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A Police Station of Their Own

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Brazilian victims of domestic violence seek assistance from precincts staffed entirely by women.

[SAO PAULO, BRAZIL] – Elaine da Silva loved her husband at the start of their marriage. But four years and too many beatings later, she broke away. When her 3-year-old daughter started telling neighbors, “My dad hits my mum,” the two moved in with Ms. da Silva’s mother, two blocks away.

Da Silva, who works as a store assistant, agreed to accept 200 reais (about \$ 85) a month in alimony, and she hoped that would be the end of it. But recently, more than a year after she left, she called her ex-husband to ask for more alimony because he had gotten a new job. “He put the phone down and came straight over. He attacked me... He threw me on the floor in front of my daughter. I tried to get out but ... he blocked my way. I was very scared.”

She tells her story from the local women’s police station, the only place she could think of where she might get a sympathetic hearing.

“I came here as soon as I could,” she says after meeting with a female officer here. “I was too embarrassed to go to a normal police station. But here you meet people [in the waiting room] with the same experience as yourself ... and you realize there are people who feel the same as you do. And it’s much easier to speak to a woman.”

More than 300 women’s police stations have opened in Brazil since the first one was inaugurated here in Sao Paulo 20 years ago. “It’s a national phenomenon,” says Cecilia MacDowell Santos, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of San Francisco in California and author of “Women’s Police Stations: Gender, Violence, and Justice in Sao Paulo.”

Asia having similar systems for registering and investigating charges of domestic violence, threats, child abuse, sexual assaults, and other crimes often perpetrated against women.

“Why so many in developing countries? The cultural and political context is similar and there is also the economic reason,” Professor Santos says. “It is less expensive to have women’s police stations than to set up shelters.”

Santos and other experts consider the stations a success because they've highlighted crimes that long went underreported. But they caution that domestic violence is still a serious problem, largely because of Brazil's macho culture and the legal system's leniency for male offenders.

Precedent for separate stations

The idea of creating a separate sector for gender-related crimes arose in Brazil at the start of the 1980s. With the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-85) coming to a close and the country's dictatorship loosening its grip on power, female activists were pushing for more recognition from authorities. Special police stations had been set up for Afro-Brazilians and the elderly, and women wanted similar treatment.

"We wanted to create a place where women would feel at ease talking about these intimate problems," says Marcia Salgado, a police chief at one of the first women's police stations and now a media relations officer with the Sao Paulo police department. "Women are not obliged to go to women's police stations – they can take their complaints to any police station. But now they have a choice."

Finally hearing women's stories

When the first station opened, Dr. Salgado recalls, "there was a line around the block... Women were coming to us to tell us about incidents that took place 20 years earlier."

Everyone knew that violence against women was not uncommon in Brazil, but no one really knew how prevalent it was until women officers started compiling statistics.

In the first year of operations, the number of charges filed by officers in women's stations was more than double the number of charges for similar crimes against women filed by the predominantly male officers in regular precincts.

The women's stations are usually not separate buildings, but floors or areas in existing precincts. The 8th Women's Police Station in the Jardim Marilia neighborhood, where da Silva came to register a complaint against her ex-husband, is located on the third floor of a squat, nondescript police building overlooking a busy crossroads 45 minutes west of the city center.

Although it is small – just eight rooms along one drab corridor – it is typical of the city's other women's stations in that it is staffed almost exclusively by women. The senior officer is known as a delegada; four specially trained officers take down the women's complaints; five detectives investigate reported abuses; and three psychologists take counseling shifts.

A TV and a coffee machine adorn the waiting area, and there's a place for children to play while their mothers are giving statements.

Usually the only male on the premises is one of the lawyers on call to provide legal advice to victims.

Of the 289,127 cases reported to the women's stations last year, 30 percent were for assault and battery, and 29 percent were for threatening behavior. The other cases were for 13 crimes as diverse as homicide, rape, slander, and abortion, which is still illegal in this overwhelmingly Catholic country.

The vast majority of cases were brought by women in established relationships, Salgado says. In Brazil, many men believe they have the right to physically dominate their partners, and many women accept a submissive role.

A study carried out by the Perseu Abramo Foundation in 2001 showed that one-third of Brazilian women had been victims of some kind of violence (including verbal and psychological abuse), and almost one-quarter had experienced physical attacks.

The women who report their abusers do so primarily because they want to show they are not powerless, Salgado says. "What they are looking for is not to criminalize the behavior of the abuser. They go to stop the violence... It's a way of renegotiating the relationship, a means of mediation."

Convincing men that violence against women is unacceptable is one of the main obstacles facing female officers. The number of accusations heard at women's police stations grows every year, Salgado says, and she expects it will continue to rise as long as men believe violence against women is a viable option.

In an attempt to change that belief, officials offer accused men the option of counseling. After hearing his side of the story, the delegada usually asks him to take part in group therapy sessions. However, unless a judge includes therapy as part of a sentence, officers cannot force it, and only 20 percent to 30 percent of men actually take up the offer, says Joceleide de Souza, the delegada at the 8th Women's Police Station.

In da Silva's case, the delegada asked her ex-husband to come in and give his version of events. He didn't show up, so a formal date has been set for him to appear before a court.

Still battling leniency in the courts

Another challenge is persuading the male-dominated district attorney's office and judges to treat the issue of spousal abuse seriously.

The Ministerio Publico (the Brazilian agency similar to a district attorney's office) tends to come down on the side of the man when deciding whether to press charges, says Norma Kyriakos, a former Sao Paulo attorney general and now a prominent lawyer. In addition, the cases that do proceed are often referred to lower courts where judges are able to pass more lenient sentences, particularly for first-time offenders, she says.

"Instead of giving him community service [or jail time], they propose he pays for a basket of food or other goods for a charitable institution," Dr. Kyriakos says. "And so the man keeps doing

it because he knows that's all he'll have to pay... Women today are still afraid to go to the police because they are afraid of their attackers. They are poor, they live with them. They know that when they are finished here with the delegada or judge they are on their own again."

Nevertheless, all those involved say that while the problem of violence against women still persists, the creation of the women's stations has made men more accountable.

"The impact has been really impressive," Santos says. "What women's police stations are doing is making violence more visible in society. They are creating a crime where one never existed before."

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