

WHEN THE BATTERER IS A COP: Voices of Women Abused by the Badge

Join Purple Berets and Prison Radio in Supporting This New Important Project

Domestic violence is an epidemic in this country and around the world. Some 1.3 million U.S. women are assaulted by their intimate partners each year; one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime; and nearly a third of female homicide victims are killed by their intimate partners. The economic costs are staggering as well – an estimated \$37 billion each year in medical treatment alone.

And while domestic violence occurs in about 10% of families overall, that rate doubles, perhaps quadruples, when we look at violence in police families. In two separate national studies, 40% of police officers *self-reported* that they had used violence against their domestic partners within the last year.^{1, 2}



Photo: Miriam Gaon

This reality creates unimaginable levels of danger and barriers to protection for the victims. After all, who do you call for protection when your batterer *is* the police, armed and dangerous at all times, with “insider” access to the courts and methods of stalking and harassment that other batterers only dream of?

But more fundamentally, the police officer-as-batterer lies at the foundation of the criminal justice system’s stubborn refusal to adequately enforce domestic violence laws: when a woman calls police to report domestic violence, her chances are at least two out of five that the officer who responds has recently beaten his own partner . . . and gotten away with it! It is in part this dynamic that has created “unequal justice” for domestic violence victims everywhere.

Focus On Police Domestic Violence

As a women’s rights activist focused on transforming the criminal justice system’s handling of violence against women for nearly twenty years, Tanya Brannan, working through the grassroots group Purple Berets, quickly zeroed in on the issue of accountability. Certainly that involved accountability for the batterers themselves, who often had five or more arrests before receiving even a slap on the wrist from a judge.

“But even more importantly,” says Brannan, “we’ve focused on holding the system itself accountable – from the officer responding to the 911 call, to the social worker who removes the children because the woman can’t protect them from her partner’s violence; from the district attorney who repeatedly fails to file criminal charges, to the judge whose sentence of probation for the batterer turns into a death sentence for the victim.” Brannan and co-organizer Noelle Hanrahan, investigator and award-winning radio producer, see focusing on battering cops as a radical, transformative strategy for improving, not just domestic violence law enforcement, but law enforcement overall.

“After I reported the crimes to the Attorney General’s office the stalking incidents escalated,” states “Susan,” who dared to report her police officer husband’s stalking up the chain of command. “I started receiving phone calls with the sounds of a gun-racking, the metallic sounds of a clip of bullets being loaded into the chamber of a .45, his service weapon.”

¹ Johnson, L.B. (1991). *On the front lines: Police stress and family well-being*. Hearing before the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families House of Representatives: 102 Congress First Session May 20 (p. 32-48). Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.

² Neidig, P.H., Russell, H.E. & Seng, A.F. (1992). Interspousal aggression in law enforcement families: A preliminary investigation. *Police Studies*, Vol. 15 (1), p. 30-38.

“As long as police agencies coddle the violent batterers within their ranks, we’re never going to change the reality for those ‘civilian’ women whose lives may depend on that responding officer’s handling of her crime report,” Hanrahan states. “And as long as a significant percentage of gun-toting police officers are *known* to be violent, we are sure to continue experiencing the current level of cultural violence, both in our homes and in the streets.”

Project Synopsis

No other crime victim is so utterly trapped as the police officer’s domestic partner. She is threatened with death if she reports; dismissed as crazy in internal “investigations” that are little more than a closing of the ranks around the offender; and laughed off by district attorneys when asked when charges will be filed. For the rare woman who does break free, she finds herself hunted from house to house and state to state, afraid she will be arrested on a trumped-up

crime, then “battered” again in family court, often to lose her children to the violent spouse. Some of these women have lived underground for years rather than risk almost certain death if her batterer finds her.

With this project, we hope to:

1. Give voice to the women living with violent police officers by conducting interviews for radio and print publication. Their stories are universally harrowing; the danger palpable.
2. Document how the various criminal justice agencies responded to these women’s complaints.
3. Bring their stories to the national media, thereby educating the public and policy makers to the problem and creating a drumbeat for change.



Photo: Lisa Thomas

The plan is to produce and widely distribute an investigative report focusing on the different aspects of the issue. Interviews will be selected over a broad geographic area within the U.S., including big cities and small, more rural towns.

Themes will include:

- Conduct within the department – interaction with the victim, handling of internal affairs investigation, involvement in criminal investigation, discipline.
- Criminal prosecution, including hopes and pitfalls, lackadaisical attitude of district attorneys.
- Repercussions in family court.
- Safety issues – women who go underground, move continually, etc.
- Social pressure. (Eg., most police families socialize only with other police families. Thus the victims are pressured from all sides not to report and socially isolated if they do.)
- How the issues of race and class intersect.



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Help us make this project a reality. Please consider a gift of

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