



## Policing Domestic and Family Violence

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### Abstract

How police respond to domestic and family violence (DFV) has important ramifications for the safety of women and their children. Despite recognition of the key role police play in responding to DFV and the importance of the perspectives of survivors in informing appropriate responses, there has been no recent exploration of survivors' experiences of the police response to DFV in Queensland. This article draws on interviews with women in Brisbane, Australia, who have experienced DFV and engaged in some way with the legal system. It explores women's reasons for calling, or not calling, the police and their experiences with police between 2014 and 2017. The article highlights the role of police culture in appropriately responding to DFV. It suggests that cultural change is needed and may be facilitated by ongoing training, addressing gender balance within the police service and introducing women-only police stations.

### Keywords

Domestic violence; family violence; police; violence against women.

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## Introduction

Recent Australian reports have recognised the importance of police as key frontline responders to domestic and family violence (DFV) (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015, 14; Victorian Government 2016). Domestic Violence Death Review reports have identified that positive and appropriate police responses may save the lives of those who have experienced DFV (Queensland Government 2017, 23; Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015, 12). DFV is now 'ordinary' and 'pervasive' in police work (Barlow and Walklate 2018; Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018). In 2013–2014, Queensland Police responded to around 180 DFV incidents daily (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015, 1). In 2016–2017, they initiated nearly 30,000 domestic violence protection order applications, around 75 per cent of the total applications initiated during the period (Queensland Police Service 2017a, 25). Over 25,000 breaches of protection orders were reported to police during 2016–2017, with 85 per cent of breach offences involving male offenders (Queensland Police Service 2017a, 20). Figures from other states also show how pervasive DFV is in police work. For example, in 2006–2007, Victorian police attended over 30,000 incidents and laid DFV-related charges in around 25 per cent of these incidents (Rollings and Taylor 2008).

While reports identify the importance of the police response, those same reports have identified that police responses to DFV have fallen short of the expectations of many victims (see Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015, 13–14; Victorian Government 2016, vol. 4, 1). While the Queensland *Not Now, Not Ever Report* (2016, 14) recognised that some inadequate police responses may result from a lack of appropriate processes, procedures and powers, police culture was also identified as a serious issue. The *Not Now Not Ever Report* made several recommendations about how to improve police culture. These included recommendations that district domestic violence coordinators be properly allocated and resourced; a deputy commissioner position be created to increase police awareness of DFV and create positive change in the QPS; and improved training for police about DFV (Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland 2015, recs. 135, 137, 138). While these recommendations have been implemented (Queensland Government 2016, ii), it is recognised that cultural change is one of the most difficult things to effect (Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018).

Despite recognition of the importance of police in DFV responses and the perspectives of survivors of DFV in informing appropriate responses, there has been no recent exploration of DFV survivors' experiences of police response to DFV in Queensland. Drawing on interviews with 65 women in Brisbane, Australia, who experienced DFV and engaged in some way with the legal system, this article explores women's reasons for calling, or not calling, the police and the interviewees' positive and negative experiences of their engagements with police between 2014 and 2017. The paper begins with a discussion of research before exploring the study results. It concludes with some considerations for possible changes to policing in the context of DFV.

## Literature review

Many victims of DFV never report DFV to the police; Voce and Boxall (2018) report that around one in every five victims do so. However, when a report is made, it is often the victim of DFV who calls police (Barrett, St Pierre and Vaillancourt 2011; Hamby 2014, 145). In Australian studies, Birdsey and Snowball (2013) found that just over half the victims who sought help from a DFV service had called police. Similarly, Meyer (2011, 276) discovered that nearly half of the women she interviewed had themselves contacted police. To better understand the factors that increase the likelihood that victims will report DFV, Voce and Boxall (2018) systematically reviewed 21 quantitative studies. They concluded that females and white victims were less likely to report to police (Voce and Boxall 2018, 7). They also found that a number of factors increased the chance

of the victim reporting. These factors included past experience of abuse outside the current relationship, previous reports of violence to the police, a higher frequency and severity of injury (including victim injury), offenders' use of a weapon and offender intoxication (Voce and Boxall 2018, 11). Barrett and St Pierre (2011, 58) found that the 'biggest predictor' that a woman experiencing DFV will call the police is that she believes her life is in danger (see also Ackerman and Love 2014; Barrett, St Pierre and Vaillancourt 2011, 48; Birdsey and Snowball 2013, 6).

Birdsey and Snowball (2013, 7) found that victims were more likely to call the police if they had a civil DFV protection order in place. Several studies have identified that victims of DFV call police for a variety of reasons, including wanting to have the abuser removed from the home, wanting police to arrest the abuser or send a message to him, and wanting to seek help for the abuser (Barrett et al. 2017; Barrett, St Pierre and Vaillancourt 2011; Leisenring 2012; Stewart et al. 2013). Research also indicates that victims express a variety of reasons for not reporting incidents of DFV to police, including fear of further violence, embarrassment or shame, feeling that the incident is not important enough and feeling that they will face discrimination from police (Barrett et al. 2017; Birdsey and Snowball 2013, 6; Meyer 2011, 277).

Many myths and misunderstandings surround domestic violence. These include notions that a woman should leave a violent relationship, physical violence is more serious than other controlling behaviours, domestic violence is a relationship issue for which both parties are responsible and that victims of violence have certain characteristics—for example being generally weak, passive and powerless (AIJA 2017, para 4.1). To better understand police responses to DFV, some studies have explored whether police accept or hold some of these myths and misunderstandings. In their survey of United States (US) police officers, Gover and colleagues (2011, 627) found that 71 per cent of police agreed that 'many DV victims could easily leave their relationships but don't'. Research has shown that women who leave a violent relationship often take a long time to do so and may call on police many times before finally ending the relationship (Meyer 2011, 276; Strang, Neyroud and Sherman 2014, 227).

Studies have also identified that police may focus attention on physical violence in DFV cases. For example, Gover and colleagues (2011, 627) found that 52.8 per cent of police agreed that 'police should arrest DV cases only when there is clear evidence of injury' (see Hirschel and Buzawa 2013, 1097). Similarly, a recent English study found that in determining whether DFV was 'serious', police most often mentioned physical assaults and injuries rather than harassment or breach of a protection order (Myhill 2017, 9). In an Australian online survey of 493 lawyers and community advocates, 52 per cent of respondents reported that they had submitted one or more written complaints about police in the past two years (Goodman-Delahunty and Corbo Crehan 2016, 1011). Respondents identified that in a 'substantial' number of cases, police justified their refusal to act in response to DFV on the basis that the alleged victim had no visible physical injuries (Goodman-Delahunty and Corbo Crehan 2016, 1016).

Research also suggests that some police continue to understand DFV as a relationship issue. Myhill (2017, 10) reported that 'some' officers held the view that it was not appropriate to 'take sides' in DFV cases; officers said they tried to find solutions palatable to, or in the best interests of, all parties. Myhill's (2017) interviews with 32 frontline police found that police officers suggested that 'negotiation' was still a fairly common approach when responding to domestic-related calls for service, at least for incidents regarded as less serious or as a 'dispute' between equally aggrieved parties.

Most studies report that women are often dissatisfied with the police response to DFV (Birdsey and Snowball 2013; Leisenring 2012; Meyer 2011; Stewart, Mangan and Hannam 2013, 278–281). Client advocates in New South Wales, Australia, reported in focus groups that problematic police behaviour included unprofessional or illegal action, lack of respect for the victim, coercion of victims and discrimination or inaction where action could reasonably be expected (Goodman-

Delahunty and Corbo Crehan 2015). Many researchers have argued that negative police responses are linked to a masculine police culture (e.g., Hoyle and Sanders 2000; Meyer 2011; Westmarland 2001).

Importantly, research has shown that reporting to police, and how those reports are received by police, often has important future implications for victims. For example, Xie and Lynch (2017) determined that reporting DFV to police may reduce recidivism. Other research has found that a victim's experience of engagement with police is an important factor in determining whether they will call the police again, with negative experiences reducing the likelihood that the victim will call in future (Barrett et al. 2017; Goodman-Delahunty and Corbo Crehan 2015; Leisenring 2012). As previously noted, despite the importance of police in the response to DFV and the perspectives of survivors in informing appropriate responses (Kelly and Westmarland 2015, 117), there has been no recent exploration of DFV survivors' experiences of the police response to DFV in Queensland.

## **The Brisbane study**

### *Methodology*

This section draws on a qualitative study that involved interviews with 65 women in Brisbane, Australia, who had experienced DFV from a male intimate partner and engaged with the legal system in response to it. Twenty-four women were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background (CALD) and six were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women (ATSI). Interpreters were used in interviews with nine of the women. The study received ethics approval from the University of Queensland. The aim of the study was to interview the women on three occasions between 2014 and 2017. Ultimately, 55 women were interviewed a third time. The women were initially approached by their DFV support workers or lawyers from a range of organisations in Brisbane, who discussed the proposed study with them. At the time of recruitment, the women were all aged over 18 years. Support workers or lawyers arranged interviews if the woman was interested in participating. A narrative interviewing style was used to encourage participants to tell their stories and describe their experiences in detail at their own pace and as accurately as possible (Flick 2007; Powell, Fisher and Wright 2005). The interviews were recorded and transcribed and thematically analysed, both manually and through NVivo qualitative software (Braun and Clarke 2006). Pseudonyms are used throughout this article and some details have been omitted to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. All participants had experienced multiple forms of abuse (n57, 87 per cent) and most had experienced both physical and emotional abuse (n51, 78 per cent). The women interviewed described their experiences with multiple aspects of the legal process (see Douglas 2018a; 2018b). However, it is the comments made by the women about their engagements with police (or their decision not to engage) that form the basis of the following discussion.

### *Why did women not call the police or why did they delay calling?*

By the third interview, six women reported that they had never had contact with the police as a result of the experience of DFV and many women reported that they delayed calling them. They provided a variety of explanations for why they had not called, or delayed calling. Reasons included fear of increased anger from the abuser, shame and embarrassment, physical obstruction from calling the police, concern that non-physical violence would not be taken seriously, fear that the woman would be expected to leave the relationship if she called police and that the woman did not feel she was in physical danger. Some reasons for not calling or delaying calling reflect the myths and misunderstandings about DFV outlined earlier.

Three of the women who had never had any contact with police were from a CALD background; they expressed various reasons for not calling the police. Luciana (CALD, interview 2) explained that she was worried her partner would become angrier: 'He doesn't like the police and for him

it's like ... I think, because it's like an offence'. Bisera (CALD, interview 2) explained that she had called the ambulance to attend to her abusive partner. On attending, the ambulance officers observed the way she was treated by her abuser. They talked to her and recommended she seek assistance from a support agency and call the police. Bisera sought assistance from a support agency and said she did not need police after that.

The three other women who had never had any contact with police explained it was in part because they had not experienced direct physical violence. Yvonne reported that her abusive partner exercised a high level of control over her and her children. She reported that she had very limited access to finances and had experienced physical threats and reproductive coercion (Douglas and Kerr 2018). Yvonne's (interview 3) partner refused to allow her to work or access television or a mobile telephone, making her extremely isolated:

When you're in a situation like that, you're sort of so involved in the situation and just surviving. There are things that are threatening ... I guess there was a lot of psychological stuff, and they were more threats than actual actions. But there was that point where I felt like I was treading a very thin line, so I think that's why. I didn't think the threat was real enough or tangible enough for someone else to take seriously, like the police.

Milly reported that her abusive partner would 'blow up ... he'd throw things and break things', he 'would stand over' her and 'threaten to punch [her] head in' and she felt 'scared'. Milly (interview 1) had never involved the police: 'I didn't want other people to know. I didn't want it to be real. I didn't want the police rocking up on my doorstep'. At interview 2, Milly said 'so much of it was in that grey area ... So much of the verbal abuse that was directed towards me was the grey. How do you prove it? Do you organise the police?'. Jane (interview 2) experienced financial abuse and significant monitoring of her behaviours, but had never called the police because she did not believe she was in physical danger.

One woman, Pari (interview 1, CALD), identified the physical obstruction she experienced on one occasion when she tried to call police:

That was a very bad time. He threw my son and he got his head banged on the wall ... He was crying, I was crying, I got bleeding lips and scars. I got cuts. Then ... I tried to call police, he snatched phone from me and he locked me in a room [with] my son.

Many other women said that they delayed calling the police, sometimes for years. Bianca had not called the police earlier in the relationship because she did not feel safe to leave and believed police would demand she leave. Bianca (interview 2) explained: 'I felt I would absolutely have to leave and I would have to not be found by him. I'd have to somehow disappear in order to be safe'. Others stated they were scared of what their partner might do if they called the police (e.g., Lyn, interview 1). Several women deferred calling the police because they believed police contact would jeopardise their partner's employment and success. For example Dara (CALD, interview 2) said, 'I loved him, I wanted his success'. In contrast, Hilary (interview 1) was worried about what the police would think of her. She explained, 'I didn't want to cause trouble ... I thought I don't want them to think badly of me'.

Some women delayed calling police because they were fearful their partner would not let them access their children if the police became involved. Faith (interview 1) explained, 'He told me he would take the kids ... He would take me to family court and he would win because I was so messed up, I was the one who was crazy'. Similarly, Julia (interview 1) observed that:



If ... I ever go to the police, he's going to lie and tell them that it was me that did this and me that did that, so that when it goes to court, it's that same thing, when it goes to court, it looks bad on me and I can lose custody of [our son].

Fiona was also worried about losing her children if she called the police. She finally left her abuser after more than 20 years of abuse when the children had grown. In explaining why she did not involve police earlier, Fiona (interview 1) described the shame she felt. 'You don't want everyone to know that you have put up with someone since you were 14 years old who hit you.' Feelings of shame or embarrassment were also cited by several other women as a reason for delaying engagement with the police. While Sara's TAFE worker eventually called the police on her behalf, Sara (interview 1, CALD) explained that she had been reluctant to call because 'when I see a policeman, like I feel like shy or embarrassed'. Martha (interview 1) was similarly reluctant to involve the police: 'I was so embarrassed ... Oh God, that I'm in domestic violence, here I am pregnant'. Other women discussed how they had kept their experience of DFV secret for many years and calling police would have exposed this. Gillian (interview 1) explained, 'you just cover these things up'; Terri (interview 1) said, 'you sort of keep to yourself because sometimes you get people saying, well why are you there or why don't you just walk out'. Maddy (interview 2) explained that she had subtly reached out to police for help on earlier occasions, but her quiet pleas were not noticed:

I think early in the piece over the years where I reached out to the police and made subtle attempts for them to notice that something was wrong—went there in a side-skirt so that they could see multiple bruises that were on my leg or on the side of my arm and things like that, to give testimony about a crash I had seen up the road; just different things like that.

### *Who called the police?*

At the first interview, most women (n59 of 65) had experienced contact with the police in relation to DFV. This is a very high proportion compared to other studies (Voce and Boxall 2018) and may be explained in part by the fact that the interviewees were recruited from support agencies where staff often encouraged and supported them to engage with police. At the second interview, 18 women reported they had contact with the police in response to DFV between the first and second interview and 15 women reported they had contact with police between the second and third interview. Generally, women reported that they themselves had called the police. At the first interview, 49 women reported that they had called the police (four ATSI women and 14 CALD women). However, some women reported at interview 1 that others had alerted the police. Three women reported that their abusive partner had called the police, one reported her new partner had called the police, one reported her child had called them and two women reported that a neighbour or friend had called the police. Seven women reported that a service (domestic violence support worker, ambulance worker, TAFE worker, child safety officer or hospital worker) had contacted police. On one occasion, police contact was the result of a drug investigation. On some occasions, women reported that more than one person had called the police.

### *Why did women call the police?*

Women expressed a range of overlapping reasons for calling the police, including seeking information about their options; wanting the police to stop the violence, provide protection or protect the children; applying for a civil protection order or reporting an abuser's breach of a civil protection order; recovering the child from the abuser; or reporting her abusive partner's suicide threat. Consistent with other studies (Ackerman and Love 2014; Barrett and St Pierre 2011, 58; Barrett, St Pierre and Vaillancourt 2011, 48; Birdsey and Snowball 2013, 6), more than half of the women in the Brisbane study who had contacted the police believed they were at risk of very serious injury when they called the police.

### *Positive experiences with police*

When discussing positive police responses, many of the women said they thought that the police had been respectful towards them, listened to them, worked with them and followed up on their safety. Positive comments on police interactions often reflected that the woman believed she had developed a relationship with an individual police officer or station. For example, Sandra had interactions with police over each of the three interviews. Her experience with police was inconsistent, but at interview 2, she reported a positive relationship with police:

This year, the police have been working very closely with me in a sense. They've been ringing me ... and then the police officer—six weeks would go by—Sandra, are you alright? We haven't heard from you. We haven't seen you ... So they were very—quite concerned.

While Frieda was only interviewed in the study once, she had already had several interactions with police over the weeks prior to the interview. She identified inconsistent police responses, but had praise for one officer:

The fact that he believed me that night in the face of this female police officer who was like, oh it is caused by nagging and the magistrate who was like, it's a push and shove ... so I just kept coming back to him. He was just very nice.

Skye (interview 1) was interviewed three times in the course of the study. She reflected on the difficulties police face in balancing the wishes of the victim against police views on the response that will best promote safety:

I believe it's hard for the police. They were very respectful on my behalf but they said to me they feel it's in the best interests of them that they [apply for] a protection order. I said to them no, no, no, please don't, please don't, I'll sort this out, everything ... They respected my wishes which I appreciated because at that point I was scared for what he would do to me in a way. But because when you supposedly love someone you don't want them going to jail or having a criminal record or anything.

At interview 3, Skye had separated from her partner, had a protection order and stable child contact arrangements. She was still experiencing stalking and was receiving support from police, but reported that she felt safe:

Sometimes the police give me a call and just say we're just checking in on you because of the past records that I've had with him they're like well we have to make sure that he's not doing anything stupid ... The one who was actually in charge of our main [protection order] thing is always like 'I'll always have to check up on you ... I felt really bad with what I saw'. He knew that I was having a really hard time with [the abuser] but I couldn't leave. He still does yearly if not half-year check-ups on me to make sure that nothing is going on.

Skye (interview 3) concluded that the police response had been an important part of her support network:

I think community services is a big part of people surviving and dealing with it. It's also the fact that I'm very grateful that I did have a lot of people supporting me and if it wasn't for them, if it wasn't for the community services, if it wasn't for the police, I wouldn't be where I am today.

Alex was involved with police at each of the three interviews and continued to experience extreme levels of stalking and legal systems abuse (see Douglas 2018a) throughout the period of the interviews. At interview 2, Alex said, 'I'm very grateful. The police have been very—they've done what they can do. But they've always been very respectful of me and my situation. They are very aware of how tricky he is'. Her experience continued to be positive at interview 3.

Bianca (interview 2) reported that she had developed a personal relationship with an individual officer that she found helpful:

[Named police officer] gave me her direct line and I spoke to her on a number of occasions around different things, when I was worried ... there was one occasion when my power went out and the meter box had been tripped ... I was completely paranoid. I don't actually think it was [the abuser], but at the time I was really freaking out about it and I rang [named police officer] and she arranged for people to drive by the house and check on things, just those little things like that.

The key themes identified in the women's positive experiences with police included a sense of feeling respected and believed by police and that individual police seemed to have a personal commitment to their ongoing safety.

### *Negative experiences with police*

Women reported number of concerns when asked about their experiences with police. Key issues they raised were police failure to investigate or take other appropriate action (especially where the parties had children together), failure to take the DFV seriously, blaming the women and aligning with or being manipulated by abusers. The women's comments about these overlapping issues are considered in the following three sections.

#### *Failure to investigate or take other appropriate action*

Some women expected that police would investigate the incident of DFV thoroughly if they were called. However, they reported that this did not always occur. Faith (interview 2) reported that the police eventually attended after a two-hour delay, then provided little support. Faith said that her ex-partner had come to her house. He was 'screaming abuse', threatening to kill her and banging on the front and back door to enter. He went under the house and started to bang a broom on the floor of Faith's bedroom:

I had locked myself and the children in my bedroom and pushed the drawers against my door. The children and I were very scared. The police took two hours to turn up. When they did, we noticed that he had snapped a key into the lock of my front door. [He] had fallen asleep downstairs, the police left him there.

When they attended, the police spoke to Faith about taking out a protection order, but did not offer to assist her or investigate possible criminal charges, despite the damaged lock and threats to kill.

Kirsten (interview 1) reported that her ex-partner violently attacked her male friend in her home, injuring him severely, including breaking one of his bones. Her male friend ran to a shop where he called the police. The police attended Kirsten's house, but she was disappointed with them:

They did nothing. In fact they were hopeless. The ones who came to the house made me feel like it was a storm in a teacup ... They didn't check on my daughter. They didn't check on me ... There was no [protection order] on their behalf ... No



evidence collected, despite blood being on the curtains and around the house. No statements. No checking on the child or the rest of the house.

While Kirsten blamed police, Francis (interview 1) blamed herself for the police failure to respond appropriately. Francis (interview 1) reflected on the first time police attended her house:

The neighbours called the police and two police came—one for him and one for me. The police said to me ‘What happened to my lip?’ and I said, ‘I bit it’ and she said, ‘Are you sure?’, and I said ‘yeah, I bit it’.

She explained that she denied that her partner had harmed her because she was scared of him. Francis further explained that although one of the police was talking to her partner outside, she thought her partner could still hear what she was saying. Francis believed the only way the police response could have been different would have been if she had ‘owned up.’ Francis discussed another time neighbours had called the police. Again she denied being harmed. Francis (interview 1) told the police her partner had thrown a saucepan and the police said, ‘You can’t fight in front of the children’. Despite her denials of DFV, she was disappointed the police did not inspect the house because, she said, ‘If they had, they would have seen a hole in the wall and blood on the wall’. Francis was disappointed the police did not follow up or talk to her about protection orders on either occasion.

Some women like Julia (interview 1) were disappointed that police did not follow through on what they committed to doing: ‘They lied to me, told me my son would be named on the protection order and he wasn’t and told me my ex was being charged and they didn’t’. Similarly, when Euni (interview 2) attended the police station on two occasions, she left her number for police to call her: ‘It seemed that it looked like they didn’t care much about that. I already left a message and contact number but they never called me back’.

In Australia, national family law orders govern property settlement and child contact post-separation, while civil protection orders and criminal offences are governed by state-based statutes and courts (AIJA 2018, para 1). In cases in which the woman had children with the abuser but did not have a family law order, some women identified that police seemed particularly reluctant to become involved. For example, Felicity (interview 1) called the police when her ex-partner was very late to return the baby from a contact visit. She recounted, ‘The police said there’s nothing we can do. There’s no parenting orders. I said he’s a five-month-old baby that’s being breastfed. The policeman said, well can he buy him formula?’. Similarly, Doya (CALD, interview 1) had eventually escaped from a very violent relationship. A final incident of strangulation and beating—in which she thought she might be killed—caused her to flee the house, leaving her two young children behind with the abuser. Doya went to hospital for her injuries and asked the police to return her children to her, especially her breastfed infant. She observed, ‘Yeah, the police think maybe, you know, they not believe me ... police said, you can’t have your kids, you will not take your kids from father’. Only after obtaining a family law order some time later were Doya’s children returned to her care.

However, issues also arose when women had family law orders in place that allowed the abuser contact with the children. At interview 3, police had told Sandra that her breach of protection order complaints were being investigated but that they ‘can’t go behind the family court order’. Police emphasised to Sandra that there were ‘two sides to every story’. Similarly, Faith had a no-contact protection order and a family court order with specific child contact conditions for the abuser. She reported numerous breaches of the no-contact condition (interview 3):

I did get the impression that the police were like, oh look he’s just trying to—he’s not doing anything wrong, he’s just trying to contact you. It’s not a big violent

outburst or anything like that. But it was—it was almost seen as—oh it's just, he's just emailing you. That's not classed as a breach.

#### *Police did not take domestic violence seriously*

Similar to Faith's experiences in relation to 'contact breaches' not being understood as DFV, Ingrid (CALD, interview 1) went with her lawyer to report stalking by her partner (via a GPS device in her daughter's doll). Ingrid hoped the police would assist her to obtain a protection order, but 'they said I can't make an application for [a protection order] because it's not physical violence'. Suggesting a gendered police response, Susan (interview 2) said, 'I hate to use the term, but I feel I'm just getting cock-blocked everywhere'. Susan had reported numerous 'contact breaches':

I have [a protection] order, he keeps breaching, why isn't anything being done about it? ... I'm continuously being threatened—yeah, and I said that to this [police officer] this morning. I said, you guys have ignored every single complaint I made for the last six months and they're just getting worse. His behaviour is escalating. What's it going to take for me to be noticed? I said, 'Do I have to show up here black and blue?'

Several interviewees recounted that their DFV complaints were not taken as seriously as allegations that their abuser had been driving under the influence of alcohol, watching child pornography or growing cannabis. Some said that while assaults on the woman might not be investigated, it was a different story when the abuser assaulted a police officer. Terri (interview 1) reported her abuser's DFV to the police several times, but 'the crunch came when he assaulted police ... and child safety came around then'. Hannah (interview 1) reported an incident of physical violence to the police but was told she could not obtain a protection order. She also told police about her abuser's erratic and drunken driving with the children in the car: 'They were more interested in the fact that he was drink-driving, to be honest, than in him hitting me'. Her partner was charged for drink-driving.

Julia (interview 1) called the police for information about how she might respond to her abuser's threats. The operator said:

It sounds like [her abuser] was frustrated ... He hasn't directly said he is going to put my mouth over the gutter and kick me over the back of the head, there was nothing they could do, because he could just say that I did something to provoke him.

On another occasion, Julia went to the police station with copies of numerous text messages and evidence of her abuser making more than 40 calls a day:

I felt like an idiot when I left there. I felt like they were just looking at me as someone who was trying to, I don't know, get attention. [The police officer] basically just told me there was nothing they could do to help ... I left there and I rang police again because I didn't know what to do. I was extremely upset and I felt like an idiot. They suggested I try going to a different police station.

Julia went to a different police station and this time decided to report the fact that her abuser was also growing cannabis. Julia said the police response to the DFV improved significantly when she disclosed this information and her partner was charged with drug offences.

#### *Victim-blaming and aligning with men*

On some occasions, women identified that police officers appeared to align with or be manipulated by the abuser, or implied that the woman was responsible for the violence. Some

women believed this attitude resulted in a lower level of service. As noted in the previous section, Susan (interview 2) claimed she had faced a gendered police response and reduced level of service, having been 'cock-blocked'. For others, there were more far-reaching implications, including several situations in which the woman was charged with a criminal offence.

Anna (interview 2) reported that police said she should be avoiding her abuser even though there was a protection order requiring him to stay away from her. At interview 3, Anna said that a police officer called her an 'idiot' for staying with her abuser. She reported, 'It doesn't matter how many times I ring, I feel like I'm annoying the police because obviously I'm calling and it's always speaking to a different officer'. At interview 2, Fiona reported that a police officer had told her she should be the one to move out of the area where Fiona and her ex-partner had lived for many years. Frieda's partner was ultimately convicted of assault. However, at interview 1, Frieda observed that when police first attended the house in response to the assault complaint:

The [police] woman came and talked to me. She said, oh I've talked to [him]. 'He feels very nagged in the relationship and you really need to think about are you putting too much pressure on him and my advice is if these things happen once they'll happen again. So you really need to think about it'. So she was just like basically placing all the blame on me and completely downplaying or dismissing or agreeing with him that he didn't do it.

Julia (interview 3) reported that her protection order included a condition that the police accompany her to remove her belongings from the family home. Despite this, Julia ended up paying for a removalist. Anna reported:

Because the police told me that I would have maybe an hour if I was lucky, to grab whatever I could. They had to sort out a time that was convenient for [abuser] to be home from work and things like that. I just felt that they weren't really considering the fact that I am a single mum with a two-year-old ... I just feel like [abuser] was able to manipulate the police really well in this whole situation.

Anna believed police were focused on the needs and convenience of the abuser rather than hers, despite the fact that she had been the one to move out of the family home because of DFV and had care of a young child.

When reflecting on her experiences with police over a three-year period, Shuang (CALD, interview 3) blamed her limited English for the lack of attention she received from police. She said, 'Maybe my English was really not very good. They didn't understand what's going on. They just listen to [Australian-born partner], you know? From me, yeah, they didn't give a lot of help'. Notably, Shuang reported that no interpreter was present at any of the call-outs.

In some cases, women were charged with offences after police determined the woman was the abuser, although in all instances the charges were subsequently withdrawn by police. Vera (CALD, interview 1) said that her Australian-born partner assaulted her but her abuser called the police. By the time police arrived, Vera was distressed. Vera and her abuser gave conflicting accounts of who had assaulted whom. Vera reported that when police arrived at the house:

He's pretending—he's using crutch for the police that day. He never used crutch. He cry and cry to the police and he's using a crutch so the police will not charge him. He pretends that he is a cripple man.

Ultimately, Vera was arrested and charged with assault and kept in police cells overnight. The charge was later withdrawn. She reflected (interview 2), 'this is really the police ... that's a really bad experience in my life ... this is my bad experience. I cannot ever, ever forget'.

Similarly, Janet (interview 1) called the police on one occasion. She and her abuser were 'a bit drunk' when the police arrived, and Janet had stabbed her abuser with a kitchen knife. The police applied for protection orders for both Janet and her partner and initially charged Janet with serious assault, but later withdrew this charge. Janet (interview 1) said: 'I told [the police officer] the reason there was a knife there is because he tried to strangle me, and I couldn't breathe and I had to get a knife out to try and protect myself'.

In some cases, women reported that police seemed to have particular expectations of how a victim would behave, creating problems when women did not fulfil those expectations. For example, Lisa (interview 1) reported that her partner was hanging around in the garden, despite a protection order with a condition that he stay away:

[I] rang the police and because I didn't scream, I didn't cry, I didn't make a noise, I was not going to give that person standing on the other side of my window any satisfaction knowing that he had scared me. I had three children in the house, plus the granddaughter. So I rang the police and they didn't come.

The police came to the house the next day to check on matters because it had not sounded urgent, despite the clear breach of the protection order and the stalking-type behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Several women pointed to the complexity of the response to fear and that there is not one way of expressing fear. Colleen (interview 2) said:

Fear can sometimes come out mostly as aggression. Grief comes out as anger. So people think it's your problem, which it is, but there's a lack of compassion or an old idea that she may deserve it. That she's mad and she's aggressive.

### *Women's strategies*

Women reported that they developed a range of creative strategies for dealing with perceived shortcomings of the police. As outlined earlier, one such strategy was reporting their partner's other illegal acts (such as drink-driving) to ensure police treated their calls seriously. Other strategies included collecting their own evidence, making formal police complaints, re-partnering (in intimate relationships) with police and security officers, living close to police stations and on some occasions simply opting out of calling the police for help.

Frieda resorted to collecting her own evidence. When Frieda (interview 1) called the police, they applied for a protection order on her behalf but initially refused to instigate criminal charges. Frieda took photographs of her injuries and obtained a medical report and then went to the police station and demanded to make a criminal complaint. Her abuser was ultimately charged and convicted of assault. Some women also used their mobile telephones to record breaches of protection orders and other forms of abuse. Susan (interview 2) said 'I try to record, but then I have to be careful about it' (see Douglas and Burdon 2018).

Several women made formal complaints about police conduct, although none of the women reported that doing so was helpful. For example, Susan (interview 2) said 'I've made so many complaints to police since then and all of them are seen to be unfounded'. Fiona (interview 2) reported that she had good experiences with police 'depending on who you talk to', but she did make a formal complaint about one incident and was disappointed that 'they said they couldn't do anything'.

Leonie, Susan and Fiona had become intimately involved in a relationship with a police officer or a security guard. Fiona (interview 2) said the security guard she re-partnered with is 'very protective'. Susan (interview 2) had re-partnered with a police officer she met on a dating website and said, 'obviously I feel very secure with him'. Vera moved close to a police station. She said, 'where I live they always had a police car' parked in the street and that made her feel safe.

The most concerning response from women who had had problematic experiences in their engagement with police was that they had stopped calling them. For example, by interview 2, Kim stated, 'I have no faith in the police ... I have no faith that there's proper justice, because there doesn't seem to be'. Jacinta (interview 3), when asked why she no longer called the police, said 'I don't believe in the system ... I don't believe it's a system that really works'.

## Discussion and conclusion

The Brisbane study reflects the outcomes of other studies in finding that it was usually the woman herself who called the police (Barrett, St Pierre and Vaillancourt 2011; Hamby 2014, 145) and women called for a variety of reasons (Barrett et al. 2017; Barrett, St Pierre and Vaillancourt 2011; Leisenring 2012; Stewart, Mangan and Hannam 2013). Many of the Brisbane participants reported that police had been respectful towards them, listened to them, worked with them and followed up on their safety. These positive views on police interactions often reflected that the woman believed she had developed a relationship with an individual police officer or station. However, significant concerns were raised by the interviewees. These included police failures to investigate or take other appropriate action (especially where the parties had children together), failures to take the DFV seriously (especially its non-physical forms) and police blaming women or aligning with, or being manipulated by, abusers. Regardless of whether women reported negative or positive experiences with police, in general, participants' experiences were inconsistent over time.

The women's comments highlight that some police responses reflect myths and misunderstandings associated with DFV and sometimes women have also internalised these myths. In particular, women's reports illustrate that some police expect that women should be able to leave violent relationships, discount complaints of coercive and controlling behaviour when there is no physical violence and may expect victims to have certain characteristics. On this point, Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon's (2018) interviews with Victorian police appear to reflect concerns raised by women in the Brisbane study. Their study (2018, 7) reported:

[o]n the whole deserving victims of [DFV] existed for officers only on a purely hypothetical plane, drowned out for the most part by a steady procession of imposters, liars and timewasters, presenting what were regarded as highly suspect claims to victim status.

While women engaged a number of strategies in response to negative or inconsistent police responses, of most concern is that some women ultimately opted out of calling the police. This concern is reflected in other research that has shown that experiences with police have implications for the woman's decision about whether to call again (Barrett et al. 2017; Goodman-Delahunty and Corbo Crehan 2015; Leisenring 2012; Li et al. 2015). Research suggests that calling the police may help reduce future violence (Xie and Lynch 2017, 359). Given that police are the frontline protectors of public safety, it is a grave situation when a woman experiencing DFV believes she can no longer rely on them.

In his interviews with English police, Myhill (2017, 14) found that many police retained a 'physical violence mindset' when policing DFV, and tended to view serious incidents as physical assaults. The limited understanding of DFV exhibited by some police may be explained to some extent by the fact that the crime control model tends to be focused on single incidents. Stark (2012, 206) suggests this focus may contribute to flawed approaches to policing DFV (see Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018, 12). Recruitment materials may also play a role in entrenching the expectations of new police. In Queensland, where this study took place, the police recruitment website includes pictures of police racing down a highway on motorbikes, leaping over fences and chasing someone or running towards something, under the caption: 'We don't do boring' (Queensland Police Recruiting 2018). Understanding of the dynamics of DFV may, to some extent, be improved



by encouraging realistic expectations at recruitment, and by training and specialisation. In some studies, police have expressed willingness to be trained (Horwitz et al. 2011, 623) and there is evidence that appropriate training can make a positive difference (Ruff 2012, 295). Ruff (2012) reported on the positive effects of a Canadian ‘train the trainer’ program designed in collaboration between police, researchers and representatives from a range of government departments to help police officers respond to DFV. Police were trained to identify forms of DFV, consider the impact of DFV on children and respond to clients with diverse needs (Ruff 2012, 287). After training Ruff (2012, 292) discovered that police spent more time at the DFV scene, were more likely to collect evidence of DFV and were more likely to make referrals to support agencies. Some studies have identified promising results from DFV specialty units in improving victim experiences of police, increasing the formal sanctioning of abusers and reducing DFV (Exum et al. 2014, 1003, 1024; Klein 2009; Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018). There is also US evidence to suggest that more police on the ground results in less DFV (Xie, Lauritsen and Heimer 2012, 984). In Queensland, since the *Not Now, Not Ever Report* (2015) was released, strategies including improved training, police specialisation and the recruitment of more police have commenced (Queensland Police Service, 2017b, a, 177). Directing women who have experienced DFV to attend specialised police units may help ensure that women experiencing DFV have a more consistently positive and appropriate experience. While all these responses are important and research suggests they will make a difference, most have been trialled now for several years and yet rates of DFV and of DFV-related homicide remain high (Walklate, McCulloch and Fitz-Gibbon 2017). In addition, concerns about police understanding of DFV continue to be raised (Segrave, Wilson and Fitz-Gibbon 2018; Smee 2018). Perhaps we need a more radical approach.

US research suggests that there may be some differences in the way female versus male police officers do their job. Morin et al. (2017, 9, 26) surveyed police and found that more male (35 per cent) than female (22 per cent) police reported physically struggling with or fighting a suspect who resisted arrest, and that male (30 per cent) officers were about three times more likely than female (11 per cent) officers to report firing their weapon while on duty. Research conducted in England by Andrews and Miller (2013) examined whether the presence of female police chiefs made a difference to the policing of DFV. They found that the rate of DFV arrests varied based on the authority and discretion accorded to female police officers and that higher rates of DFV arrests occurred where female chief constables were present in a police force (Andrews and Miller 2013, 1010). Importantly, they determined that ‘the quality of life for women, as victims of domestic violence, can be greatly improved if there is greater representation of women within the police service’ (Andrews and Miller 2013, 1011). The authors found that female police officers who had greater authority and opportunity to exercise discretion actively represented women’s interests (Andrews and Miller 2013, 1010). It may be that addressing gender balance within the police service may assist in encouraging cultural change and improved responses to DFV. Queensland Police Service is overwhelmingly a male-dominated institution. The most recent statistical review undertaken by the Queensland Police Service (2017a) shows that while almost half the new recruits are women, there is an obvious gender imbalance at higher levels of the service. Approximately 30 per cent of constables are women, 21 per cent of non-commissioned officers are women and there is only one female member (six per cent) of the 18-member Queensland Police Executive (Queensland Police Service 2017a).<sup>2</sup> More generally, of the 44 members of various QPS committees, six (13 per cent) are women, with three of those women being external members who are not QPS employees (Queensland Police Service 2017b). With the move towards a more gender-balanced police service at the recruitment end, we may observe some changes in the way policing is conducted in Queensland. However, ensuring women have greater authority within the police service may be a more reliable way to improve the policing of DFV.

Several studies (Barberet and Carrington 2018; Perova and Reynolds 2015) have highlighted the work of the hundreds of women’s police stations (WPSs) throughout Latin America. WPSs have

been developed since the 1980s to 'enhance women's confidence in the criminal justice system, encourage reporting, prevent re-victimization and send a message to the community that gendered violence was no longer tolerated and men who abuse women will be made accountable' (Barberet and Carrington 2018, 837). WPSs operate using a variety of models, but their common features include that the stations are usually located separately from regular police stations, operators receive specialised training, and operators are able to coordinate women's access to a range of services, including services providing support through the justice system, counselling, jobs skills training and childcare (UN Women 2011, 2). UN Women (2011, 4) reports that WPSs have improved women's access to justice, resulting in more charges being laid against violent abusers, and the majority of WPS users surveyed reported feeling that they were listened to and, as a result, better supported and understood. Most users also perceived that WPSs contributed to a reduction in violence against women (UN Women 2011, 4). Perova and Reynolds (2015) examined national mortality data in Brazil to determine the effect of WPSs on the homicide of women. They concluded that WPSs had strong effects on homicide rates among women aged 15–24 years, living in larger metropolitan areas, resulting in a 70 per cent reduction in the average homicide rate for women in that group (Perova and Reynolds 2015, 17).

The *Not Now, Not Ever Report* (2015, 50) recognised that 'cultural and attitudinal factors ... [affect] the behaviour of the professionals within our police, justice, welfare and service provider systems when called on to respond to, and manage, domestic violence'. Police are just one of the responses to DFV, but they are an important one. This research suggests that there is still some way to go to effect the cultural change needed among police. In the Queensland context, DFV training and specialised units have been introduced and there are increasing numbers of police on the ground. However, reports of DFV and associated deaths remain persistently high (Queensland Government 2017, 35). Perhaps it is time to reconsider the police recruitment message and the representation of women in higher ranks of the police service. It might also be time to investigate the potential of women's only police stations.

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<sup>1</sup> Notably stalking is identified as risk factor for future abuse (AIJA 2018, para 4.2).

<sup>2</sup> A definition of commissioned and executive rank: 'The appointment of an officer to a commissioned and executive rank in the service is an important milestone in the officer's career and comes after the officer has demonstrated advanced levels in the core attributes and personal qualities required of commissioned officers. A commissioned rank in the QPS is Inspector and above, and an executive rank is Assistant Commissioner and above' (Queensland Police News 2018).

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