

WHEN PROTECTORS BECOME PERPETRATORS: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG ISRAELI POLICE OFFICERS

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Abstract

Domestic violence perpetrated by police officers represents a critical yet underexamined manifestation of gendered power, wherein state-sanctioned authority converges with intimate partner abuse. This article offers a feminist analysis of domestic violence committed by Israeli police officers, addressing a significant gap in Israeli scholarly literature. Drawing on qualitative analysis of court verdicts, media reports, and interviews with mental health professionals, the study examines the structural, psychological, and institutional dynamics that distinguish police-perpetrated intimate partner violence from abuse in the general population. Situated within feminist theories of patriarchal control, hegemonic masculinity, and coercive control, the analysis demonstrates how police culture—characterized by militarized masculinity, emotional suppression, access to weapons, and the “blue wall of silence”—intensifies both the severity of violence and barriers to victim protection. The Israeli context, shaped by mandatory military service and chronic occupational stress, further reinforces these dynamics. Findings reveal patterns of weaponized professional knowledge, institutional minimization, and victim silence, producing what is conceptualized as compound trauma rooted in both intimate and institutional betrayal. The article argues that police-perpetrated domestic violence should not be understood as individual deviance but as a predictable outcome of institutionalized patriarchy embedded within law enforcement structures. The study concludes by calling for feminist-informed structural reforms, including independent accountability mechanisms, trauma-informed support systems, and a fundamental transformation of police culture toward gender equality and care-oriented practice.

Keywords: *Policemen, domestic violence, feminist analysis, qualitative research, Israel.*

1. Introduction

Domestic violence perpetrated by police officers represents a critical manifestation of patriarchal power structures operating at both institutional and intimate levels. Domestic violence perpetrated by police officers presents a profound paradox: those sworn to protect and serve become the very threat from which their intimate partners need protection. This phenomenon, while documented internationally, has received scant attention in Israeli academic literature despite compelling evidence suggesting elevated risk factors. This essay examines the characteristics and patterns of domestic violence committed by Israeli police officers, drawing on court documents, media reports, and interviews with mental health professionals to illuminate this understudied issue.

The intersection of law enforcement culture and intimate partner violence creates unique dynamics that distinguish police-perpetrated domestic violence from similar crimes in the general population. Officers possess specialized training in violence, access to weapons, investigative knowledge, and perhaps most significantly, membership in a professional brotherhood that may prioritize loyalty over accountability. These factors combine to create what researchers have termed a “perfect storm” for domestic abuse that is both more dangerous and more difficult to address than typical cases. Through a feminist theoretical lens, this phenomenon reveals how masculine hegemony, embedded within law enforcement culture, creates and perpetuates systems of gendered violence that extend from the public sphere into the private domain. This essay examines domestic violence among Israeli police officers, arguing that police-perpetrated intimate partner violence represents not only aberrant individual behavior but rather the logical extension of institutionalized patriarchal control mechanisms that shape both police culture and officer psychology.

Feminist scholars have long argued that domestic violence functions as a tool of patriarchal control, maintaining male dominance through physical, psychological, and economic subjugation of women (Stark & Hester, 2018). When the perpetrator is a police officer, these dynamics intensify exponentially, as state-sanctioned authority merges with intimate terrorism to create what might be termed "weaponized patriarchy"—the convergence of institutional and personal male power to ensure female subordination.

2. The Israeli context

The Israeli context adds additional layers of complexity. The nation's security-focused culture and mandatory military service create a pipeline from military to police service, potentially compounding trauma and reinforcing militaristic approaches to conflict resolution. Israeli police officers face particularly challenging employment conditions, with longer work hours, lower pay compared to Western counterparts, and limited union protections. These stressors, combined with inadequate mental health support systems, create fertile ground for maladaptive coping mechanisms, including domestic violence (Johnson, Todd, & Subramanian, 2005).

Moreover, the "blue wall of silence"—the unwritten code protecting officers from scrutiny—takes on particular significance in Israel's relatively small law enforcement community (Skolnik, 2022; Sweeting, Cole, & Hills, 2022). The researchers document how this protective culture extends to domestic violence cases, with colleagues often dismissing visible injuries on female officers as "work-related" and supervisors addressing obsessive harassment as merely an administrative inconvenience rather than criminal behavior.

The Israeli context adds layers of militarized masculinity inherited from mandatory military service. The psychological transition from soldier to police officer involves minimal decompression from combat-oriented hypervigilance and aggression. Post-traumatic stress, inadequately addressed due to cultural stigma around male vulnerability, becomes channeled into intimate terrorism. The feminist concept of "trauma as gendered performance" illuminates how officers transform psychological wounds into weapons against female partners, converting their own pain into female suffering.

The study's finding that minority officers (Ethiopian, Druze) committed disproportionately severe violence reflects intersectional dynamics where marginalized masculinities seek validation through extreme demonstrations of patriarchal control. These officers, experiencing racial subordination within the police hierarchy, may compensate through hyperviolent performances of masculinity in intimate relationships—what Bell Hooks (2004) terms "plantation patriarchy," where oppressed men replicate oppressive structures against women in their communities.

3. Feminist theoretical framework: The psychology of masculine domination

The psychological profile of officers who commit domestic violence must be understood within the broader context of hegemonic masculinity and its institutional reinforcement. Police organizations actively cultivate hypermasculine identities through recruitment, training, and socialization processes that valorize aggression, emotional suppression, and dominance (Brown, 2007). This institutional construction of masculinity creates profound psychological tensions that manifest in intimate relationships.

From a psychoanalytic feminist perspective, the police officer's need for absolute control stems from deep-seated anxieties about masculine inadequacy. The hypermasculine facade demanded by police culture requires constant performance and validation, creating what Connell (2005) terms "masculinity under threat." Officers experiencing professional stress, perceived emasculation, or challenges to their authority may attempt to restore their masculine equilibrium through domestic violence, reasserting control in the private sphere when public authority feels compromised.

The psychological splitting between "protector" and "perpetrator" roles creates cognitive dissonance that officers resolve through victim-blaming narratives and minimization. The study documents numerous cases where officers portrayed themselves as victims while depicting their female partners as manipulative, unfaithful, or psychologically unstable—classic projective identification mechanisms that preserve the officer's self-concept while justifying violence. One officer referred to himself repeatedly in the third person during court proceedings, psychologically distancing himself from his actions while maintaining his victim narrative.

Feminist analysis reveals police organizations as fundamentally patriarchal institutions that normalize and reproduce gendered violence through multiple mechanisms. The "blue wall of silence" represents not merely professional loyalty but masculine solidarity—a brotherhood united in protecting male privilege and power. When officers commit domestic violence, this protective mechanism extends to shield them from accountability, effectively institutionalizing intimate partner violence as an acceptable expression of masculine authority.

4. Psychological mechanisms of control and coercion

The psychological tactics employed by officer-abusers demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of coercive control mechanisms. Officers weaponized their professional knowledge to create elaborate surveillance and intimidation systems. They exploited their investigative training to gaslight victims, their interrogation skills to psychologically torture, and their knowledge of legal systems to ensure impunity. This represents what feminist psychologists term "institutional gaslighting"—using professional expertise to systematically undermine women's reality testing and agency.

The timing and triggers of violence reveal deep psychological patterns rooted in patriarchal entitlement. Violence frequently erupted when women asserted independence, seeking divorce, suspected of infidelity, or challenging male authority. These moments represent threats to patriarchal ownership, triggering what psychologist Lundy Bancroft (2002) calls "entitlement-based rage." The officer's professional identity as controller and enforcer makes any challenge to personal authority psychologically intolerable, necessitating violent restoration of dominance.

Particularly revealing is the psychological profile of murder victims: several were professional women, domestic violence advocates, or law enforcement personnel themselves. From a feminist perspective, these women represented the ultimate threat to patriarchal authority—empowered women who understood systems of oppression and possessed resources to resist. Their murders represent not crimes of passion but calculated eliminations of female autonomy, what feminist scholars term "femicide as patriarchal terrorism".

5. The psychology of silenced victims

The psychological impact on victims reflects multiple layers of patriarchal oppression. Partners of police officers experience what might be termed "compound trauma"—the intersection of intimate terrorism with institutional betrayal. Victims face unique psychological barriers to help-seeking, knowing their abuser's colleagues will likely protect them, that he can track them through police databases, and that the very system meant to protect them is controlled by their abuser's brotherhood.

The study documents how victims internalized patriarchal narratives, with several unable to recognize sexual coercion as rape or systematic abuse as criminal. This reflects what feminist psychologists term "patriarchal consciousness"—the internalization of male supremacist ideologies that normalize female subjugation. One victim, herself a police officer, admitted she failed to recognize abuse patterns in her own relationship despite professional training—illustrating how pervasive patriarchal conditioning overrides even professional knowledge.

The psychological isolation experienced by these victims extends beyond typical domestic violence scenarios. They face not just one abusive man but an entire patriarchal institution prepared to discredit, dismiss, and destroy them if they speak out. This creates what trauma specialist Judith Herman (1992) calls "captivity trauma"—psychological imprisonment within systems of total male control.

6. Institutional failures through a feminist lens

The systematic failures documented—lack of protocols, absent data collection, continued employment of known abusers—represent not oversight but active patriarchal preservation. The police institution's refusal to acknowledge officer-perpetrated domestic violence maintains the fiction of masculine protector-heroes while sacrificing female lives to preserve this mythology.

When colleagues dismissed visible injuries on female officers as "work-related" or supervisors treated obsessive harassment as an administrative inconvenience, they engaged in what feminist scholars term "institutional misogyny"—the systematic devaluation of women's safety and reality. The Ministry of Welfare's failure to track victims fleeing officer-partners represents deliberate ignorance designed to protect patriarchal institutions from accountability.

7. Conclusion: Toward feminist transformation

This research illuminates how police-perpetrated domestic violence represents the convergence of personal and institutional patriarchy, creating uniquely dangerous conditions for women. The psychological dynamics—from officers' fragile masculinity to victims' multiple trauma—reveal domestic violence not as individual pathology but as logical outcome of patriarchal institutional structures.

Meaningful change requires a real transformation of police culture itself: dismantling hypermasculine ideologies, implementing training on healthy relationships and emotional regulation, creating independent accountability mechanisms staffed by feminist advocates, and providing trauma-informed, gender-conscious support services for all police officers who need it. Most fundamentally, it requires recognizing that police-perpetrated domestic violence is not an aberration, but a predictable result of institutionalized patriarchy granted state-sanctioned weapons and authority along with frequent exposure to traumas.

Until law enforcement undergoes fundamental (hopefully) feminist restructuring—prioritizing care over control, community over domination, and gender equality over masculine supremacy—partners of police officers will remain trapped within dual systems of patriarchal violence: intimate terrorism backed by institutional power. This research breaks crucial silence, but silence-breaking without structural transformation merely documents oppression without dismantling it. The path forward demands nothing less than feminist revolution within law enforcement itself.

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