

# Women Perception of the Police in a Developing Nation

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study was at researching women’s perception of the police in a developing nation like Trinidad and Tobago. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service have an important mandate in protecting citizens including women, minimising their fear of crime and maintain safe and tranquil communities. However, within recent times there have been an increase in crime and violence against women in Trinidad and Tobago mainly at the hands of men, but more noticeably, at the hands of male police officers. As a result, these concerns have developed a challenge for the police institution and more importantly, the relationship between the police and women. This study used an adaptive approached considering the existing literature on women and policing in developed countries and applied it in a qualitative method where 50 face to face interviews were conducted. These interviews were conducted in various locations of Trinidad and Tobago using the snowball sampling technique. The findings from this study suggested that women in Trinidad and Tobago did not have positive or favourable perceptions of the police due to ongoing problems such as officers sexually harassing women, officers involvement in delinquency, a lack of trust and confidence and officers violence onto women. As a result, the relationship between women and the police was strained and fragile. The findings of this study could be useful to police institutions and academics who can utilise the concepts from this study to make improvements and enhance the relationship between citizens and the police.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Women, Perception, Police, Trinidad and Tobago, Violence.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1- Perception of the Police

Citizens contact with the police are more likely to develop specific types of attitudes and judgements which often formulate an experience. As a result of this experience, citizens are more likely to develop individual perceptions of police officers and the institution (Skogan, 2005; Eller *et al.* 2007). Citizens experiences with the police, regardless of it being personal or vicarious could become an influential factor towards shaping their relationship of the police (Turks, 1969; Lim & Lee, 2021). Pica *et al.* (2020) stated that citizens perception of the police in democratic societies is paramount towards the police becoming legitimate (Adams, 2019). Previous studies have demonstrated that positive experiences amongst citizen and the police were more likely to develop favourable perceptions. As a result, citizens were more inclined to accept the police as legitimate and voluntarily comply with society’s law and order policies (Skogan, 2005; Mazerolle *et al.*, 2013). This could allow policing to become more effective and efficient. On the other hand, negative experiences with the police were more likely to diminish citizen trust and confidence in the institution, the loss of legitimacy is possible, and citizens might become reluctant to comply with police officers and the law (Skogan, 2005; Mazerolle, *et al.*, 2013). As a result, relationships between citizens and the police could become fragile and contentious and simultaneously, criminal activities might increase.

### 1.2- The Problem

Since the 1870’s, studies have suggested that women felt unsafe in public spaces when alone and developed higher levels of fear toward criminal victimisation when compared to men (Stanko, 1993; Macmillan, Nierobisz & Welsh, 2000). Within recent years, women have become significantly fearful because of an increase in violent crimes against them such as assaults, sexual assaults and murder (Hitchings-Hales, 2018; Office for National Statistics-ONS, 2021a). In countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) women has turned to the police for protection in a time of elevated fear. However, there has been an increase of violence towards women from police officers and a notable event is the murder of a female pedestrian namely Sarah Everard who was murdered by a serving police officer (Ingala-Smith, 2021).

In Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) crime against women is not a new phenomenon and had a history related to domestic violence and men excessive consumption of alcohol (Maharaj & Ali, 2004). However, within recent

times, there has been significant increases in violence towards women in the country (Johnson and Boodram, 2019). The Crime and Analysis Branch (CAPA) of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) reported that between 2000 and 2013 there were 143 women in T&T murdered and 134,526 who experienced domestic violence and between 2014 and 2019, 22.5 % of reports of violence against women received by the TTPS were from females between the ages of 18-29 years and 48.5% were between the ages of 30-49 years (Johnson and Boodram, 2019). According to Lee (2022) four abused women entered various police station across T&T in an attempt to make reports of violence being inflicted upon them. However, their reports were mocked by police officers and no action taken. There have also been numerous reports of male police officers inflicting violence against women such as kidnapping, rapes, physical assaults and assaults with firearms (Williams, 2020).

### ***1.3 Aim of the Study***

Due to an increase of Violence Against Women (VAW) in T&T, and the nascent body of literature that exist on public perception of the police, it has become paramount and a priority to understand how women perceive the police in a time of need for protection and safety. It is important now more than ever before to understand the role that police officers in T&T play in safeguarding women from crime, violence and victimisation and equally develop trust and confidence in the TTPS. If the police institution is able to secure women's trust and confidence, it is more likely that they will cooperate with the police and vice versa to end and prevent VAW.

This research study was aimed at answering the following research questions:

- I. What are the factors that influence women perception of the police in T&T?
- II. How does current violence against women cases affect their perceptions of the police?

### ***1.4 – Justification for Study***

Previous studies on public perception of the police often researched factors such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age and gender in developed countries such as the USA, UK and Canada (Brown & Benedict, 2002; O'Conner, 2008). However, there is a nascent body of literature which attempted to research citizens perception of the police in a developing country like T&T, and furthermore on women's perception. At the time of this study there were no specific study found, which attempted to research women's perception of the police in T&T. As a result, this study was aimed at filling this gap in research and establishing a body of literature in T&T considering the recent elevated level of violence encountered by women. Due to ethical principle, and the limitations of resources, citizens under 18 years of age were considered minors and therefore not included as part of this study. The result of this study is not intended to portray a national picture of the problem, but rather shed light on it and create a foundation for future research and analysis.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1–Crime Against Women***

According to Stanko (1993) women often have a fear of crime which is three times more than men, despite them having a lower risk of victimisation. Such fear by women might be associated with gender stereotype in society as feeling more socially and physically vulnerable when compared to men (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Stanko, 1993). As a result, two theoretical concepts were developed, the first being, women fear are associated with their environment, for example, social and physical disorder (Jagori, 2010; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021). The second concept is related to women fear of sexual violence from men which is developed from daily experiences with men and misogynist behaviour (Warr, 1984; Chhetri, 2015). As a result, government began to develop initiatives on safety such as streetlights, CCTV and rape alarm (Tyagi, 2020). Whilst there might be several factors that influence women fear of crime, addressing the environmental and male violence was imperative (Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021).

Due to increase fear, women began to restrict their public activities and access more safety measures compared to men (Tulloch & Jennett, 2001; Osmond, 2013). According to Tyagi (2020) this was more prevalent at night-time, quiet, unkept and unfamiliar areas (Jagori, 2011; Cosgrave, Lam & Henderson, 2020). These fears were categorised by Mahadevia & Lathia (2019) as women having a desire to be visible, able to escape and seek assistance and position themselves to hear and be heard. However, women highlighted that they felt unsafe and vulnerable in these areas and as such avoided them. Women often begin to experience harassment from a young age, and this often continues for the rest of their lives (Stanko, 1993; Chhetri, 2015). An accurate account of victimisation to women is unknown due to it being underreported by approximately 95%. In the UK, more than 80% of women experienced some type of harassment and 86% of this occur in public spaces (Osmond, 2013; APPG, 2021). According to Chhetri (2015) street harassment frequently generated violent crimes against women

and statistics showed that between 2020 and 2021 there was an 8% increase in sexual offences against women with rape cases reaching record levels (ONS, 2021a). Women are four times more likely to experience sexual assaults when compared to men and account for approximately 82% of grooming and stalking victims (HMICFRS, 2021).

Within recent years there has been an increase in crimes against women and in the UK several women lost their lives at the hands of serving police officers. This resulted in a lack of trust in officers and an unlikelihood that women will approach the police (Morton, 2021; Femicide Census, 2021). The UK's Independent Office of Police Complaints– IOPC (2021) reported that officers were likely to participate in offences such as deceiving women to achieve sexual relationships, voyeurism and photographing dead women. Kraska & Kappeler (1995) argued that the police have historically been perpetrators of sexual violence against women and their study highlighted that between 1991 and 1993 more than 750 officers were facing sexual misconduct allegations in the USA.

This increase in violence has also been experienced in T&T with CAPA reporting that between 2017 and February 2020 it received 1,393 reports from women who were physically assaulted by men and 728 reports of threats to endanger women's lives and all perpetrated were identified as male. According to Bruzual (2021) during the year 2021 there were 33 women violently murdered in T&T some being victims of kidnappings, rape and physical assaults before their lives ended. Thomas (2022) stated that some men in T&T were misogynist and embraced a culture of machismo. Within recent years there have been an increase in police officers violence against women in T&T. Some male officers were sentenced or under investigation for violent attack such as rape in a police station (Braxton, 2017) and kidnapped, raped and physical assault (Williams, 2020).

The nascent body of research on women and perception of the police in T&T have demonstrated a gap in research and literature, but more importantly, a deficiency in the understanding of how women perceive the police in a time of need for security and safety in a developing nation. According to the present literature, there was no mention of the factors that influenced women perception of the police in T&T and given the increase of violence against women, how this impacted on women's perception of the police. As a result, this study was aimed at using these research question to construct a foundation on the topic and simultaneously fulfilling the gaps.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

Considering the nascent body of research on policing in T&T, this study was aimed at exploring women's perception of police in T&T. A qualitative design was used to obtain descriptive information from women about how they perceive the police in T&T. In-depth and probing dialogues which provided women with undivided attention to fully discuss their views and opinion were considered imperative for this study. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility and allowed the researcher to reconstruct and pose new questions based on answered provided. This was important towards obtaining the intricate details of women's experiences, views and opinions (Saunders et al., 2003; Bryman, 2016).

Due to the researcher limited presence in T&T, the snowball technique was used to initiate contact with women who had some level of relevance or interest in the topic. Initial contacts were made, and this generated further contacts with other women through knowledge, common bond or social/professional affiliations, who were later approached to participate in the study (Saunders et al., 2003; Bryman, 2016). The samples were obtained from different geographical locations of T&T where 50 interviews were conducted and participants were selected based on their demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, income/ employment and marital status. These characteristics provided a balance to the samples and a level of diversity which simultaneously avoided bias amongst women's views and opinions. This study used the adaptive theory which uses established theories and compared them with empirical data to elaborate, confirm existing or identify new theories (Layder, 1998). The abductive analysis technique by Timmermans and Tavory (2012) was used in this study. The Abductive analysis approach used a thematic coding framework where themes were developed from the empirical data (Hewege, 2010; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

### **IV. FINDINGS and DISCUSSIONS**

#### **4.2 Participants Demographics**

It was observed throughout this study that most participants were from disadvantaged and middle-class communities and only a small number from affluent communities. When citizens from the affluent communities were approached to participate, most declined. There was a comprehensive representation from the various ethnic backgrounds in T&T, but more than 65% of these participants were from an African and Indian heritage. More than 80% of participants were in fulltime employment, less than 20% were either self-employed, unemployed, homemakers or stay at home moms. There was a balance ratio in participant's age, marital status (single, married, residing together unmarried) and this provided equilibrium to the data obtained. The

majority of participants identified themselves as having an undergraduate or lower qualifications whilst a small number held higher education qualifications and a minimal number refused to answer.

## **4.2 – Findings and Discussions**

### **4.2.1 Sexual Harassment**

The majority of participant ( $n=45$ ) from this study highlighted that police officers (mainly males) were sexist, rude and unhelpful towards women in T&T. These participants explained that male police officers habitually pursue young women for sexual relationships whilst they [officers] were married. According to some participants, it was a common police culture in T&T for many male officers (on rare occasions female officers) to have extra marital affairs in the area where they were stationed, and the women involved were often referred to as “*side chick or side thing*.”

These participants explained that male police officers often pursued younger females for sexual relationships, (approximately under 30 years of age) because mature female were perceived [by officers] as being more knowledgeable and experienced about life and could become a difficult target. However, some participants explained that a small number of male officers sometimes pursue mature females who were perceived as being vulnerable, lonely or wealthy. On the other hand, it was explained that male officers often perceive younger females to be less educated and inexperienced about life and therefore be easier targets. These officers often pursued females from disadvantaged communities because they were more likely to be experiencing financial hardship, be less educated, belong to dysfunctional family homes and be easily charmed by gift and special treatment because officers received a permanent and monthly salary. Participants also stated that it was unlikely for police officers to pursue sexual relations with women from the affluent communities. They explained that these women were more likely to have influential family members in government departments and international organisations and could exert pressure on the police authorities to sanction officers for wrongdoing such as sexual harassment.

According to these participants, younger females who approached the police for assistance were often perceived by male officers as vulnerable and became an easy target. Some male officers interpret these females vulnerability as an opportunity to exploit them. It was explained that some male officers often use women's legitimate personal information as an opportunity to make contact for sexual relationships. These findings were consistent with those from a study by Krasha and Kappeler (1995) who suggested that male police officers were more likely to pursue females for sexual relationships and in doing so, they often display a macho and egocentric type of behaviour. Krasha and Kappeler (1995) stated that a male officer might not stop a female driver because she committed a traffic violation, but mainly because he wanted to get her number and establish a connection with her. A mature participant explained.

*“my 19 years old daughter and I had a small argument and she reached out to the police and asked them to speak to me in an attempt to pacify the situation. A young male officer dealt with her at the station and recorded her information including phone number. The officer came and we spoke, and I agreed that I was wrong and apologised to my daughter and felt we was good again. I noticed that my daughter began going out late at nights and spoke to her about it and she told me the officer took her for dinner. I was shocked but did not want any arguments again so stood quiet. About a week later my daughter went for dinner with the officer again but stayed out all night. I spoke to her, and she confirmed that everything was OK. She arrived home the next day complained of feeling unwell and could not remember what happened during the night. We went to the doctor, and it was confirmed that my daughter drink was spiked, and she was sexually active during the night. I made an official complaint, and the officer actions are now being investigated and treated as a criminal offence.”*

*(Interview # 13)*

### **4.2.2 Officers Delinquency**

The majority of participants ( $n= 47$ ) explained that a major problem with police officers in T&T is corruption. Participants explained that corruption is not a new phenomenon in the TTPS, but within recent times the problem became an endemic with many officers accepting bribes and some being involved in gang activities. It was stated that some officers have become part of organised criminal gangs [OCG], being it as a member, getting paid to protect the gang and their activities, or as a family or friend of gang members. It was highlighted that because of the police affiliations with the criminals, some police officers were more concerned with the profits associated with gangs and less concerned about the safety and security of citizens, especially women. These findings were comparable to the finding from research conducted by Townsend (2009) and Pawelz (2018) who suggested that many police officers in T&T were associated with criminal gangs and the citizens have become afraid to approach officers. A study on police deviance in T&T by Pino and Johnson (2011) suggested that citizens who were victimised and approached the police for assistance were often treated

as suspects and interrogated intensely, brutalised and became reluctant to cooperate with the police. A participant shared her personal experience.

*“my neighbour was selling weed and coke and I have 3 young children so was concerned about all these strange looking people coming there. Our fence boarder each other and when my children are playing outside this could cause some concern about my children’s safety. So, I went to the station and make a report. The officer wrote my details on a piece of paper and when I reached home, my neighbour put a gun to my face and told me about the report and to stay out of his business otherwise my children will know what a bullet feels like.”*

(Interview # 29)

#### **4.2.3 Trust and Confidence**

The majority of participant ( $n= 43$ ) stated that they did not trust the police or have confidence in them. Participants stated that they would not approach the TTPS for assistance as the likelihood of being victimised was high. It was explained that it was difficult to establish if the TTPS and its officers were genuinely interested in assisting citizens or an institution that victimised citizens. It was highlighted that there were a small number of officers who can be trusted but it was difficult to identify who they were and if they would become pressurised into the code of silence whereby officers cover the crimes of their colleagues. As a result, participants felt that it was safer for them to avoid contact with the police and if victimised, not approach officers because there was the potential for further victimisation at the hands of police officers. One participant explained.

*“It really is a pity that the majority of Trinidad men just do not act like mature adults until their late fifties even as old as their early sixties. Policemen have had this long history of mocking women that report abuse some have even tried to use the abuse of these women to try to sleep with them, and I have this from one woman's personal experience. We cannot seem to train policemen properly not even how to speak to the public and this is why so many abusers get away, the women prefer to suffer in silence rather than be abused twice, the first in your own home, the other in a Police Station if you dare make a report. This is a disgusting trait of Trinidad policemen, and it seems it is so no matter which station it is. So much for the training and the management behind such an expensive spend by the citizens.”*

(Interview # 37)

#### **4.2.4 Police Violence Against Women**

The majority of participant ( $n= 39$ ) stated that they some knowledge of women being abused by police officers in the past but these were minimal. However, within recent times, there have been a sharp increase of incidents whereby police officers [males] inflicted violence onto women in T&T. Participants explained that several male police officers in T&T are currently [at the time of this study] being investigated and some charged for variety offences that relate to violence against women in the country. It was explained that some of these situations involved officers using their authority to coerce women into sexual relations with them and if the female refuse, violence is inflicted onto them. As a result, participants held negative perceptions towards police officers in T&T. One participant explained.

*“ imagine a police officer using his car to operate a taxi and pretending to be a legitimate taxi when he is not. Then he pick up a young female passenger who believe it to be an honest and legit taxi driver. The officer on the way pick up 2 more of his friends and took the young woman to a lonely canefield, gang raped her, battered her and dumped her on the roadside. This is where the Trinidad and Tobago police reached and where our male officers have reached. These officers must have women in their family so it is impossible to understand why they would treat other women like this.”*

(Interview # 41)

## **V. CONCLUSION**

### **5.1- Summary of Findings**

Women’s perception of the police is imperative towards institutional effectiveness and efficiency but more importantly for cooperation between women and officers to foster an alliance for ending and preventing VAW (Johansson & Haandrikman, 2021). According to Boateng (2012) citizens [including women] were more likely to approach and assist the police when they [women] believe that officers have their best interest and will keep them safe and protected. However, this is only possible when women have positive perception of the police. The findings of this study suggested that women perception of the police in T&T was crucial towards ending violence against women. The data obtained suggested that women in T&T did not have positive experiences with police officers and this created negative perceptions of policing due to sexual harassment, officers delinquency, lack of trust and confidence and police violence against women.

The findings from this study highlighted that male police officers in T&T often sexually harass younger women especially those from disadvantaged communities because they were perceived as most vulnerable and easier targets. However, these officers were less likely to harass women from affluent communities due to their elite status and possible action against officers. Officers were accused of being instrumental in gangs and criminal activities. As a result, some officers protected criminality and related behaviour which had a negative impact on the safety and security of citizens including women. The data from this study further suggested that women in T&T did not trust and had a lack of confidence in the police. This was influenced by officers delinquency and sexual outlook on women which shaped and became an important factor for the negative perception that women held about police officers on an individual level and the institution collectively. Police violence against was also a major contributor towards women perception of the police in T&T. The finding suggested that the increased number of violent attacks on women at the hands of serving police officers developed a negative atmosphere for the relationship between officers and women.

### 5.1- Theoretical Implications

The data from this study showed important sociological implications with previous research from authors such as Stanko (1993); Krasha & Kappeler (1995) and Johansson & Haandrikman (2021). Women perception of the police were mainly studied in developed societies but not in a developing nation like T&T. The findings and data from this study can now be included in the existing literature but more importantly to form a foundation for studies on women and policing in other developing nations. Due to the nascent body of research and literature on women and policing in T&T, this study could be used as a platform for developing harmonious relationships between women and the police in T&T.

### 5.2 - Future Research

The data from this study showed that women perception of police officers was interrelated with citizens socioeconomic status, officers delinquency and trust and confidence problems between women and the police. As a result, these emerging factors can now be used a foundation for future studies to develop better understanding of citizens perception of the police in developed and developing societies.

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