The Role of Policewomen in Ending Gender Violence in Afghanistan

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“I was the first woman to join the police force in Afghanistan’s Central provinces under the Transitional government in 2001”, says Lieutenant Colonel Ayar, flanked by Private Hamid, her bodyguard. Sixteen years later, she now manages the Gender and Human Rights section of Bamyan province’s police headquarters, located 180 kilometers from Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul. Advocating for the rights of women while holding a senior role in the Afghanistan National Police (ANP) does not come without risks. Hamid was sent from Baghlan province 12 months ago, to ensure Ayar’s security. In patriarchal Afghanistan, policewomen such as Ayar are challenging societal norms, especially in the male-dominated ANP. Today, women comprise seventy of Bamyan’s 1,200 police personnel. They are stationed across Bamyan’s seven districts in units such as the Family Response Unit; Human Rights; Criminal Investigation Division; and Anti-Corruption and Anti-Narcotics.

Earlier this month, at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) Bamyan Provincial Office, Ayar and four female colleagues attended training on the United Nations (UN) and rules of war. They took two days away from both police duties and university courses, where they study law and political science. During a training break, these women explained that they joined the police force because they saw the value they could add in helping their countrywomen.

Second Lieutenant Anissa said she not only joined to “defend her country” but was “eager to assist other women”. Police Officer Batawa offered a similar reason, “From my childhood, I wanted to help other women. If a woman has a problem she cannot tell a man. She is more relaxed with a woman.” Police Officer Gulchaman, joined because she “wanted to bring justice for women and encourage more women to join”.

Today, women make up less than 1% of the ANP nationally. Female participation in the ANP began in 1967, when the first woman joined, three years after women gained voting rights. However, then came the Taliban’s rule (1996-2001) and women were banned from participating. Today, the Afghan government recognizes that the ANP needs more female employees. Under the Ten Year National Transformation Plan it ambitiously announced that by 2024, women should represent 10% of ANP employees. The recruitment of women has been incremental. In 2005, 180 women were employed out of 53,400 personnel. In 2016, the number was reported at 1,300 out of 157,000 (less than 1%) (BBC, 2016).

Female participants in the ANP such as those in Bamyan is important for two reasons. Firstly, they provide a powerful role model for women in a country where working outside the home is rare. According to World Bank figures, female labor force participation rate is 19%, startlingly low compared to Western countries where 50-60% is typical. These policewomen demonstrate it is possible to overcome societal prejudice and become “breadwinners”.

Secondly, the Bamyan policewomen play a pivotal role in reducing violence against women. Dr Sima Samar, head of the AIHRC explicates, “Women’s presence in the police force gives security and confidence to female victims of human rights violations.” Policewomen empower themselves and others. As one female police officer explained, “I once suffered at home to the point I wanted to commit suicide.” Then she was inspired by Ayar and joined the police force. Today, she feels “stronger” as a result.

Research completed by Global Rights in 2015 estimates that almost nine out of ten Afghan women face physical, sexual or psychological violence, or are forced into marriage (Vyas, 2015). While the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law passed in 2009 was monumental, women still struggle in practice to exercise those rights. The rule of law is not yet strong enough to give EVAW its intended impact. This was substantiated by the UN in its report *Still A Long Way To Go: Implementation of the Law on EVAW in Afghanistan* (United Nations, 2012).

If a victim wishes to report a crime she must visit a police station. Given the dearth of policewomen, traumatic experiences will nearly always be recalled to a male. Experiences vary considerably, and in many cases the victim is treated as a criminal herself. According to Oxfam, victim Zahra told ANP staff of her father attempting to forcibly marry her to an abusive drug dealer shortly after her eighteenth birthday. Male police officers ignored her, despite the obvious breach of law. With no other choice, she took refuge in a women's shelter. She said, "A policewoman would have been good for me. If there are policewomen we can easily say everything to them" (Oxfam, 2017)

This absence of the rule of law means that many women remain silent rather than take their chances. Added to this problem, is that between 70-80% of ANP male staff are illiterate, which may result in inadequate reporting (Oxfam, 2013).

In recent years, the Afghan government and international donors have made efforts to recruit policewomen, including several initiatives emphasizing the importance of female staff in reducing gender violence. For example, the UN worked closely with the Afghan government to establish 33 national Family Response Units (FRUs). The FRUs trained women in crime scene investigation, interviewing and taking statements. Some stations now have an office on the station's perimeter staffed by females that prevent women entering male-dominated stations to report crimes.

The Bamyan police force are a good example of such initiatives in practice. When a female victim reports a crime, her case is referred to a female staff member to examine within the FRU. If the victim is in danger, she is referred to a safe house. The first safe house was established the year after the Taliban's demise (Rasa, 2017). Today, under the auspices of an international organizations such as UN Women, shelters continue to operate with some being government funded (Orya, 2013).

Community dialogue conducted by female police officers is critical. Ayar holds sessions with local women, informing them of their rights. She also meets regularly with local mullahs as "the community will listen to religious leaders rather than western ideologies about violence and women". Mullahs in the region were trained by a local Afghan NGO, Shuhada Organization, about Islam and women's rights. The Mullahs then went on to train their local communities.

While the case of Bamyan is promising, it is difficult to replicate. The UN states that the participation of women in the ANP faces "serious challenges" which makes the recruitment of women a "formidable task" (Moetsabi, 2017). Female recruitment is layered with complexities: gender stereotypes, reputation, and sexual harassment.

Across Afghanistan, the police role is perceived as bringing shame to an individual and her family. Often families forbid a wife or daughter from participating. Policewomen reported not wearing their uniforms to and from work in fear of harassment. For some, the role has been a death sentence such as the six policewomen murdered in Eastern Afghanistan in 2013 (Rubin, 2015). The Afghan government recognizes these issues, proposing in its National Transformation Plan to introduce mechanisms that "prevent gender-based harassment and violence, to persuade families to allow their wives and daughters to join the ANP and serve the people".

This harassment is entrenched. For example, the *New York Times* found that sexual harassment was common with women forced into sexual favors to receive promotions (Rubin, 2015). In 2013, cases of widespread sexual harassment and rape were uncovered in the city of Mazar-e Sharif, which has the third highest number of policewomen nationally (Oxfam, 2013). Sexual harassment is not limited to policewomen but also female civilians. The AIHRC reported that from 2010 to 2013, police personnel had committed 15% of crimes pertaining to honor killings and rape (Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2013).

Ultimately, the answer is more complex than hiring more policewomen. Support must go beyond employment. Women were denied education under the Taliban, and have greater illiteracy rates than their male counterparts. This lack of education, coupled with sexual harassment means that policewomen are often left to languish in lower ranked administrative positions.

Many policewomen are unaware of laws pertaining to human rights and EVAW. To successfully report violent acts and ensure thorough redress occurs, gender training that is rights focused is essential. As one human rights activist stated, "For these women to take a stand, they need to know what they are making a stand for."

The Bamyan police force has overcome problems relating to education and gender training. Ayar notes that they ensured that all their staff are now literate. Additionally, many now undertake university degrees while serving as officers. They have all completed gender training, which Ayar says helps staff "recognize the challenges [of gender violence] and make a plan to overcome it".

Today, Afghanistan remains unpredictable and unsafe. Citizens must deal with the Taliban, the ongoing threat of ISIS (who recently attacked a hospital in Kabul killing 49 men, women and children), and complex geo-political relationships. While these interviews in Bamyan took place, the US dropped the largest non-nuclear bomb in Nangahar province with the apparent support of the Afghan government.

In this context, it is tempting to de-priortize the Bamyan policewomen's story. But education, equal rights, and the rule of law through women's empowerment are pivotal in improving Afghanistan's security. As UN Women's Assistant Security General Puri says, "Women's full participation [in society] is fundamental to democracy and essential to the achievement of sustainable development and peace in all contexts" (Puri, 2013).

Dr Sima Samar echoes these sentiments, "Women's participation in the police plays a strong role in reducing violence against women and is key in conservative societies such as Afghanistan. Women's position in society is a strong indication of civilisation and peace. To reach peace in Afghanistan women need to be involved in every sector of society, otherwise peace will not be sustainable and complete." For this to happen, the Bamyan police force case is telling, evidencing important steps that ANP's other divisions must mirror to reduce violence against women and achieve peace.

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