



## Who is better for handling domestic violence? A comparison between Taiwanese female and male Officers<sup>☆</sup>

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### A B S T R A C T

This study examined Taiwanese female and male police officers' perceptions of handling domestic violence. Specifically, it assessed officers' attitudes toward whether female officers, male officers, or a combination of female and male officers are more suited for handling cases of battered women, offenders, and domestic violence overall. Survey data were collected from 96 female and 156 male officers from two police departments in Taiwan. Frequency distributions showed that a combination of male and female officers were most preferred by officers for handling abused women, offenders, and domestic violence overall. Regression analysis found that female officers were significantly more likely than male officers to favor a combination of male and female officers over female officers alone for handling battered women. Female officers were found to be more likely than male officers to favor male over female officers and a combination of male and female officers for handling offenders. Police supervisors' attitudes toward domestic violence also influenced officers' attitudes toward who is more suited for handling offenders. Implications for future research and policy are discussed.

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### Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed a substantial increase in research on women in policing. One of the major concerns is whether female officers display patterns of occupational attitudes and operational styles that distinguish them from their male counterparts. Gender differences have been detected in officers' attitudes toward police role (e.g., Brooks, Piquero, & Cronin, 1993; Sun, 2003), community and residents (A. Worden, 1993), community policing (Schafer, 2002), job satisfaction (Winfree, Guiterman, & Mays, 1997; A. Worden, 1993), stress (Haarr & Morash, 1999; He, Zhao, & Archbold, 2002; He, Zhao, & Ren, 2005), and domestic violence (Belknap, 1996; Homant & Kennedy, 1985; Stalans & Finn, 2000). Nevertheless, an even greater number of studies found weak or no gender differences along the same line of investigation (see Poteyeva & Sun, 2009, for a review). Gender differences in policing clearly remain an unsettled issue.

The main purpose of this current study was to examine whether Taiwanese female and male officers differ in their attitudes toward the disposition of domestic violence incidents. Specifically, this research assessed officers' attitudes toward whether female officers, male officers, or a combination of both are best suited for handling battered women, offenders, and domestic violence overall. Two reasons underlie this current research. Although police responses to domestic violence in

Taiwan have become the subject of an increasing number of studies over the past two decades, very few studies had empirically tested attitudinal differences toward domestic violence between male and female officers and the results were far from conclusive. Thus, the existence or absence of gender difference in officers' attitudes toward domestic violence stays an open question. Furthermore, while studies conducted in the U.S. had investigated similar issues and found gender difference (see, for example, Belknap, 1996), whether findings from research on Western police forces can be applied to police officers in an Asian society is largely unknown. This current study was designed to shed light on these unanswered questions.

Using survey data collected from 252 police officers in two Taiwanese departments, the study was designed to answer two questions: (1) Do female officers differ from their male counterparts in attitudes toward who is best suited for handling domestic violence; and (2) Are officers' attitudes toward who is best suited for handling domestic violence influenced by demographic and attitudinal variables? The findings of this study would contribute to a better understanding of policing in general and gender difference (or similarity) in attitudes toward domestic violence in particular in a Chinese society. The findings are also relevant for effective policing and good police-community relations.

### Policing domestic violence in Taiwan

Domestic violence was not viewed as an essential part of police work in Taiwan before the 1980s. While there is a long history of local

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social service agencies providing assistance and protection to abused women and children, legal interventions, including appropriate police actions, were largely absent from the official response to domestic violence. Like their Western counterparts, many Taiwanese police officers tended to view domestic violence cases as civil, family matters and were unwilling to actively intervene into this type of incidents (Wang, 2003). Officers clearly preferred mediation over arrest and strongly encouraged parties involved to reconcile the conflict rather than to seek official legal sanctions (L. Yeh, 1996). The role of the police, however, has gradually shifted from passive listeners to active responders in the 1990s mainly due to women's human right movement, political pressure, and, perhaps most importantly, new legislations (Huang, 1999; Wang, 2003). Violence against women is now regarded, at least from the government's point of view, as a form of interpersonal violence and violation of women's right (Tang, Cheung, Chen, & Sun, 2002).

The turning point in terms of governmental response to domestic violence in Taiwan is the promulgation of the *Domestic Violence Prevention & Control Act (DVPCA)*. As the first law of this kind among Asian countries, DVPCA was enacted in June 1999 to beef up the law enforcement of this historically ignored issue and provide better protection for domestic violence victims (Chen, 2001). DVPCA requires various governmental agencies, such as social services, police, prosecutors and courts, public health, education, and household registration to carry out certain responsibilities and work collectively to address the problem of domestic violence. Under social service bureaus within city and county governments, Domestic Violence Prevention Centers (DVPC) were established to coordinate governmental efforts in responding to domestic violence. Twenty-six shelters were also set up throughout the country to provide emergency accommodation to domestic violence victims (Lin, 2001). Domestic violence cases reported to DVPC have increased steadily since the passage of DVPCA, rising from 21,572 in 2000 to 25,362 in 2001, and to 28,467 in 2002 (Lai, 2003).

DVPCA requires the police to take more aggressive actions, such as arresting serious offenders, filing case reports, and helping victims to apply for protection orders, against domestic violence. These tasks are shouldered mainly by three groups of officers within police departments. First, officers who are assigned to the local police stations (i.e., the so-called *Pai-chu-suo*) are the first responders directly involved in responding to domestic violence incidents. Their specific tasks include: (1) taking and handling domestic violence calls made to local stations; (2) controlling the scene, separating parties involved, and making arrests if necessary; (3) collecting relevant evidence and filing reports; (4) protecting the safety of victims and their family members, informing district stations about victims who have an urgent need for protection orders, and passing information on the protection orders to victims; (5) arresting offenders who violate the protection orders; and (6) informing the local DVPC about domestic violence cases (Chen, 2001). Evaluations of neighborhood officers' attitudes toward domestic violence revealed that many officers showed low levels of willingness in intervening and often complained about the complex procedures and abundant paperwork involved in disposing of domestic violence cases (Y. Yeh, 2001). Problems associated with the execution of protection, such as the lack of adequate training, manpower allocation, and managerial support, were also identified (Huang, 2003).

The second group consists of domestic violence prevention officers within district stations (the so-called *Fen-ju*), which is organizationally one-level above the local police stations. Specifically, the criminal investigation division within each district is required to assign a detective (at the rank of sergeant or above) to serve as the district domestic violence officer whose primary responsibilities include applying protection orders for victims and informing officers at local stations about the nature (e.g., time and place) of the protection orders, assisting victims in seeking legal actions against offenders, compiling and analyzing case-related data, conducting contacts with victims and making referrals to counseling and shelter services, and

administering training in handling domestic violence (Chen, 2001). These officers act as bridges between the DVPC and local police stations. Like local station officers, their workloads are extremely heavy since many of them are also given non-domestic violence criminal cases. Some officers also expressed dissatisfaction with inadequate support from the local DVPC (Yang, 2006).

The final groups are female officers assigned to women and/or juvenile police squads. They are responsible for designing prevention programs and tactics and supervising and coordinating enforcement and prevention efforts carried out by officers at district stations (Chen, 2001). Studies showed that women police squads functioned fairly well in rendering emergency shelters, legal advisements, and referrals to battered women and female officers assigned to women squads displayed better knowledge of and more positive attitudes toward domestic violence than female officers assigned to other duty (L. Yeh, 1996).

Police administration has made efforts to hold various domestic violence workshops and training seminars to familiarize officers with current domestic violence laws and handling procedures as well as techniques to promote victims' safety and availability of various referral sources. The specialized workshops on domestic violence for all line officers range from eight to twenty-four hours and are held annually by each city and county police department. These training sessions stress the importance of handling domestic violence cases and usually outline the roles and responsibilities of law enforcement officers with an emphasis of being sensitive and responsive to victims' needs. For domestic violence prevention officers, the training courses are even more intensive, lasting longer and touching a broader set of legal and procedural issues in domestic violence. In addition, routine quarterly in-service trainings at the local departmental levels, which are required for all officers, occasionally include special topics or seminars related to domestic violence incidents.

### Gender differences in attitudes toward domestic violence

Although the past three decades have witnessed a steady increase in research on gender difference in officers' occupational attitudes, only a small number of empirical studies had investigated officers' perceptions of domestic violence and the results were far from conclusive. Theoretical explanations of gender difference between men and women in general and between male and female officers in particular focus on psychological distinctions developed early in life or prior socialization into different social roles (Gilligan, 1982; A. Worden, 1993). Women emphasize on interpersonal concerns in their attitudes and actions toward others because they are socialized into nurturing roles highlighted by an "ethic of care" (Gilligan, 1982). Extending these arguments to policing, for example, female officers are more inclined to regard domestic violence as an important police matter and display sympathy toward victims of domestic violence (Sun, 2007). These expectations, however, have yet to receive consistent support from previous studies.

Several studies found no significant differences between male and female officers in attitudes toward or perceptions of various aspects of domestic violence. For example, the majority of female and male officers were found to have either neutral or antagonistic attitudes toward the Phoenix presumptive arrest policy (Ferraro, 1987). Similar attitudinal propensities between policemen and policewomen were also reported in officers' evaluations of whether police could have a positive impact on domestic violence (Feder, 1997), perceptions of arrest, referral to shelter, and marriage counseling as appropriate responses to domestic violence (Stalans & Finn, 2000), and attitudes toward domestic violence victims (Robinson, 2000).

One of the few exceptions that demonstrates gender difference is Belknap's (1996) study of officers' attitudes toward whether policewomen, policemen, or a combination of both are best suited to handle battered women, offenders, and domestic violence overall.

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