerability of women in general must include an in-depth analysis of the traditional gender roles that are routinely assigned to men and women; the perpetuation of these roles through various channels like formal education, print and electronic media and folk lore; how gender ideology gives rise to patriarchy right from the family unit up to the state; and the effects of this gender hierarchy on society and social practices. The last dimension should be discussed from the range of emotional perspectives: the lower level (grief at the birth of a daughter) to the extreme level (physical and psychological abuse). As part of this training, the officers could then be invited to come up with examples of domestic violence and then examine them in the framework of the penal code under which they operate.

The second part of the discourse must now turn to the manifestation of patriarchy in the working of the justice system. A good and in-depth discourse must encompass the entire justice system and then narrow down the subject to

the response and practices of police officers in the field as the first and foremost component of the criminal justice system. As Morley and Mullender (1994) have pointed out, "(t)he protection women receive from male violence through recourse to the criminal justice system is limited both in access and effectiveness." Any myths and beliefs that the officers have at this point, regarding the so-called soft treatment of female offenders and victims by the justice system should be dispelled as research clearly shows that the bias is tilted against women and not for them. The officers involved in the training should be exposed to the length and breadth of the justice system through case material, media reported items, as well as role playing in order to appreciate how difficult it is for women to navigate through the criminal justice process.

The final part of this training should include an honest assessment of police practices by the officers themselves to ascertain if they possess any biases as it relates to their work in the field. The most important and difficult phase at this point is to deconstruct concepts like "Chadowr" or "Char deewari" and the strong belief that women are most safe within the confines of the four walls of their home.

At this point, the officers must actively concentrate on deconstructing the term "domestic violence," or as it is referred to in Urdu as "Gharelo Tashadud." It has been seen that the word domestic, as far as the police and the general public is concerned, trivializes the nature of these incidents and crimes and distracts the police from the seriousness of the offence. Even though the police by law the police are not supposed to differentiate between public and private crimes, the reality on the ground is that this distinction is made on a daily basis by police officers across the world. This is because the police culture does not exist in a vacuum but is part and parcel of the "super culture" of society and is bound to be affected by it. In order to neutralize the effects of harmful cultural notions and to provide effective prevention and law enforcement, gender studies must be made a mandatory part of all police training and in-service courses so as to counter the effects of informal training and traditional cultural biases.

In view of the above, police officers must be trained to view victims as a special target group in need of services and the attention of the police and criminal justice authorities. This has been highlighted within the Dutch Victim Guidelines and has been acknowledged for their impact on victim satisfaction. These policies further point out that this would require that the police response be framed within a service oriented model rather than a procedural rights model. As such, the sound and comprehensive training of police officers should highlight the position that the assumption of truth is the corner stone of

victimology. It is one of the first demands of victimology in the case of a female complainant or one from another vulnerable group; the police officer must believe the complaint to be true. If proved otherwise, legal action can and should be taken later, but from the start, the victim should be believed.

The police officers should then be trained as the true first responders to be fully cognizant of the victim's feelings and stages of emotional reactions, namely denial, anger, remorse and grief. They should also be trained to deal with all or any one of them. The training should also emphasize the issue of protection of complainants and witnesses. The investigation into complaints by members of vulnerable groups should be conducted, while keeping in mind the imbalance of power between dominant and subordinate groups. An additional emphasis on communication skills is important as the interviewing of victims under these circumstances is a highly sensitive task.

In addition, the organizational rules, procedures and protocols dealing with juveniles must be within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (particularly Articles 37 and 40). Any training must cover these issues and the rationale behind them.

Finally, all police officers should not only be trained to develop sensitivity in order to deal with female victims, but should also be instructed to better understand and deal with women offenders. Women are known to use violence not as an instrument but as an expression. Many investigations of these incidents may reveal the woman offender to actually be a victim.

In conclusion it can be safely said that a desire to produce a sensitive police force which can deal with and handle vulnerable groups, especially women, has to be coupled with efforts in the field to provide like sound, effective and focused training. Indeed, it is in-depth training alone which can ensure the sensitive handling of vulnerable groups, not only in Pakistan, but across the globe.

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