



Badam Bagh women's prison ©Lalage Snow, 2011.

WOMEN AND THE AFGHAN POLICE

Why a law enforcement agency that respects and protects females is crucial for progress

Only one per cent of the Afghan National Police is female. Although female police are vital for Afghan women to be able to report crimes and access desperately-needed justice, few women in Afghanistan will ever encounter one. Further action is urgently needed to recruit, train, retain and protect Afghan female police officers. This is critical for upholding the rights of Afghan women and girls and can contribute to sustainable peace and development efforts in Afghanistan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan's first policewoman took up her duties in 1967 – three years after Afghan women gained the right to vote. Yet, as with many aspects of the country's development, subsequent decades of political upheaval and conflict took their toll and when the Taliban swept to power in 1996, women were banned from serving in the police.

Over the past decade, the Afghan Government and international donors have worked hard to rebuild the country's basic institutions, including the Afghan National Police (ANP). The Government has launched several initiatives to recruit women into the ANP, resulting in a gradual rise in their numbers. In 2005, the ANP employed just 180 women out of 53,400 personnel. In July 2013, 1,551 policewomen were serving out of 157,000.

All Afghans stand to benefit from more effective and responsive law enforcement in which policewomen play their part – but none more so than women and girls in a country where domestic violence, forced marriage, sexual assault, and honour killings are shockingly common.

Official figures are distorted by underreporting but in reality as many as 87 per cent of Afghan women suffer at least one form of physical, sexual or psychological abuse, according to a credible 2008 survey, with more than half experiencing multiple kinds of violence and abuse.¹

Significant underreporting – which contributes to the lack of prosecutions and a culture of impunity – occurs partly because social norms prevent most Afghan women from approaching male police officers. Despite the gradual progress in female staffing, policewomen still only represent 1 per cent of ANP personnel, with very few deployed in rural areas. Consequently, few Afghans ever see a policewoman, leaving most women and girls unable to report crimes and threats against them.

Compounding this, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission found that many honour killings and sexual assaults against women have been committed by the police themselves. Such crimes undermine public trust in the ANP and, by association, the legitimacy of the Afghan state. Effective, independent oversight of the ANP is required to improve accountability, police behaviour and public trust.

SERIOUS CHALLENGES

Accelerating the recruitment of policewomen is a key part of the solution. However, numerous challenges exist and efforts to reach the target of 5,000 policewomen by the end of 2014 are set to fail. These challenges, therefore, must be better addressed not only to recruit more women, but to ensure they stay in their jobs and serve their communities effectively.

One such challenge is sexual harassment and assault by male colleagues. A 2012 investigation by US-based National Public Radio found allegations of widespread sexual abuse and rape of policewomen

in Mazar-e-Sharif, capital of Balkh Province, which has the third largest number of policewomen in the country. NPR said it found evidence that senior policemen demanded sexual favours in exchange for promotions.

Although the *tashkeel* (organizational structure) of the ANP reserves 3,249 jobs for female civil servants and police officers, women fill fewer than half these jobs. This is partly because many provincial chiefs of police are reluctant to accept female recruits. However, there is very little pressure on police chiefs to recruit more women, nor on the Afghan Ministry of the Interior (Moi), which oversees the ANP, to initiate reforms.

Negative attitudes and practices persist after women have been recruited. Policewomen often lack basic items, such as uniforms, which male colleagues receive. Many find themselves performing menial tasks (such as making tea) and receive little or no training. Opportunities to develop their careers are extremely limited, leaving intelligent and ambitious policewomen unmotivated and unfulfilled.

Meanwhile, some policewomen lack the basic skills and motivation to serve their communities but are still promoted to jobs reserved for women. Such problems undermine confidence in policewomen and fuel negative male attitudes towards them. To an extent, this is part of a wider social problem: an estimated 70–80 per cent of the ANP are illiterate, with illiteracy rates among policewomen even higher.

Discriminatory attitudes and lack of awareness also need to be tackled on a wider public level. Many policewomen and potential recruits face opposition from their own communities, who often see policing as a disreputable job for an Afghan woman. Effective information campaigns and even the promotion of fictional role models (e.g. in television dramas) can make a positive difference.

PRIORITISING SOLUTIONS

To address these challenges, the Afghan Government, with donor support, should prioritise and implement a coordinated, adequately resourced strategy to recruit more policewomen and provide them with essential training. They also need to improve retention rates by ensuring they are safe from abuse, respected and provided with the necessary facilities to perform their duties.

This should include efforts to recruit and retain better educated women, particularly university graduates, by ensuring merit-based promotion and offering fast-track schemes. Once trained, policewomen should be assigned to professional policing roles, particularly within Family Response Units and in community policing. At the same time, male police should receive effective gender training and better understand relevant laws, especially those designed to protect women from abuse.

'We are too ashamed to tell men our problems. But a woman is like us: she feels as we do.'

Mariam,¹ an 18-year old, female victim of violence from Logar Province.²

'Half of our society is female so just having male police is not enough. It is impossible to carry out searches of women or houses, or to solve cases, particularly involving violence against women, without female police.'

Colonel Samsoor, a police commander in Kabul.³

¹ Where appropriate, names have been changed for security reasons.

Understanding the nature of any problem, implementing solutions and measuring progress is virtually impossible without adequate information. The UN in particular has an important role to play in improving the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data. This would also make it easier for donors to monitor the issue and the impact of their aid.

There are significant opportunities to help achieve these goals. For example, the Afghan Government and international donors have launched an initiative to transform the paramilitary ANP into a civilian law enforcement agency: the first large-scale police reform in the country. The Ten Year Vision includes the target of a 10 per cent female workforce in the ANP and MoI by 2024 – a realistic and appropriate step towards the long-term objective of an effective and responsive ANP.

Strengthening women's participation in the police also helps Afghanistan meet its responsibilities to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This seeks to improve women's role and influence in post-conflict contexts and strengthen measures that enforce their human rights – all of which contributes to building a just and lasting peace. Afghanistan's first National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325 provides an opportunity to ensure that actions designed to promote women's roles and enforce their rights complement each other, thereby maximising their impact.

Ministries aiming to implement the Afghan National Action Plan (NAP) and related initiatives will require UN support. International missions such as NATO can set positive examples, for instance, by maintaining NATO gender advisers to help implement the organisation's own NAP and by ensuring that training and mentoring programs are gender-sensitive.

WHO BENEFITS?

Why does this matter in a country facing a multitude of social, economic and political challenges? Afghanistan's people, its institutions, its stability and security, as well as donors seeking to maximise the impact of their aid, all potentially benefit from more effective policewomen as part of a more responsive and accountable ANP.

The likely impact on women and girls is clear. Although Afghanistan has a constitution and laws designed to protect and uphold women's rights, they are not consistently enforced. A more female-friendly ANP would increase women's access to the formal justice system and assist the implementation of, for example, the historic 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, which criminalises child marriage, forced marriage, rape and other violent acts against women and girls.

Successfully tackling this issue has potentially wider positive impacts. As the UN noted in its EVAW report in 2012: 'Ultimately, improvements in EVAW law implementation and reduced incidents of violence against women can lead to improved protection of Afghan women's rights, in turn strengthening their active and crucial role in society and in efforts to achieve durable peace, security and prosperity in Afghanistan.'

The ANP, which is widely mistrusted, would benefit as an institution. A UN-backed survey in 2012 found growing popular acceptance of the role of female police, contributing to improvements in public perceptions of the ANP generally.⁴

Female police can also contribute to Afghan security. Some are already deployed to search women at checkpoints and entrances to Government buildings, as well as to participate in house searches. In 2012, there were at least 13 incidents in which men disguised themselves as women to smuggle goods, or to gain entry into areas from where they carried out attacks. Deploying more policewomen could help prevent such incidents.

In relation to presidential elections expected in 2014, for which the MoI will oversee security, policewomen will be needed to monitor female-only polling stations to help women exercise their right to vote – again helping to strengthen the state’s popular support.

Although institutional reforms and other necessary changes will take time, the time to act is now. The transfer of responsibility for security across the country to Afghanistan’s national security forces is due to be completed in 2014. This, together with the withdrawal of combat troops by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) brings new challenges and risks for Afghanistan’s security and development.

It is therefore crucial that Afghan authorities, donors, as well as Governments and international missions involved in developing Afghan National Security Forces, intensify their efforts to improve the ANP’s responsiveness to the female half of the population and enhance policewomen’s roles. Failure to do so risks eroding more than a decade of hard-earned development gains and undermines Afghanistan’s progress towards stability, prosperity and self-reliance.

For this report, Oxfam consulted Afghan police officers, civil servants, human rights and women’s organisations and local communities, noting women’s perspectives particularly. International donors and security training officers were also interviewed. The recommendations below draw upon the various views that emerged, with some additional details at the end of this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Afghan Government and the international community should:

- Develop and implement a national strategy to recruit and retain female police. Coordinating national and international efforts, this strategy should be accompanied by clear action plans and backed by adequate donor funding to be successful.
- Prioritise policewomen within overall police reform efforts. Backed by adequate, ring-fenced donor funding, the MoI-International Police Coordination Board Working Groups should develop specific

plans within mainstream police reforms to recruit women and enhance their roles. The Working Groups should include, or meaningfully consult, gender experts from the Ministry of Women's Affairs, gender-sensitive policing specialists, senior Afghan policewomen and civil society.

- Ensure equal access to professional training and opportunities for women, and expand improved gender and rights training for all personnel. The Afghan Government and international missions should increase professional courses and opportunities for policewomen (including specialist training such as driving and forensics), prioritise female literacy classes, and ensure all ANP understand the gender curriculum and women's national and international legal rights (including EVAW).
- Ensure the development of a strong and effective Afghanistan National Action Plan to implement UNSCR1325. The Afghan Government should include clear, relevant indicators in an adequately donor-resourced NAP that relate to women's participation in the police and wider security sector, particularly at decision-making levels.

The Afghan Ministry of Interior should:

- **Develop and implement large-scale recruitment and information campaigns.** Recruitment drives should offer training and education opportunities to uneducated women and higher-ranking jobs to educated recruits, complemented by public information campaigns on the benefits to communities of having policewomen.
- **Provide a safe working environment for female police.** The Mol should take urgent steps to provide necessary facilities (e.g. locking toilets and female changing rooms), ensure women are aware of, and have access to, a safe effective complaints mechanism, consider providing personal guards for senior policewomen, and ensure that all staff in district and provincial police stations are made aware of relevant policies (e.g. the 2013 Directive on Sexual Harassment).
- **Ensure national policies are implemented at the local level.** Overseen by the Steering Committee, the Mol should ensure its policies are in line with national and international standards for gender sensitivity, and increase efforts to implement national policies supporting policewomen at the local level, including by issuing ministerial directives to provincial police chiefs.
- **Reform the *tashkeel* (organisational structure).** Reforms should include developing clear recruitment policies and specific job descriptions, reserving more positions (including senior roles) for women, and identifying more departments and units where they can work – including in FRUs, recruitment, intelligence, the Passport Department, Criminal Investigation Division and Counter Narcotics. Independent appointment and review boards, including men, women and civil society representatives, should be created.
- **Ensure women have fair access to career development opportunities.** The Mol should set provincial police chiefs targets to promote women to officer and NCO levels – ensuring promotion is

merit-based while allowing for the specific challenges that women face (such as lower literacy rates) – and establish fast-track promotion schemes alongside leadership training and mentoring by experienced foreign policewomen.

- **Rapidly increase the numbers of female police at the provincial level.** The MoI should assign educated and trained policewomen to provincial positions with incentives for them to stay, prioritising the allocation of such staff to specialised units such as the FRUs and community policing as well as increasing training for illiterate members of these units.

Provincial Chiefs of Police should:

- **Provide active support to female police.** Provincial police chiefs should clearly instruct all their personnel that sexual abuse and harassment will not be tolerated, ensure that complaints are transparently investigated and perpetrators of abuse and harassment are appropriately disciplined, and also ensure policewomen have access to appropriate equipment, private transport, female-only spaces and childcare facilities.
- **Increase efforts to deploy female police into communities.** Women should be assigned to police stations in groups no smaller than five staff, both to protect them from harassment and enable them to reach out more effectively to communities. Police chiefs should also ensure policewomen actively conduct core professional duties, particularly in FRUs and communities.
- **Strengthen Family Response Units.** Police chiefs can do this by ensuring FRUs always include trained and literate policewomen, recruiting graduates of Sharia law to serve as legal advisors, and placing units under female leadership where possible. FRUs must use office space provided by donors for that purpose, or be given specific areas of police stations (with separate entrances), with access to transport to help FRU staff serve local communities.

All states supporting the Afghan National Police should:

- **Allocate specific funding to recruit, retain and promote female policing.** Priorities include support for improved literacy, community policing, innovative incentives (such as bonuses, family health care plans and housing), essential infrastructure such as female-only facilities, policewomen's associations, and training and mentoring for senior male and female officers, especially provincial police chiefs.
- **Make security funding conditions-based.** Donors should link long-term support to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) – especially after they assume full responsibility for security in all of Afghanistan in 2014 – to indicators of success on female police recruitment and professional progress. Donors should also ring-fence funding for policewomen's posts in the *tashkeel* and safeguard these against proposed cuts after 2015.

- **Provide substantial long-term funding for civil society initiatives.** Funding should be prioritised for groups working to support female police, including efforts that increase community acceptance, promote male champions and female role models and link Afghan policewomen associations and councils with international counterparts (including the International Association of Women Police and with similar groups in Muslim countries).
- **Support independent oversight of the Afghan National Police.** Donors should adequately fund the Police Ombudsman's Office to ensure women can access an independent and effective complaints mechanism. This should be rolled out nationwide as a matter of priority to ensure access at the provincial level.
- **Ensure all international police training and mentoring programmes are gender-sensitive.** Troop contributing states should maintain gender advisers in the post-2014 ISAF mission's Operation Resolute Support to enable the implementation of NATO's own 1325 NAP, while donors should ensure the new phase of LOTFA beginning in 2014 includes civil society representatives on the Steering Committee.

International police missions should:

- **Maintain mentoring programmes.** Bodies such as EUPOL and the UNAMA Police Advisory Unit should continue to provide qualified civilian mentors for senior male and female police officers, particularly provincial chiefs of police. Mentoring programmes should be expanded where possible (or at least maintained at current levels beyond 2014), and create links between police chiefs in different regions and with neighbouring countries.
- **Prioritise support to the Ministry of Interior Gender and Human Rights Units.** International police missions should ensure that capacity building of the Gender and Human Rights Units is a priority within police reform efforts, both at the MoI in Kabul and at the provincial level. This should include strengthening their information collection systems, including the disaggregation of data by sex and age.

The United Nations should:

- **Improve the collection and use of data.** The UN mission in Afghanistan should improve the collection and use of sex disaggregated data when reporting against benchmarks in quarterly Secretary General Reports on Afghanistan, including comprehensive reporting on women's participation in the ANP.
- **Step up support to ministries.** The UN should increase targeted support to relevant ministries to assist the implementation of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan and the forthcoming Afghanistan National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325.

NOTES

¹ Living with violence: a national report on domestic abuse in Afghanistan, by Global Rights (March 2008)
http://www.globalrights.org/site/DocServer/final_DVR_JUNE_16.pdf?docID=9803

² Interviewed in Kabul (April 2013).

³ Colonel Samsoor (Police Commander, District 9, Kabul). Interviewed in Kabul (March 2013).

⁴ Police Perception Survey, funded by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) under the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) project, January 2012.

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