

Editorial Introduction

Argentina established its first police stations specifically designed to receive female victims of gender violence in 1988. Today they have 128 of these specialist police stations in the province of Buenos Aires, employing 2300 officers in interdisciplinary teams.

This brief provides an overview of a world first study into how the unique model of women's police stations in Argentina respond to and prevent gender-based violence.

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How Women's Police Stations Prevent Gender Violence

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Women's Police Stations: a unique invention of the global south

Women's Police Stations are unique innovations that emerged in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century to address violence against women. Variations of the model have since spread across other parts of the global south—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). Like traditional policing models they offer a 365-day emergency response service, employ uniformed armed officers, have the authority of the state, and the same powers. Unlike traditional policing models, officers work from a gender perspective and have additional specialist training in responding to gender violence. CMFs look nothing like a police station. Most are brightly painted converted houses with welcoming reception rooms designed to receive victims, not offenders and do not have holding cells. They employ multi-disciplinary teams of police, social workers, lawyers, psychologists and counsellors who work collaboratively with other organisations (such as local boards, local government, religious, educational, and community organisations). While CMFs provide tertiary and secondary interventions in response to discrete incidents of domestic and sexual violence, more uniquely they have a legislated mandate to engage in primary prevention at least once a month within their own communities (Carrington et al 2020).



The establishment of Women's Police Stations in Argentina

Argentina has two different types of police stations that offer the public an emergency response: the common police (Comisaría) and police stations for women and families (Comisaría de la Mujer y Familia (CMF)).

The Province of Buenos Aires established its first CMF in 1988 and by the end of 2018 had 128 stations and another 16 specialist units. In that year they responded to approximately 257,000 complaints of domestic violence and 7,000 complaints of sexual assault. CMFs account for one in five of all police stations in the Province and, since 2009, have had a legislated mandate to prevent gender violence, under the National Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women (Law No. 26485). The definition of gender violence is broad and includes, physical, psychological, symbolic, obstetric and institutional.

CMFs have their own command structure and report to their own Commissioner providing a unique career structure not available to women integrated in traditional policing models (Natarajan, 2008:18; Prenzler and Sinclair 2013).



The Study

Our research team undertook a world first study of the unique way these stations called Comisaría de la Mujer (CMF) prevent gender-based violence in the Province of Buenos Aires Argentina (See Carrington et al; 2020).

We used a triangulated methodology that involved semi-structured interviews, field research, policy analysis and observations of community prevention work. We interviewed 100 staff—including police officers, social workers, lawyers and psychologists—from a stratified sample of ten women's police stations in the Province of Buenos Aires spread across an area of 2,500 km. The ten stations were chosen to reflect the diversity of urban and rural communities in the province. We recruited voluntary participants from each CMF. Interviews were conducted at the CMF at times that best suited them.

While most officers in our study are female (89%), male officers can work in CMFs in multi-disciplinary teams of social workers, lawyers, police and psychologists as long as they have had the requisite training. For police learning how to work from a gender perspective is a compulsory part of their training.

Working with Victims, Families and Perpetrators to unlearn and de-naturalise gender violence

The multi-disciplinary teams aim to break the cycle of domestic violence through targeted and strategic interventions with victims to de-naturalise violence.

Over half (56 %) of those interviewed described their role as one of helping women leave a violent relationship (Table 5 Carrington et al 2020:5). As one police officer described it,

“For me the goal is to reduce violence against women ... 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)

Psychologists attached to CMFs facilitate survivor support groups who meet weekly and remain in contact on-line. CMFs can also refer men to centres to ‘unlearn violence’.

Importantly specialist police stations for women, do not prioritise a traditional criminal justice response. They are survivor driven respecting the agency of victims over the authority of the state.

One of the chief obstacles in preventing gender violence is that most of it remains private and hidden in the family home (Dowling et al 2018), and the most vulnerable victims (i.e. Indigenous women) are least likely to report it to the police (Nancarrow, 2019). Specialist police stations for women overcome this problem by reassuring women they will be supported and not judged for breaking their silence.



Working with Communities to Prevent Gender Violence

In the Province of Buenos Aires, women's police stations are mandated under the Provincial Action Plan to undertake community prevention activities at least once a month (BA Province, undated). CMFs engage with a wide range of communities and organisations in their prevention work, such as religious organisations, women's groups, schools, hospitals, neighbourhood and community groups to fulfil this obligation (Table 7 Carrington et al 2020:55).



CMFs organise community prevention campaigns to coincide events, such as International Women's Day, Day of the Mother, the Festival of the Child and protests against femicide.

In anticipating increases in gender violence over Christmas, CMFs strategically distribute their contact details to hundreds of children and women by attaching this information to the wrapping of presents delivered by police dressed as Santa's helpers driving around the neighbourhood in their police cars with sirens blaring. When children and parents pile onto the streets to see what's going on, they are handed gifts with the CMF's contact details and

information about domestic and sexual violence.

These prevention activities are designed to raise consciousness, build trust and rapport, and turn around community norms that continue to underpin and tolerate violence against women. The wide-scale educative impact of the CMFs community engagement activities directly challenge the social norms that sustain violence against women. Consequently, CMFs are both regulators of the social order but also *'engines for change'* (Psychologist Station C)

Working with organisations to prevent gender violence

While many police organisations in Australia and elsewhere in the world work with other government organisations as part of their routine response to domestic and sexual violence complaints, women's police stations in Argentina are mandated under the 2009 National Action Plan to meet monthly. Women's police stations work in collaboration with other government, local and provincial organisations through Local Boards (Mesas Locales) established under this plan. These local boards are strategically important in co-ordinating activities of the many agencies involved in responding to and preventing gender violence. This collaboration reduces duplication, while pooling and prioritising local resources to develop a 'road map' to prevent gender violence.

The boards bring together representatives of state agencies addressing health, education, human rights, children, gender policy and the judiciary, to coordinate local actions and strategies to respond to and prevent gender violence.

Of the employees of CMFs interviewed, 86 per cent worked with these local social development boards (see Table 8 Carrington et al 2020:57). The majority (82%) described their work with such organisations as very useful to the prevention of violence against women. A police officer we interviewed described them this way:

"The [Local] Board is useful to coordinate actions, to improve the failures in each case, to correct and not to repeat mistakes...It provides information about how each agency works, the conditions of admission, what works in the repertoire of state agencies. We normally identify the agency's ...most difficult cases or the ones that require special treatment. It is often very useful to articulate because different agencies often do the same work and resources are wasted"

(Police Officer, Station H).



Concluding Remarks

Our research adds to a growing body of empirical evidence that women are more comfortable reporting to women police in a family friendly environment (Jubb et al. 2010; Miller and Segal 2018; Hautzinger 2016; Santos, 2004; Natarajan 2008). Women's police stations enhance women's willingness to report, which then enlarges access to a range of other support services and widens access to justice (Jubb et al. 2010; Santos 2004: 50; Perova and Reynolds 2017). In metropolitan Brazil, while the rates of femicide are considerably higher than Australia, the presence of a women's police station halved the femicide rate for women aged 15-24 and reduced the overall rate by 17% (Perovic and Reynolds 2017: 193-194).

While not without limitations, our study found women's police stations in the Province of Buenos Aires Argentina prevent gender violence in three distinct ways: 1) by working with victims and offenders to de-naturalise violence and prevent re-victimisation; 2) by working with communities to disrupt the patriarchal norms that sustain gender violence and 3) by working with local boards to create road maps to reduce duplication, pool resources and share information about high risk cases to reduce the number that end up as femicides. As a by-product women's police stations provide police officers in the global south a career in law enforcement framed from a gender perspective.

We conclude that there is much Australia can learn from this unique model of policing gender-based violence (Carrington et al 2020).

This study is framed by Southern Criminology (Carrington et al 2016) which reverses the notion that ideas, policies and theories can only travel from the Anglophone world of the Global North to the Global South.

A follow up brief will report on our investigation into the prospects for translating aspects of how CMFs work into Australian policing frameworks.



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About the Project

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