

# "You believed the man"

## Policing domestic violence

Police are often blamed for their ineffectual policing of domestic violence. While there are clearly problems with the way some police approach the issue, **Anthony Albeker** highlights that the policing issue is not that clear cut.



The woman, her baby wrapped in a blanket and held fast against the chill, had been bouncing around on the narrow steel ledges of the police van for three hours. During this time, the two officers in the front of the van made other calls and had other priorities to attend to. They had not yet managed to deal with the crisis that had brought her to the police station.

When she first arrived at the charge office, I watched her negotiate a path through the bustle of a Saturday night rush-hour in the charge office. This rush-hour starts in the early evening and ends sometime after midnight. In this time scores of people come into the office seeking police assistance. Some have been mugged, others involved in fights with friends,

neighbours or the drinkers at the next table. Someone may have reported a rape, or a murder committed by unknown people for unknown motives. Thus, the woman's complaint, serious as it was for her, was not that important for the police officers. It was nothing more than an unremarkable case of domestic violence.

The complainant was small, in her late twenties and, dressed in a purple skirt with matching shirt. She was strikingly beautiful. In one arm she held her son, a toddler in orange shirt and pants. He squawked occasionally, but it was impossible to tell what he was feeling. In her free hand she held a tissue, damp against her tears. Something in her look spoke of a sadness that was more a sense of

resignation than of shock. It was the worn-out emotion that you feel after a long string of crises, none of which are entirely unexpected.

Perhaps it was the formalities of the interaction with the desk-officer, the mounds of official documents, a uniformed policeman in owlsh glasses with his pen clicking as he wrote out the details, that made her seem unsure of herself. She was as self-effacing as a subject petitioning a king. Or perhaps this was just the instinctive, unquestioning response to officialdom that she had learnt from hard experience.

She told the officer that her husband had abused her. He had not, she insisted, beaten her. But he had threatened her with a long and heavy stick. He had frightened her and her child. She had no desire to

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open a case, she said, no desire to have her family’s breadwinner arrested and sent to jail. But she wanted the police to come to her home and tell her husband off.

All this made it exactly the kind of complaint police officers hate. A domestic dispute that qualified legally as an assault, but which contained no actual physical violence. The fact that the complainant and the offender were married also made it an act of domestic violence, as defined by legislation which imposed additional, potentially burdensome, duties on the police.

It was, in other words, the type of case which officers believe will consume more time than is justified by the harm done.

It is appropriate to note, of course, that the harm done by these incidents cannot be measured by the amount of blood spilled. The trauma of these incidents is greatly magnified by the fact that they occur in the victim’s home and they are committed by someone from whom she has every right to expect far, far more. It is also important to note that these kinds of family problems often escalate if the police do not act when called upon, however trivial the incident appears.

But from a police officer’s point of view, these kinds of cases, of which there are thousands every



day, usually lead to wearying frustration and to a reinforced sense of the futility. What, they wonder, can they be expected to achieve when troubled families fight?

Worse, dealing with troubled families is hard on cops, hard on their souls. Like anyone else, they have no desire to be drawn into strangers’ private lives and private griefs. Yet that is precisely what these cases demand of them. Often, the result is that whatever pity officers once felt for victims has, after long exposure, changed into its near-cousin, contempt. Why, they wonder, can’t these people manage their own affairs?

This does not mean that what goes on in people’s houses is not police business. Responding to people in need, after all, is the nature of the job. Still, it is hard not to feel some sympathy for police officers. The simple truth is that in most cases there is no set of simple actions that an officer can take to help resolve problems which are

built into the structure of the families in question.

Sympathising with the officers, however, does not excuse the two Ivory Park officers for making that Saturday night’s complainant wait three hours before attending to her case. Either they thought her time had no value, or, worse, they wished to send her a subliminal message that her problem was of no importance.

The woman’s home, when we eventually arrived, was a drab concrete room crammed into a crowded backyard of a house in one of the township’s older sections. A large bed took up half the floor-space. Most of the rest was taken up by an ancient television set on its stand, a small kitchen table stacked high with pots and plates, and a narrow cupboard. The room was better than many, but it conveyed the idea that its builders thought that residents in the area would put up with anything. That anything could be done to them, and that the

consequences of overcrowded homes did not matter.

The woman's husband opened the door at the police officers' knock. A short man, hard and nuggety, retreated to the bed where he sat unruffled throughout the interview. He gave the impression of a man who, at home at least, was used to getting his own way. His body language said, "A man's home is his castle."

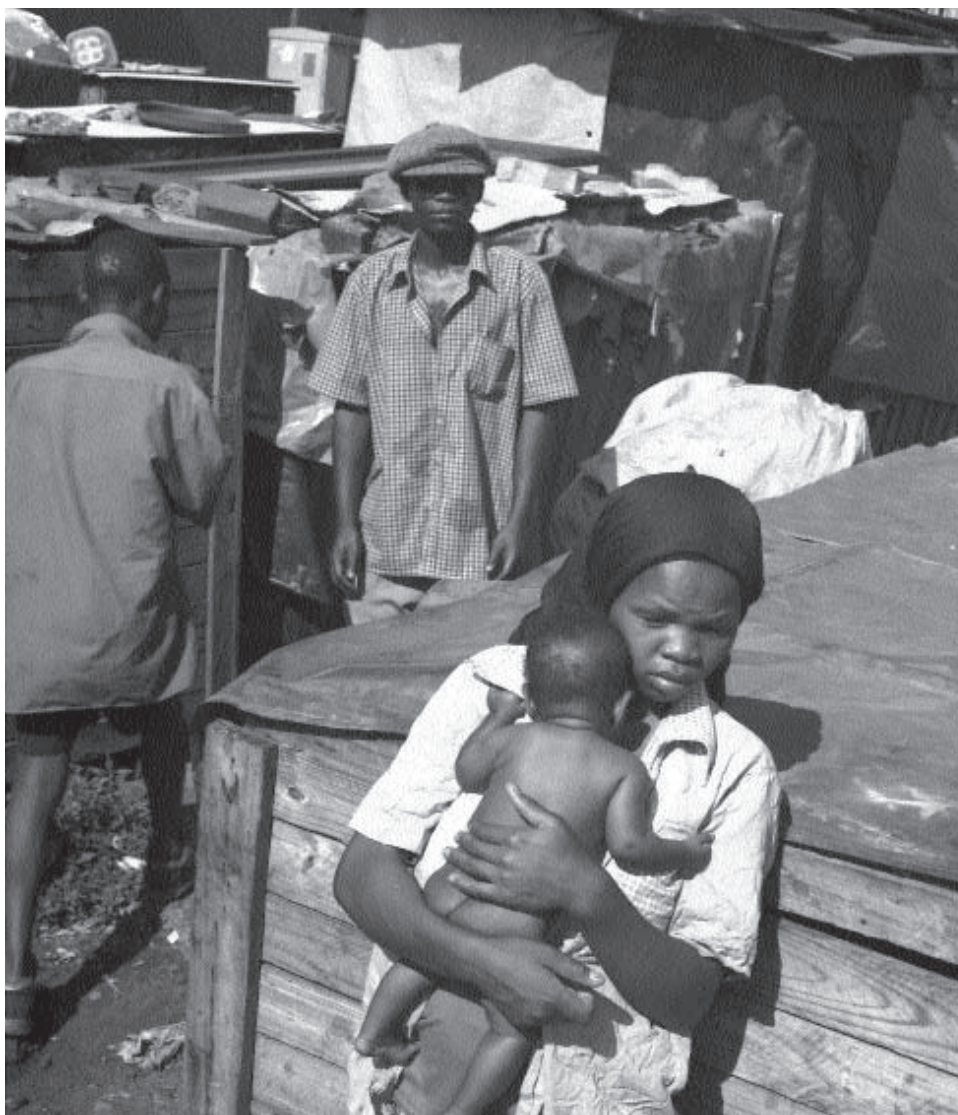
The exchange between cops, complainant and castle-owner took place in xiTsonga. I understood none of this. But as the conversation developed, it became clear that the officers had turned on the woman.

Early on, the man acknowledged that he did, indeed, possess a heavy stick, showing it off with some pride. Then he went into denial, shaking his head and speaking rapidly to the policemen whenever his wife offered a comment. The officers listened respectfully. Then they began lecturing her and she was crying in anger and disbelief. Soon, her frustration became so intense I could almost smell it.

After we left the room and made our way through the darkened yard back to the van, I asked the officers about the discussion. What had the man said when confronted with his wife's claims. Sergeant Nyakane, a ponderous man with large features and a carefully shaved head, told me what I had already deduced: that the husband had denied his wife's claims.

"But you spoke to him for a long time," I pointed out. "What was his story?"

Nyakane and his partner were reservists, youngish men who lived in Ivory Park and who dedicated up to 40 unpaid hours a month to



policing their community. That might be interpreted as an argument against the complaint that our political leaders frequently make about the absence from our society of a spirit of volunteerism. The truth was however that the two men desperately wanted to become full-time policemen. They had decided that a stint as reservists would help their applications when recruitment-time rolled around.

In answer to my question, Nyakane told me that the man was a truck driver, hauling goods to his native Mozambique and back. He had spent the past week on the road, and had returned a day early. When he got home, so he claimed, he found his wife eating a meal with a man, a neighbour from

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another room in the yard. "He thinks that there is something between his wife and that man," Nyakane concluded.

Nyakane told me that the woman denied these allegations. Adding a doubtful, "Of course".

"You believed the man," I said because everything about the interaction I had witnessed told me this was so. "Why?"

"No man would say such a thing to us if it wasn't true," Nyakane replied. "It would be too embarrassing. So we told them that

**“Cops know that there is something going on in these homes that they are simply not able to address”**

they must get their families involved. That is the only way to deal with these things.”

Nyakane’s was a response filled with the sort of half-baked patriarchal speak that makes analysts and activists despair of the police’s response to domestic violence. Naturally they believe that men who raise their hands against women have rationalisations for their acts. As a matter of social policy, though, it is very bad form for police officers to create the impression that threats and violence is justifiable in any circumstances by lecturing the complainant on her morals. Unquestionably, Nyakane and his partner had dropped the ball.

There are probably a lot of reasons why Nyakane and his partner’s efforts were so inadequate. One may have been that they were reservists and

lacked the training and some of the discipline of ordinary cops. Another was the learned patriarchy of a society which may have led them to sympathise excessively with the woman’s husband. Another may have been a simple desire to get the incident behind them and move on to the next complaint.

A final reason, one I came to appreciate more as I spent time in police vans, was the futility of policing unhappy families. Whether it is money or drink or other problems from which South African families suffer. Whether it is a once-off incident or part of a pattern, cops know that there is something going on in these homes that they are simply not able to address. They can’t make people richer. They can’t give them more space in which to live. They can’t get mean drunks to stop drinking. They can’t make difficult people easier to live

with. They lack the tools to do these things.

Frustrating as it was to witness police officers treating a victim to a lecture on why she was to blame, the scene I witnessed also showed another truth. The state responses to troubled families cannot begin and end with visits by nightstick-wielding men in uniform. Down that route lies only failure for the families, the police and, indeed, the state and the laws themselves.

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