CHAPTER SEVEN
BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP-BLUE SEA: VICTIMS’ EXPERIENCES OF POLICING IN MARITAL VIOLENCE

This chapter shifts the focus to female victims of intimate violence. It explores the views of victims of marital violence in terms of their relationship with the criminal justice system, particularly the police. It also seeks to contextualise how such relationships take place within the boundaries set by the authoritarian, paternalistic and patriarchal Singapore State. It examines the neglected questions of why victims of marital violence call the police, and the context in which victims make choices to involve the police. How do victims perceive the utility of police intervention in such instances? What is the real and perceived impact of police intervention on these victims? What are the social and economic consequences for the victims and offenders following criminalisation? What other options (criminal or non-criminal) are available to victims of domestic violence?

In exploring these issues, the author draws upon fieldwork carried out between May and December 2003 with several social work agencies and family service centres (FSCs) which are organisationally linked to a police division. Data for the research were gathered from conducting in-depth interviews with female victims of domestic violence at the three but ‘interconnected’ field sites: the police division proper, social work agencies/victim shelters, and FSCs. It is interconnected because the three sites are organisationally linked with one another and it was usually the police who referred reported cases and victims who had sought formal help from either the social work agencies or FSCs. The reasons victims were interviewed at the latter two sites was to capture the perspectives of victims who had directly sought the assistance of social workers and volunteers at the FSCs without being processed through and referred by the police.

During the period of research, a total of 26 of the 35 victims whose cases were dealt by the social work agencies/FSCs were interviewed. The selection of the victims was non-random and they were included in the sample solely on the basis of their willingness to participate in
the study, considering how sensitive this issue is to many of the victims. In situations where the victims were reluctant to talk to a male interviewer (author), the assistance of a female interviewer was sought, although only a minority of victims actually requested one. All the victims interviewed were drawn from combinations of categories as follows: victims who had never called the police but were seeking some kind of assistance and counselling from the social work agencies/FSCs; victims who had been referred by the police to the social work agencies/FSCs within their jurisdiction; victims who had had some kind of prior experience and contact with the police and this category also comprised individuals who fell ‘outside’ the police jurisdiction under study; and victims who had reported a case of violence to the police but had not since come into contact with the police in the three months prior to when the interviews were conducted. All the victims were asked questions about their experiences of, and the police response to, their victimisation in the context of their expectations of the police when they made that decision to involve the police. In addition to gathering data from the victims, an insight into the perspectives of social workers and volunteers with FSCs was also sought as they were empowered institutionally, following the implementation of the Domestic Violence Project in 1995, to act as ‘official gatekeepers’ of cases that entered the criminal justice system.

Despite the apparent ‘progress’ made in the legislative and organisational arena with regard to making the police more ‘responsive’ and ‘interventionist’ in cases of domestic violence more generally, evidence from the research indicates that many victims of marital violence—the majority of whom were women—do not seek formal intervention from the police since criminal sanctions are unlikely to help to end the violence. The data thus call into question the value of pro-arrest policies to victims instituted by the Singapore police, which require prosecution decisions to be based on evidential considerations alone. These policies are based, as Hoyle & Sanders (2000) argued on the basis of the British experience, on assumptions about the interests of victims and the best ways to protect them. Data from the research also indicated that policies which seemingly give effect to ‘victim choice’, on the other hand, are also problematic as they ignore the socio-cultural, economic and legal circumstances which shape and inform constructions of victim preferences. Neither of these positions takes victims’ interest into account. Nor do they stem from an understanding of the socio-structural context in which victims experience violence, and continue to experience it, long after a police intervention.