



Commission for Gender Equality  
A society free from gender oppression and inequality

**POLICY BRIEF 18**

**July 2017**

## **POLICING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:**

**Assessing local police station interventions**



## 1. INTRODUCTION

On 16 May 2017 President Jacob Zuma stated that violence against women had been declared a priority crime by government. It was not the first time that the president has made such an announcement. In his 2013 state of the nation address he said that improving the status of women remains a critical priority for the government and that the brutal gang rape and murder of women and girls in recent times had brought into sharp focus the need for unity in action to eradicate this scourge. The president's reference in his speech to the former National Council on Gender Based Violence (NCGBV) was intriguing though, given that the government has allowed the Council to become moribund, with no clear reason advanced for this. Gender-based violence and violence against women has been on the government's agenda for a considerable length of time, although many of its programmes to deal with such violence have been characterised by lack of proper coordination, ineffective implementation and limited resources.

In 2009, the president held a meeting with more than 1000 South African police station commissioners from all over the country, to discuss how to take forward the fight against crime. Recently the president and the newly appointed minister of police met with the station commanders to discuss yet again the escalating events of violence against women and children (VAWC). The study that was conducted by the Commission for Gender Equality revealed that all the selected police stations did not have a clear, coherent and well-defined long-term programme of action to tackle the scourge of domestic violence or violence against women within their areas of jurisdictions.

This policy brief, drawn from the CGE's 2016 report<sup>1</sup> assessing the work of selected SAPS local police stations, highlights key findings on the effectiveness of local programme interventions to combat gender-based violence and violence against women. The study was conducted in selected provinces (i.e. the Rustenburg and Boitekong police stations in the North-West Province, Lebowakgomo and Seshego police stations in Limpopo, and the East London and Berlin police stations in the Eastern Cape).

The brief will further highlight the challenges that are faced by SAPS local police stations in their efforts to combat violence against women. The study revealed that the selected police stations were not adequately prepared for the challenges, and faced limited institutional capacity to deal effectively with violence against women in their local areas of jurisdiction.

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<sup>1</sup> CGE (2016), Fighting Fire With(out) Fire: Assessing the work of Police Stations in combating violence against women.

## 2. BRIEF BACKGROUND

The domestic violence act (DVA) makes it a legal duty for the South African Police Service (SAPS) to help victims of violence. Members of the SAPS have various specific duties and responsibilities towards victims of domestic violence. These include victim support, as well as helping victims to find suitable accommodation and medical support. For instance, the SAPS have the responsibility to implement the DVA and the Sexual Offences Act (SOA), both of which are key pieces of legislation to combat gender-based violence. The SAPS also has an important role in terms of evidence gathering in cases of domestic violence, especially where such incidents lead to court cases and subsequent prosecution of perpetrators.

The DVA places responsibility on the police to ensure that victims and survivors of domestic violence have the necessary information to claim their rights, including assistance to apply for protection orders against perpetrators. The National Action Plan (NAP) objectives specifically assigned to the SAPS include the following: Ensuring that domestic violence is not a private family matter but a crime and a public health issue, that civil society organisations and Community Policing Forums (CPF) play a more proactive role in addressing gender-based violence and violence against women<sup>2</sup>; the establishment of active partnerships between the police and the public that can jointly address crime and matters relating to community safety. Police/community partnerships have been structured by means of CPFs, as prescribed by section 27 of the South African Police Service Act, 1995 (Act No. 68 of 1995).

The SAPS's Victim Empowerment Programme Manual 2009 charges the station commander and the commanding officer with the responsibility to ensure that the local station order/standard operational procedures are implemented to deal with all aspects of crime. It is therefore critical for the station commanders and commanding officers to ensure that all SAPS members under their command are aware of and comply with the protocol for initial and further contact with the victim, ensure that members are familiar with the necessary provisions of relevant pieces of legislation, including the DVA, provide victim-friendly services to victims of crime, receive regular in-service training on victim services, ensure that all SAPS members attend the Victim Empowerment Programme course, ensure that there is a functional victim-friendly room (VFR) available at the station and that the VFR is properly equipped, maintained and used for the purpose of victim support; as well as make arrangements for victim-friendly services to be provided even if a VFR has not yet been established.

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<sup>2</sup> NAP (365 Days of Action to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Children). Available at [http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/365actionplan\\_0.pdf](http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/365actionplan_0.pdf)

### 3. BRIEF NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

The study adopted a qualitative method utilising in-depth interviews with key officials and for this study SAPS station commanders, deputy station commanders and other relevant officials from the selected police stations, utilising the in-depth interviews which covered a range of subjects and topics from the work of local SAPS police stations, including current GBV-related structures within the selected police stations. In addition, official documents (e.g. programme documents, policy documents, annual reports, operational documents, etc.) related to the work of the SAPS in general and specific police stations, were collected and examined as valuable sources of information, to gain an understanding of some of the strategies and programmes in place to guide and underpin the work of the selected police stations to combat gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup>

### 4. KEY STUDY FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Station location background and leadership issues

It was clear during the study that there are station leadership issues to be noted. All the six station commanders had some knowledge and understanding of some of the key challenges faced relating to domestic violence against women in their areas. All of them could offer plausible explanations of the underlying causes, seemingly alcohol and substance abuse being among the key causal factors leading to various crimes such as sexual assaults, rape, attempted rape, intimidation and others. This appears to support scholarly research which shows a clear causal relationship between increased risk of all forms of interpersonal violence (e.g. gender-based violence/violence against women/domestic violence) and alcohol or substance abuse. For instance, Abrahams et al., found that 67 per cent of men that had consumed alcohol became abusive to their partners.<sup>4</sup>

While domestic violence, gender-based violence and/or violence against women were identified as key challenges facing the six police stations in varying degrees of prevalence and intensity, (with the police stations in the North West and Limpopo identifying it as relatively serious, while the two police stations in the Eastern Cape appeared to indicate that its prevalence was limited), all the police stations did not seem to have accurate figures/data at their fingertips to demonstrate a clear and well informed grasp of the intensity

<sup>3</sup>. For additional details on the study methodology and approach, please refer to the relevant section of the main research report containing the findings of the study.

<sup>4</sup>. Abrahams, N., Jewkes, R., Martin, L.J., Matthews, S., Vetten, L. & Lombard, C. (2009). Mortality of women from intimate partner violence in south Africa: A national epidemiological study, *Violence and victims* 24 (4): 546-556



and prevalence of the crimes, their prevalence and patterns in their areas of jurisdiction. This is despite local police stations being responsible for collecting crime statistics first hand, and the national Ministry of Police relying on local police stations for collection of such crime figures which are released nationally every quarter.

Also, given the strategic role, position and responsibilities of station commanders in terms of leading their local police stations in effectively addressing crimes in their areas of jurisdiction, the CGE expected these officials not only to have a clear knowledge and understanding of some of the key national policy, strategic plans and programmes of action to guide state institutions in combating GBV. Knowledge of such national programmes and strategies to deal with GBV or violence against women is crucial for strategic leadership within SAPS to ensure that local police stations can play a role expected of them to curb violence against women through effective intervention (prevention and response) strategies.

Also, knowledge and understanding of the nature, patterns and intensity of various crimes facing their police stations is important for institutions expected to be at the forefront of fighting the scourge of crimes that violate the rights of women. The CGE expected them to also utilise this knowledge, combined with the availability of reliable crime statistics collected by them, to develop clear intervention strategies for effective prevention and responses. Instead, many of the station commanders could only refer to their awareness-raising campaigns driven through local community meetings, radio stations and newspapers. Many of them were not even confident as to the effectiveness and efficacy of these campaigns. In fact, some of the station commanders appeared to admit that the violence against women, underpinned by alcohol and substance abuse, was persisting unabated, implying that such awareness-raising campaigns could not be relied upon as effective strategies to curb the violence against women. It was only one police station, East London, that claimed that its awareness-raising campaigns were yielding positive results in the form of a lower number of reported cases of domestic violence. Even so, this was a mere statement not supported by clear data showing trends in reported cases of domestic violence viewed against the number of awareness-raising activities over time. It would therefore be impossible to take this claim at face value.

#### *4.2 Institutional capacity and GBV-related internal structures*

The CGE is keen to assess the institutional readiness of any organisation in South Africa not only to abide by, but also to take positive steps and put the necessary systems and instructional arrangements in place to fulfil the constitutional and legislative requirement for gender equality. This study sought to examine and assess current structures and related

institutional arrangements established by the various police stations to enhance their capacity to handle and fulfil this requirement.

Based on the findings presented in the main research report, it was clear that the most common institutional set-up in most police stations was the Victim Support Centre (in some cases referred to as victim empowerment). It was clear however, that the mere existence of the VSC was no guarantee of effective institutional capacity for the police station to curb GBV in its jurisdiction. In many instances the VSCs appeared under-staffed (some with only one volunteer staff member), or lacking basic furniture and office equipment. In some instances, as was the case with the Rustenburg police station, the CGE team's onsite observations revealed an ambivalent working relationship between the VSC and the police station.

Also, the VSC's role is clearly to provide post-incident care, support and assistance, such as debriefing, psycho/social support, counselling and forensic medical support. Moreover, the VSC appears to handle, collect and record reported cases of violence. This means that the VSC as a structure is designed to make pro-active interventions to curb gender based or domestic violence within the community or the area of jurisdiction of the police station. The VSC is by its nature therefore a reactive/after-care mechanism, even though in one area (East London police station) it was claimed that the VSC conducted 10 awareness-raising workshops in East London. This means that many police stations do not have internal structures specifically designed for, and dedicated to handling and dealing with gender-based violence or violence against women as a special category of crime. We found that some of the stations had the FCS Unit. However, the FCS units appeared to be over-stretched and working on a variety of problems including children, domestic crimes and other general crimes, rather than focusing attention on GBV or violence against women as a category of crime.

In practice, it would seem that police stations rely on ordinary SAPS officers to handle and investigate cases of gender-based violence/violence against women in the same way as they would handle any other crime. There is nothing necessarily wrong with ordinary SAPS officers being responsible for handling and investigating gender-based violence and violence against women, except that training and skills development, including knowledge and understanding of key gender legislative (e.g. DVA and SOA) and policy frameworks on gender rights as well as the rights of victims of crimes (as outlined in the Victims Charter) will be critical. The study could not determine the extent to which the necessary training was being provided to ordinary SAPS officers to equip them with the skills and knowledge to

handle gender-related crimes and violations of women's rights. For instance, some of the stations made various unsubstantiated claims of the existence of internal training programmes on gender mainstreaming or the existence of the so-called women's networks at national and provincial levels.

It was also clear that in many cases the station commanders interviewed for this study were not very familiar with some of the key provisions contained in the policy and legislative frameworks referred to above. It was even less clear as to the extent to which ordinary SAPS officers would be familiar with the provisions of the same frameworks. Several police stations did indicate that their officers are given skills development and training in the provisions of the DVA. While this is encouraging, the exact details of such training were never revealed to the CGE.

Other aspects of institutional capacity, such as availability of financial resources, equipment (e.g. availability and mechanical conditions of police vehicles, etc.) and other facilities that are important for police stations to operate effectively and fulfil their basic responsibilities were found to vary from station to station depending on individual circumstances. For instance, some of the stations based in the more rural areas (i.e. Lebowakgomo and Boitekong) were affected by limited human capital, office equipment and vehicles, compared to the better resourced stations such as East London, Rustenburg and Seshego. Also, some of the stations obviously relied on the assistance of NGOs within their premises to alleviate the pressures, but not all of them had this type of external resource and assistance. In general, though, it appears that the capacity of the SAPS stations to handle effectively and curb gender violence and violence against women in line with national policy and programmes of action (i.e. the Department of Social Development's Integrated Programme of Action 2013 – 2018) should be a key area of concern for the National Gender Machinery in South Africa.

#### *4.3 Relevant intervention programmes and initiatives*

The question of appropriate and effective intervention (i.e. prevention and response) programmes at police station level to combat domestic violence or violence against women is a crucial aspect not only for this study, but for the work of the CGE. An important part of the mandate of the CGE is to monitor and evaluate the work of, among others, state institutions in terms of how they fulfil the constitutional imperative of observing, promoting and achieving gender equality. In the case of the SAPS, the CGE sought to gain insights and assess any coherent plans and programmes of action by the selected police stations to curb



violence against women (e.g. rape, sexual assaults, attempted rape, etc.) as well as dealing with the related underlying causes.

The findings presented in the main research report showed, without any doubt, that virtually all the police stations did not have clear, coherent and well-defined long term programmes of action to tackle the scourge of domestic violence or violence against women within their areas of jurisdiction. While all the stations had identified violence against women as prevalent (in varying degrees of intensity) within their policing precincts, including some knowledge of the underlying causes and patterns of the violence, there were no coherent intervention programmes either to address the underlying causes of these crimes, or to address the crimes over the medium to long term. The most common approach adopted by all the police stations appears to be awareness-raising campaigns or variations of this theme. Many of the stations appear to rely on this activity, utilising specific operational methods such as local radio stations, community meetings, local newspapers and road-shows.

While this was clearly a popular and common tactic adopted by the stations included in this report, the effectiveness of this approach in curbing violence against women could not be established or vouched for by these stations. In several cases the police stations admitted that the scourge was persisting if not escalating at the time of the study. Some of the stations, especially Seshego, Lebowakgomo and Rustenburg, referred to multi-sectoral strategies to deal with violence against women. However, details of such strategies were never revealed or articulated. The CGE is aware though that the Department of Social Development and the Ministry of Women in the Presidency have developed multi-sectoral strategies and integrated programmes of action to tackle the scourge of violence against women.<sup>5</sup>

Such strategies and programmes clearly identify and assign specific roles for stakeholder departments/institutions such as the SAPS. It was clear that the leadership of these police stations were not familiar with these types of multi-sectoral/inter-departmental programmes of action to inform their work on the ground.

It would therefore be fair to surmise that SAPS police stations on the ground are not well prepared, and lack the ability to develop appropriate long term and effective strategic responses to tackle domestic violence and violence against women in their areas of jurisdiction. This would explain their reliance on short-term activities, such as awareness-raising campaigns, which are usually unsustainable and not driven within broader and clearly

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Social Development (2013), South African Integrated Programme of Action. Addressing violence against women and children; Department of women in the presidency, strategic plan 2015-2020.

defined strategic frameworks to deal effectively with violence against women and its underlying causes.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study led to the following recommendations to assist policy makers to address some of the key issues by the findings.

- Firstly, the South African Police Services should develop an internal national programme of action to educate and sensitise its senior officers, especially station commanders, deputy station commanders and other related personnel, on key national policy and legislative frameworks dealing with gender-based violence and violence against women. Such an internal programme should also focus attention on clearly defining the role of the SAPS in general and that of police stations on the ground, in implementing national programmes of action to combat gender-based violence and violence against women.
- Secondly, the SAPS should strive to develop and/or enhance current multi-sectoral arrangements with other key departments (DSD and Women's Ministry) and institutions such as the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) to enhance inter-departmental or inter-agency collaborative working relations to address the scourge of gender based violence and violence against women.
- Thirdly, SAPS should draw up internal guidelines on the establishment of the appropriate and well-resourced internal units to enhance the capacity of individual police stations for effective pro-active interventions (through prevention and response) to deal with gender-based violence or violence against women. This could include reviewing and enhancing the effectiveness of Victims Support Centres to equip them with the capacity for effective pro-active interventions.
- Finally, we recommend that SAPS police stations should provide appropriate training to senior as well as ordinary police officers to equip them with the necessary skills to plan for and implement effective medium to long term programmes of action to combat violence against women in their policing precincts.





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