The role of women’s police stations in responding to and preventing gender violence, Buenos Aires, Argentina: Stage 1 Report ARC Project

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About the Project

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How to Cite

CONTENTS

Research team ...................................................................................................................................................... 1
Introduction and background to the study ............................................................................................................. 1
The case for sex segregated policing of gender violence ..................................................................................... 1
The emergence of ‘women’s police stations’ in Latin America ...................................................................... 2
Women’s police stations in other parts of the World ....................................................................................... 4
The emergence of women’s police stations in Argentina ................................................................................. 5
Method ..................................................................................................................................................................... 5
Discussion of results ............................................................................................................................................... 6
   Table 1: Interviews in women’s police stations, La Plata, Buenos Aires ...................................................... 6
   Table 2: Professional qualifications ................................................................................................................ 10
   Table 3: Specialist training to work in women’s police stations ................................................................ 11
   Table 4: Routine roles of employees at women’s police stations ............................................................... 11
Working with women to prevent gender violence ............................................................................................. 11
Working with communities and organisations to prevent gender violence .................................................. 13
   Table 5: Working with organisations to prevent gender violence .............................................................. 13
   Table 6: Government agencies that work with women’s police stations to prevent gender violence .......... 17
   Table 7: Years of service in this or at another women’s police station ........................................................ 18
Capacity and limitation of prevention work through women’s police stations ............................................ 19
   Table 8: Resourcing of women’s police stations .......................................................................................... 20
Preliminary findings .............................................................................................................................................. 22
Acknowledgements: .............................................................................................................................................. 23
References ............................................................................................................................................................ 24
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is the first report of a study into the role of women’s police stations in Argentina in responding to and preventing gender violence. The study is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and includes a multi-country team of researchers from Australia and Argentina. Violence against women and girls is a global policy issue with significant social, economic and personal consequences. A World Health Organization (2013) prevalence study found that 35 per cent of women in the world had experienced violence or sexual abuse by a partner or ex-partner, and that women who are murdered by a partner or ex-partner account for 38 per cent of all female homicides. However, the burden of violence against women and girls is distributed unequally, with rates of violence significantly higher in low to middle income countries of the Global South. Yet, the bulk of global research on gender violence is based on the experiences of urban communities in high-income English-speaking countries mainly from the Global North. Only 11 per cent of research on gender violence has been conducted in Africa and 7 per cent in South Asia (Arango et al. 2014, 19). This body of research also tends to promote policy interventions that are either unsustainable (such as specialised domestic violence courts) or mono-cultural (based on white women’s experiences) and consequently of little assistance in designing interventions to eliminate gender violence in culturally diverse, low income and post-conflict, post-colonial or neo-colonial contexts in the Global South (Carrington et al. 2019). It is in this context that women’s specialist police stations, which first emerged in Latin America over 30 years ago and have since grown exponentially in countries of the Global South, warrant serious consideration as a more effective method for responding to violence against women, than reliance on traditional models of policing.

THE CASE FOR SEX SEGREGATED POLICING OF GENDER VIOLENCE

Policing is a male dominated profession, where masculine culture is pervasive, if not hegemonic (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 (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013). Women in policing are less likely to work in specialist roles, such as tactical response and drug squads (Collins 2017; Dodge et al. 2011; Irving 2009, 4-5), and are more likely to be restricted to particular roles, such as administrative, personnel and communications units (Martin 1990, 94-100; Rabe-Hemp 2008, 259). 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).

An international review of policing in 23 countries concluded that ‘There was very little evidence that United Nations’ policies or agreements on women’s employment or the protection of women from crime translated into practice within police departments’ (Prenzler and Sinclair 2013, 128). Given the systemic shortcomings of traditional policing responses to victims of domestic and sexual violence, the case for sex segregation in policing is strong. There is a growing body of evidence showing that women’s police stations or units, alongside increasing the number of women in law enforcement more generally, will reduce some of the systemic problems with current male dominated models of policing violence against women (Amaral et al. 2018, 3; Miller and Segal 2018; Natarajan 2005). Indeed, a similar problem exists with United Nations (UN) co-ordinated peace-keeping missions, which has similarly led to calls for more gender balance in peace-keeping and for women-only police forces and peace-keeping units globally (Pruitt 2013).

**THE EMERGENCE OF ‘WOMEN’S POLICE STATIONS’ IN LATIN AMERICA**

Women’s police stations first emerged in Latin America in the 1980s in a period of re-democratisation. In 1985, the state of São Paulo, Brazil established its first women’s police station in response to feminist demands that the democratic state act to advance women’s citizenship by protecting them from male violence (Santos 2005). In Portuguese these stations are called Delegacia da Mulher (DDM). By 2010, Brazil had established around 475 of these specialist women’s police stations (Jubb et al. 2010). DDMs also provided new jobs for women and, for the first time, a career structure in policing, a deeply masculinist field of employment for men who in the main failed to take women’s complaints of violence seriously (Santos 2005, 34). Significantly, the DDMs arose from a democratic process established by the newly elected governor Franco Montoro from the Brazilian Democratic Party in a post-authoritarian Brazil, who established a new council staffed by women, feminists and activists (Santos 2005, 35). This council followed the principles of participatory democracy by including actors
from social movements in new hybrid state/society collaborations or partnerships to address social problems that affect women. Most notably, the SOS-Muhler (SOS women), an activist group that had campaigned in support of the victims of domestic and sexual violence since the early 1980s welcomed the proposal to establish women’s police stations (Santos 2005, 36). This was despite feminist qualms about collaborating with the coercive arm of the state to bring about effective interventions to end violence against women (Nelson 1996).

After only one year of operation in Brazil, the first DDM was judged to be a success as the number of women reporting complaints of violence more than doubled (Santos 2005, 30). Subsequent assessments of women’s police stations in Brazil were mixed, with the main criticism being a chronic shortage of resources (Hautzinger 2002; 2016; Nelson 1996; Santos 2005; Jubb et al. 2010; Perova and Reynolds 2017). Hautzinger (2016), who conducted an ethnographic study of one DDM in Brazil in the 1990s, now argues that between 1985 and 2006 the effectiveness of women’s police stations was undermined by chronic resource shortages, partly due to the droves of women seeking assistance, creating backlogs and increasing waiting times for assistance. Hautzinger concluded that the critical value of women’s police stations are their role in sensitising communities that violence against women is a crime (2002, 248; 2016, 577, 582). An evaluation of women’s police stations in Latin America found that of those surveyed, 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).

Following extensive critique of how the existing system of courts for less serious offences (Juizados Especiais Criminais) dealt with men’s violence, Brazil introduced the Maria de Penha Law (Law No. 11.340) in 2006. The new law created new specialised courts to deal with domestic and gender violence, shifted interpersonal violence from a civil to a criminal offence, and provided additional funding for strengthening collaboration across the government and non-government sectors to provide additional support to victims of domestic violence through women’s police stations (Perova and Reynolds 2017, 190). Since then women’s police stations in Brazil have responded more effectively to gender violence and now have higher conviction rates than in the past, and increasing numbers of women are seeking their specialist services (Hauztinger 2016, 582).

The most recent study of women’s police stations in Brazil, conducted during the time of the introduction of the Mariah de Penha Law has produced some very promising results. The study assessed shifts in female homicide rates in 2074 municipalities from 2004 to 2009, controlling for a number of variables. The presence of a women’s police station (DDM) was the main variable. The study found that where DDMs 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 an astonishing 50 per cent (or 5.57 deaths reduction per 100,000) (Perova and Reynolds 2017, 193-194). On this basis Perova and Reynolds concluded that ‘women’s police stations appear to be highly effective among young women living in metropolitan areas’ (2017, 188). This study adds to a small but growing body of compelling quantitative and qualitative evidence about the effectiveness of women’s police stations in Brazil and India (Natarajan 2005; Amaral et al. 2018; Hautzinger 2003; 2007; Jubb et al. 2010; Perova and Reynolds 2017).
WOMEN’S POLICE STATIONS IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD

The idea of establishing women’s police stations or units to respond to violence against women, has spread to other countries in the Global South, including South Africa, India, Ghana, Kosovo, Liberia, and the Philippines (UN Women 2011). Women’s police stations that dealt specifically with crimes against women were introduced in India 1992, with the first established in Tamil Nadu (Natarajan 2005, 89). By 2013 there were 479 all women police units (AWPU) established to deal with domestic violence and dowry disputes in India (Amaral et al. 2018, 3). The dowry system which involves the exchange of valuables, property or money by the bride’s family, usually in return for an arranged marriage, makes young women vulnerable to domestic and family violence (Natarajan 2005, 90). Indeed, dowry murders remain a significant problem in India with around 7-8000 reported annually (Statista 2019).

After a complaint is lodged with the AWPU, the initial goal is to achieve reconciliation between the parties (Natarajan 2005, 92). Most complainants simply want the violence to stop, their husbands warned and few want or can afford legal action (Natarajan 2005, 93). Analysing 474 cases, Natarajan (2005, 95) found 86 per cent of women agreed to participate in reconciliation discussions. From these, 50 per cent of cases reconciled, 25 per cent were referred to family court, 9 per cent separated and 11 per cent of cases were withdrawn. In cases of serious violence, the police officers took legal action against the accused, but this was rare (Natarajan 2005, 96). Interviews with 60 of these women found that 93 per cent were satisfied with the immediate response of the police and 88 per cent felt that the police were helpful in listening to their problems and tried hard to resolve the dispute (Natarajan 2005, 101). Of those that received counselling, 68 per cent were pleased with the outcome and most of the participants had a positive opinion of the women police. Participants felt that the authority of the police had an important effect on their husband’s behaviour (Natarajan 2005, 101). Natarajan makes the interesting observation that these AWPU ‘act as a surrogate village “Panchayat”’ (Natarajan 2005, 102), a customary form of justice traditionally used to mediate disputes (Natarajan 2005, 91), ‘with the important difference that police are in charge of resolving the dispute and they often serve as advocates for women’ (Natarajan 2005, 102).

A more recent study in India compared crime and reporting rates in cities with and without AWPU (Amaral et al. 2018). Across the cities with AWPU, the study found a 22 per cent increase in reports of crime against women (Amaral et al. 2018, 1, 12). They also found a 15 per cent increase in arrests for kidnapping of women and concluded that women are more likely to report crime at AWPU (Amaral et al. 2018, 5, 27). Amaral et al. (2018, 29) argue these sorts of results indicate an improvement to access to justice for women. However their study found no change in rates of gender specific mortality or self-reported intimate partner abuse (Amaral et al. 2018, 1). One possible explanation for this could be that in India AWPU primarily operate as centres for dispute resolution, mediation, and law enforcement, with no mandate for prevention of the kind undertaken by women’s police stations in Latin America (Amaral et al. 2018, 9).
THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN’S POLICE STATIONS IN ARGENTINA

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 Comisaria de la Mujer, now called Comisaria 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—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 (Ley de Protección Integral para prevenir, sancionar y erradicar la Violencia contra las Mujeres en los Ámbitos en que desarrollen sus Relaciones Interpersonales). A Department for Gender Policy in the Ministry of Security and Local Boards (Mesas Locales Intersectorales) were established to integrate all the municipal and provincial services involved in preventing gender violence. Following the implementation of this law a further 91 women’s police stations were established over the last nine 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 2000 officers who deal with approximately 307,000 cases per annum.\(^1\) In 2012, the offence of femicide was incorporated by Law 26.791, amendment to the Criminal Code.

METHOD

This first report of our ARC Project is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 51 staff, including police officers, social workers, lawyers and psychologists, from five women’s police stations in the province of Buenos Aires (BA), Argentina, located in Tigre, La Plata, Berisso, Ensenada and Ezeiza. We have referred to these stations as A, B, C, D, and E to protect the anonymity of our respondents. The interviews were undertaken in October and November of 2018. All stations had been in operation for at least six years, the longest 30 years. All are within relative proximity to the city of Buenos Aires, an autonomous district that is the federal capital of Argentina, or the capital of the Buenos Aires Province, in La Plata. All interviews were in Spanish. Transcripts in this report have been translated by the ARC research team. Three members of the ARC team undertook the interviews together, two to ask questions and one to transcribe directly into the survey instrument. The report will be produced in both Spanish and English and circulated to participants for comment prior to any public dissemination. We have plans to undertake another 40-50 interviews in another five CMFs (Azul, Bahia Blanca, Mar del Plata, Olvarria and Tandil) still within the BA Province but within a 2000 km radius of the capital.

The instrument was divided into six sections. The first asked standard questions about socio-demographic background, the second a series of questions about their length of time worked in a CMF, and any specific training undertaken with respect to their job. The third block asked a range of questions about how they engaged with the community and the types of public outreach they undertook as well as the preventative aspects of their work. The fourth block of questions were about typical profiles of victims seeking their assistance and types of violence they mostly dealt with

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\(^1\) Estimate only, based on data supplied during interview with Zone commanders. Accurate data has been sought for the BA Province from the Ministry of Security.
(domestic, sexual, obstetric, reproductive, institutional and Internet-based). We asked standard questions about whether they regarded the resources available as adequate for them to do their job. The fifth set of questions were about the general operation of CMF—their vision, function, and any changes to how they have operated over time. The last block of questions were about their perceptions of the representation of gender violence and the impact of the growing women’s movements in Argentina demanding that the state do more to protect women from femicide, domestic and sexual violence. The interviews were audio recorded and notes were typed throughout to assist the thematic analysis of the data. The interview data was supplemented with field research notes, data from public leaflets and, in some cases, photos and videos of activities between the CMF and the public. All this information was voluntarily provided by the directors of each CMF. The field research also included guided tours of the stations and the occasional drive in a women’s police car around the local neighbourhood.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Our research team was granted permission from the Comisaría Directora General, Ministerio de Seguridad de la Provincia de Buenos Aires to undertake research with ten women’s police stations in the province, three close to the capital La Plata, two close to Buenos Aires (the capital of Argentina), and another five in regional cities/centres of the province. La Plata has 17 women’s police stations or offices which respond to 40,800 cases per year, an average of 200 per month per station. The stations where we conducted interviews were the larger ones in the city areas of La Plata and Buenos Aires with significantly higher caseloads between 300 to 700 per month. This is the first study of its kind in Argentina and one of the very few in the world to actually interview the employees of these stations. This report is based on interviews undertaken with 51 employees of the five stations, of whom 90 per cent were female, 82 per cent were employed as police, and 18 per cent worked as lawyers, psychologists or social workers (see Table 1). The majority (72 per cent) were aged between 26-45 (see Appendix Table Age). The median length of service in a woman’s police stations was 8.7 years, with the longest 30 years (see Table 7). 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Police Officer</th>
<th>Lawyer Psychologist</th>
<th>Social Worker</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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In Buenos Aires Province women’s police stations operate out of converted houses or from offices in main streets. Those in the suburbs operate out of converted houses situated in local barrios (see Photo A). Four of the five women’s police stations where we conducted interviews worked from converted houses in the suburbs. One of the factors that distinguishes women’s police stations from traditional models of policing is that they work in multi-professional teams of lawyers, social workers, psychologists and police to respond to cases of violence against women. As such they provide women with a gateway of integrated services in policing, legal support, counselling and housing and financial advice to help address the multi-dimensional problems typically experienced by survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Importantly, access to support is not dependent on whether or not women decide to make a formal report or pursue a criminal conviction. Like traditional policing models, women’s police stations provide an emergency response as they operate 24 hours a day, every day of the year. One police officer commented ‘we work at 100%. ... The police station operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Here the door does not close, the computer does not turn off’ (Police Officer, Station B).

Unlike traditional policing models, women’s police stations have a mandate under the national action plan to undertake prevention activities with their local community at least once a month. Their prevention work is described in detail in the following sections. They conduct this work in collaboration with other government, local and provincial organisations. ‘Mesas Locales’ (local boards) are strategically important in co-ordinating the activities of the many agencies involved in responding to and preventing gender violence. Mesas Locales bring together representatives of state agencies in health, education, judiciary, humans rights, children and gender policy, to coordinate actions and strategies to respond to and prevent gender violence. Of those interviewed, 75 per cent worked with these local boards (see Table 6). One station Commander described their role in local boards this way:

> The Local Boards emerged as a provincial program to combat gender violence in 2009. Each agency has a representative, we represent the Ministry of Security, there are staff from the Ministry of Health, Children, Education, Justice, Human Rights, Family Courts. (Commander, Station D)
Four of the five women’s police stations where we conducted interviews were brightly painted houses (usually purple, yellow, sky blue, pink or green) with welcoming reception rooms, play rooms or spaces for children and inviting interview rooms adorned with flowers and paintings (see photos A, C, D, E, F and G). The distinctive appearance of their patrol cars and stations within the barrios is deliberately designed to encourage visibility, enhance reporting, strengthen confidence, and widen access to justice for women. One of the psychologist’s interviewed described their location as ‘a strategic area where women come. ... After so much time we’ve built a bond of fellowship ... And that is good. ... That’s why it’s strategic, because people come.’ (Psychologist, Station B). A lawyer interviewed commented, ‘From the preventive aspect I think that the people have lost a little fear of coming to the women’s police stations, as they have a better image and are more accessible’ (Lawyer, Station D). Women can come at any time of day or night with their children, because the women’s police stations provide childcare and are family friendly, very much unlike general police stations (Photos C, D and E). When women come to the station with nothing they are provided with clothing, food and support, much of it donated by the local community or the station employees.

The staff have an impressive human quality, often out of their own pocket they buy nappies for children who come with nothing. We have a small community closet with clothes and shoes to provide them. Sometimes they leave their homes in the middle of an emergency and arrive with nothing. So here we offer what we have. (Police Officer, Station B)

Of those interviewed, 58.8 per cent said their routine work included childcare duties (Table 4). This is another aspect of their job that distinguishes them from generalist police. The provision of a space for children was seen by our interviewees as critical to encourage women to come to the station and seek their help. A separate space for children was also regarded as essential to prevent the re-victimisation of children by having to hear their mothers recounting their experiences of domestic violence.

For children it is very important to have their own space, separate from where the mother is explaining what happened, not to relive everything. ... It seems frivolous, but having a television while people wait, a space for the children. ...The women have to come with their children, they have nowhere to leave them. We try to make it a different space, with colours, with games. (Police Officer, Station B)

Comisarías de la Mujer y Familia (CMF) (police stations for women and families) are staffed by multi-disciplinary teams that include varying combinations of police, social workers, psychologists and lawyers. Traditionally they only dealt with complaints of violence against women (domestic and sexual violence) but have more recently broadened their activity to include sex trafficking offences, technologically assisted forms of domestic and sexual violence, and violence against lesbian and transgender members of the community, although 100 per cent of our respondents said that the latter ‘very rare’. They accept self-reports from men and attempt to steer violent men to support groups established by the local authorities to ‘unlearn’ violent conduct.
There have been cases of men coming to ask for help, who recognize that the situation is overwhelming, that they come voluntarily to ask for help ... There is a group of men who work with men who exercise violence ... The Program is called ‘Unlearning’, the idea is to work in these reflection groups about their behaviors. (Psychologist, Station C)

The majority of police officers of women’s police stations are female and they have the same powers as general police as well as the same training. Of those we interviewed, 68.6 per cent had the public security qualifications expected of Argentinian police and 70.6 per cent had received specialist training to work in the women’s police station (Tables 2 and 3). Most of the specialist training was organised by the Gender Policy Unit in the Ministry of Security. Police officers can transfer from the general police to the women’s police as part of a chosen career path in law enforcement; however, it is primarily women who choose this career pathway. Four of the five women’s police stations were directed 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. He was as dedicated and enthusiastic about his job as the female commanders and well-liked by his all-female team. Teamwork is essential with 92 per cent of interviewees describing themselves as working in a team.

Our team is not so much a professional team but the team of the police station, that's the team. It is more than interdisciplinary, its inter-knowledge, because I learned a lot of things from the police personnel, from their practice. I believe that from talking to the other, we learn beyond our differences. We have the same objective and that is that the person leaves the situation of violence. (Psychologist, Station C)
TABLE 2: PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Public Security</th>
<th>Police Training</th>
<th>Social Work</th>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Psychology</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>3.9%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
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In contrast to traditional policing, prevention work is obligatory and thus essential to the work of CMFs in the province of Buenos Aires. Almost 71 per cent of those interviewed described prevention as part of their role at the women’s police station (Table 4). 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 by working collaboratively with other organisations (co-ordinated by local boards), and the third is work with the community to prevent violence from occurring by transforming the cultures and norms that sustain violence against women. Below we describe in more detail how women’s police stations engage in these two different approaches to preventing gender violence.
### TABLE 3: SPECIALIST TRAINING TO WORK IN WOMEN’S POLICE STATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you received specialist training?</th>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>13</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4: ROUTINE ROLES OF EMPLOYEES AT WOMEN’S POLICE STATIONS

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

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one answer

**WORKING WITH WOMEN TO PREVENT GENDER VIOLENCE**

When asked what groups they worked with to prevent violence almost half said they worked with women’s groups (See Table 5). Several of the police stations had run women’s support groups, and online 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 contribution 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 [online] 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)

The psychologist described how the groups are reflective spaces where women can deal with complex ambiguous emotions of guilt and shame. While she participates in the group much of the conversation is led by survivors who, through example and empathy, support women to break the cycle of violence—what she referred to as ‘subjection’. The objective of working with women’s groups is to raise consciousness, empower women, build resilience, prevent re-victimisation and reduce the number of cases ending in femicide. Below is a sample of responses from respondents about the importance of consciousness-raising work with women as a method of prevention.

It is very difficult to prevent gender violence as if it is just another type of crime. It is important to raise awareness about the issue so that the woman is empowered and can move forward. We do these type of talks, and explain what things they can do, we listen to their doubts and answer their queries. We explain the support they can get as they need from the women’s police station, so they can get out of the situation of violence. (Police Officer, Station A)

Sometimes with an interview you can do much more than you think. Making a woman listen, can generate some change, a movement. In that sense, I do believe that it can prevent violence ... That’s the objective. It is an active listening so that the woman can separate from that relationship of submission. See what resources she has at the psychic, economic and social level and what is the network of family or friends that she has so that she can be strengthened. (Psychologist, Station C)

One of the commanders interviewed stated that 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)

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, and 70.6 per cent said prevention was a routine aspect of their work (Table 4).

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, CMFs are mandated to undertake prevention activities in the community. The stations engage with a wide range of communities and organisations in their prevention work, such as women’s religious organisations, women’s groups, schools, hospitals, neighbourhood and community groups (Table 5). When asked what kind of prevention activities they undertook with the community 68.6 per cent of interviewees said they worked with schools, and 64.7 per cent with the local neighbourhood or community groups. The prevention activities of the CMFs are designed to raise consciousness, build local networks, trust and rapport, and turn around the outdated norms in the community that continue to underpin and tolerate violence against women. The quality of the prevention services provided however varies according to the adequacy of resources. Some stations, and one in particular (Station E), told us they were too overwhelmed with their case load to engage in more than the mandated monthly prevention activities. However others undertook their prevention work in the community with immense pride and dedication, raising donations in toys, clothing, food and furnishings for the women and children who come through their doors.

### TABLE 5: WORKING WITH ORGANISATIONS TO PREVENT GENDER VIOLENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Women’s Groups</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Neighbourhood or Community Groups</th>
<th>Hospitals</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>29.4%</strong></td>
<td><strong>49.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>68.6%</strong></td>
<td><strong>64.7%</strong></td>
<td><strong>27.5%</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.9%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one answer
The proximity of women’s police stations to citizens, through their strategic location in the barrios, was described by one of the Zone Commanders as key to their ability to prevent domestic violence. As more than two thirds of our interviewees undertook prevention work with schools (Table 5), they described why:

We particularly work with children and schools, as far as primary prevention is the best place. We can work on cultural issues about gender inequality, how they are constructed since childhood. (Psychologist, Station C)

We have held workshops in schools or in different places, there is an annual agenda, we present ourselves in certain places, we make brochures and we explain our work to the community. (Police Officer, Station D)

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)

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)

Every Christmas, the entire team from Station A gather donations of toys and lollies to distribute to the local community. In anticipating increases in gender violence over Christmas, they strategically distribute contact details of the women’s police station to hundreds of children and women by attaching this information to the wrapping of presents (See photos H and I). They also hold a Christmas party at the station and invite the local community. We were told over 100 children attended with their mothers at the station this year.
But they don’t rest here. They visit children and women in the local hospitals handing out presents with their contact details. Then they dress up as Santa and Santa’s helpers and 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 toys and lollies (Photos H and I) with the contact details. 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 K]. 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, [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, Station A)

The Commander of another station described how they worked within an integrated network of government organisations to aid the prevention of gender violence. Over 84 per cent interviewed worked with the gender policy units established by local and provincial governments (Table 6). This unit works closely with the Director’s Office of the Women’s Police Stations in the BA Provincial Ministry of Security. One of the Zone commanders who had worked in women’s police stations for over 30 years summarised the prevention approach thus:

Prevention is aided by the proximity (of the women’s police stations) with the citizen, on the one hand, and by the relationship with the Local Board. ... Now we have started working with violent men, with the Human Rights Secretariat, the Local Board, the Addiction Prevention Centre, and the Board of Freemen. (Zone Commander)
PHOTO J: COMMUNITY PREVENTION WORK

PHOTO K: NI UNA MENOS (NOT ONE LESS WOMAN) CAMPAIGN TO END FEMICIDE
Which government agencies does this CMF work to reduce the impact of gender violence in the community?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Local Social Development</th>
<th>Provincial Social Development</th>
<th>Gender Policy Units</th>
<th>Public Prosecutor’s Office</th>
<th>Public Criminal Defence</th>
<th>Judicial Office/Courts</th>
<th>Provincial Education Organisations</th>
<th>Women’s Political Organisations</th>
<th>Access to Justice Centres</th>
<th>Justice of Peace</th>
<th>Ombudsman</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>36</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>80.4%</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

74.5 per cent of interviewees described their work with these organisations as very useful.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>less year</th>
<th>1 to 2</th>
<th>2 to 3</th>
<th>3 to 5</th>
<th>6 to 8</th>
<th>9 to 11</th>
<th>12 to 14</th>
<th>15 to 17</th>
<th>18 to 20</th>
<th>21 to 25</th>
<th>more 25</th>
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</tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Years</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>445</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The capacity of women’s police stations in the province of Buenos Aires to prevent gender violence is enhanced through three main strategies, by working with women to prevent re-victimisation, by working collaboratively with other organisations (co-ordinated by local boards), and by working with communities to change the social norms the support gender violence. Like traditional policing models they offer an emergency response 365-days a year, 24-hours a day. Unlike traditional policing, victims are received within a family friendly environment where their needs are responded to by an interdisciplinary team of professionals. A psychologist we interviewed described why so many new police stations for women have been created in the province of Buenos Aires.

More police stations have been created to cover the entire province and every woman knows that if something happens to her, she can count on that, for the purpose is that they are there 24 hours a day. Teams are created so that people also have assistance, that they are listened to, that it is not just an automatic response to have to make a report.

However the capacity to undertake prevention work through women’s police stations is limited by insufficient resources. Almost two-thirds of those interviewed felt they did not have adequate resources in relation to personnel, facilities, budget, and working conditions to respond to their case load (see Table 8). Ideally all victims should be received by the inter-disciplinary professional team, but lawyers, social workers and psychologists are only available for periods of time (for example, 30 hours per week) or certain days of the week. The facilities of some of the older premises were rudimentary with one station without gas for heating or adequate plumbing to allow clients to access toilet amenities. Others had outdated computers, broken printers and mobile phones. Two of the stations had gaping holes in their ceilings, although one of these stations has since moved to a new premises in a much better state of repair. Three had fairly reliable police vehicles but the other two had vehicles needing repair. There was also a widely held view that women’s police stations were under-resourced compared to generalist police stations because their work was under-valued.

We are auxiliaries of justice, we are not justice. Justice are Judges and Prosecutors. Our resources are basic, they are few. (Police Officer, Station C)

Despite the frustrations in being able to deliver justice to clients with limited resources, the majority still felt that the women’s police station in which they worked fulfilled its objectives (Table 8). Less than 10 per cent felt their station did not function as it should (Table 8). Two of the stations reported they had abundant resources because of their special relationship with the local authorities who provided furnishings, computers, equipment, patrol cars and the like. All of the stations also received donations of toys, clothing and furnishings from the community and civil organisations.
The most persistent concern raised by our respondents related to the lack of support for them as the first responders to distressed victims of violence. They talked about suffering from vicarious violence and of having difficulty in being able to return home after listening and responding to so many women’s experiences of violence. Compounding this was the long 24 hours shifts worked in some of the stations, though others worked in 12-hour shifts. One police officer we interviewed became visibly upset when she recounted the day at work in the station when she breastfed a baby of a mother who was in a coma. Others recalled the emotional difficulty of the job and their need for more self-care.

It is not an easy job, the person attending needs and should have counselling, one also suffers violence. (Police Officer, Station A)

I think that working in this police station generates a lot of emotional charge ..., I think that we should take more care of the staff working on these issues. (Police Officer, Station A)

One leaves frustrated, your day ends and you leave but you do not forget what happened. And all that affects you. (Police Officer, Station C)

Despite the difficulty and demands of working in a women’s police station, the research team was struck by the dedication, compassion and resilience of those we interviewed. Almost all said they liked
their work, and felt especially rewarded by the gratitude they received from women who they had helped to turn their lives around. This lengthy quote illustrates the ambiguity of working in a women’s police station—when asked ‘What do you like most about working at the Women’s Police Station?’

I will not deny that it is a difficult job, sometimes it is difficult to understand, but most of the people who are here have had a period of violence in our lives and we empathize with people, we understand violence. ... as something cyclical, which is built over years and what it costs to leave. Violence is stigmatizing, although it is a cultural problem not everyone brings it to light ... we know that it is difficult to eradicate it. While the complaint is the legal tool, good therapy, good support is the best way to avoid recidivism. There are people who come back and come back. The best part of the job is not the papers, it’s about understanding, making the other person open their eyes, we’ve all been victims of some type of violence and that’s the hardest part, recognizing ourselves. Beyond the complaint, I prefer to spend two hours talking with the person, to open their eyes, tell them that they have rights, that they do not have to be submissive or do what others say. That it is not a crime to take the children, that no one is going to take the children out of the house. That is what fulfils me the most personally. It is difficult to work with a gender perspective to understand these issues, it is very stressful too. There are cases that make you stressed. You have to have a special sensitivity for this not to take the problem to your home. It is not simple. (Police Officer, Station C, 18 years)

Women’s police stations have a number of similarities and dissimilarities from traditional models of policing that enhance their capacity to police 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. Prevention work with the community is obligatory and highly valued. 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. 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 to gender violence (Mesas Locales Intersectorales, BA Provincia, undated). 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 stations 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)
One of the chief obstacles in responding to gender violence is that most of it remains private and hidden in the family home (AIHW 2018, 5), and victims, especially the most vulnerable, are least likely to report it to the police (Dowling et al. 2018). 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 2018; Natarajan 2005, 91). This is why women’s police stations are effective in enhancing women’s willingness to report, which then 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 2005, 50; Perova and Reynolds 2017). Our research on women’s police stations in the province of Buenos Aires supports these conclusions. While they vary in appearance and have minimal resources, women’s police stations are one of the most important entry points for accessing justice and enhancing the visibility of violence against women.

Our study found that women’s police stations in Argentina prevent gender violence through three main strategies that look quite promising. Our research contributes to understanding their logic and practice. First, they prevent re-victimisation and reduce the number of high-risk cases that could otherwise end in more serious incidents or even femicide. By understanding domestic violence as cyclical, women’s police stations aim to break that cycle through targeted and strategic interventions with victims. To be able to measure this impact would require access to longitudinal data for the province of Buenos Aires that measures the variance of rates between localities with women’s police stations and those without. The research team does not have access to this data. However, the results of a similar study in Brazil demonstrate that the presence of women’s police stations leads to a 50 per cent drop in lethal partner violence for young women in urban areas, and a 17 per cent drop overall (Perova and Reynolds 2017, 193-194).

Preventing gender violence is not a capability of any one agency alone. Secondly, by working in a co-ordinated way through local boards (Mesas Locales Intersectorales) with other municipal and provincial agencies, women’s police stations enhance a region’s capacity to prevent and respond to gender violence.

Thirdly, women’s police stations prevent gender violence from occurring in the first place through the wide-scale educative impact of their community engagement activities. Again, knowing how much their work with communities prevents gender and family violence is difficult to gauge in a single time-frame study such as ours. Only a longitudinal study of women’s police stations would be able to measure this impact. Their preventative impact also cannot be assessed by shifts in rates of reporting, as policy measures, legislative changes and campaigns to end violence against women are designed precisely to increase rates of reporting (Dowling et al. 2018). Yet, increases in reporting of incidents of domestic and family violence have nevertheless been interpreted a measure of successful interventions (Dowling et al. 2018).

The presence and proximity of women’s police stations not only increases reporting, but it sends a message to the local barrio 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.

In a study of policing gender violence in Pacific Island states, Bull and her colleagues argue that women police in the Pacific Islands, by virtue of being both insiders and outsiders —‘may be perceived as having a particular effectiveness or objectivity that is valuable in the regulation ... most particularly, (of) crimes of gendered violence’ (Bull et al. 2017, 9). This study supports that perception of their virtue. 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. They are both regulators of the social order but also ‘engines for change’. This unique regulatory framework enhances the capacity of women’s police stations in policing gender violence, consistent with the United Nation goals of promoting gender equality, empowering women, providing access to justice, and the elimination of violence against women (UN 2016).

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### Appendix: Age Profile

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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
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<td><strong>31%</strong></td>
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