CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
THE PROBLEM OF POLICING MARITAL VIOLENCE

This book explores the police response to marital violence in Singapore. As with any research, this investigation into police response is located in a particular culture and historical context. It owes its origins to the reframing of questions about the problem of intimate violence and its ramifications for the criminal justice system, particularly with issues of policing, safety and protection of victims from such violence. The book fundamentally attempts to address the question of why years of police reform in countries such as the US, the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia since the late 1960s have not produced significant changes to improving the policing of marital violence. In this regard, the book also documents the reform process and the resistance encountered within the police organisation, especially by the rank-and-file police, to such reform efforts. Any attempt to understand this process requires an examination of the everyday realities of policing as well as a recognition of the political, social and legal context in which policing occurs. It is towards achieving this end that the book calls for an alternative theoretical approach to the location of ‘police culture’, one that will be sensitive to the structural conditions of policing marital violence.

The book examines the history of changes at the policy and executive levels relating to the policing of marital violence in the Singapore context. It discusses the legislative and administrative changes, including the Family Violence Bill of 1995, Amendments to the Women’s Charter in 1997, and the development of agencies with specific competencies in the area of marital violence. The disjunction between ‘street-level’ and ‘managerial policing’, to which some observers attribute the failure of reforms in the policing of marital violence, is introduced so that at the outset the focus of the book is established as one of explaining rank-and-file policing.

The book offers an alternative and original conceptual approach to understanding rank-and-file policing based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Using Bourdieu’s relational concepts of the ‘field’ and ‘habitus’, designating the structural conditions of policing and the cultural
dispositions of police culture, respectively, the book argues that any attempt to appreciate police response to marital violence must involve an analysis of both police culture and how it interacts with the ‘structures’ of the field, which in the present analysis include: (a) the patriarchal State’s discourse of marital violence and the institution of the family; (b) structural-legal constraints in which police intervention takes place; and (c) the interplay of class, race, gender and sexuality. In contrast to other research and published works on police response to marital violence, this book devotes a chapter (Chapter Seven) to documenting victim experiences of policing in such situations. As much as it exposes the street-level institutional response to marital violence, a sociological analysis of it will also reveal the structural features of Singapore society.

The problem of ‘improving’ the policing of marital violence is conceptualised by police reformers as principally one of changing the practices and community responsiveness of the police to adopting a more interventionist approach in domestic situations. Evidence of a willingness to improve the policing of marital violence in the Singapore Police Force (SPF) could be traced to the introduction of the Domestic Violence Project at a police division in April 1995. The project, which was organised around an elaborate network comprising the police and social service agencies, was essentially an administrative set-up designed to assist victims of domestic violence in making a formal complaint, rather than being a consequence of legislative change to substantive law governing police conduct. Nonetheless, the project administered by the SPF and the then Ministry of Community Development (MCD) marked the first formal response by the Singapore State in recognising and addressing the problem of marital violence in Singapore.

An interesting feature of this ‘facilitated complaint and referral system’, as the police phrased it, was the incorporation of the ‘Family Violence Proforma’ where the victim is referred by the police to a Family Service Centre (FSC) in non-seizable (non-arrestable) cases for counselling. The counsellor at the family service centre then works closely with the Neighbourhood Police officer (NPPO) on any one of the two options available: to prosecute the offender (a criminal perspective), or to monitor the victim’s progress (a social work perspective). A significant development in the implementation of the Domestic Violence Project was the extension of the socio-legal control mechanisms which dealt with the problem of marital violence, and the empowerment of