

## **Women and the Afghan Police: Key Messages**

**Afghan women need Afghan women police to protect them.** Violence against women is on the increase and Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. Without female police officers, Afghan women find it very difficult to report crimes and get the justice they desperately need.

**Afghan women police are risking their lives to serve their communities.** They are harassed and killed by members of the community—and even their own families—because of stigma and ignorance. The international community, as well as the Afghan government, must do more to build awareness and respect for Afghan policewomen and the crucial role they play.

**Women police should be doing more than making tea.** They must be trained as professionals with the policing skills, knowledge, equipment, and opportunities needed to be effective. Critically, female police must be accessible and visible in their communities.

**Less than 1% of Afghan police are women.** The international community and the Afghan government must do more to recruit, train, and retain policewomen as full transition looms.

## **Q & A**

### **Why are female police important? Why will policewomen lead to less violence against women?**

Afghanistan has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world, but less than 1% of the police force are women. There is only one policewoman in Afghanistan for every 10,000 women.

In Afghanistan's deeply conservative society, women are unlikely to report a crime to a man. When they do, crimes are often not taken seriously and male police have been the perpetrators of further abuse.

When policewomen are visible and working effectively in communities, women are more likely to speak out and report crimes. Increasing women's access to justice will help end the culture of impunity for perpetrators of violence against women.

More policewomen will also help ensure the police force has better access to communities to implement laws, which is critical to overall security and stability.

### **How many women police are currently in Afghanistan?**

There are currently 1551 female police in Afghanistan working in 31 provinces. Two provinces—Panjshir and Nuristan—have no police women at all.

### **Why is it so difficult to recruit women into the police force?**

Policing is not seen as a respectable job for women in Afghanistan. Policewomen face a huge amount of stigma within their communities, which often leads to threats, abuse, sexual assault and even murder.

Women who do join the police are faced with abuse and discrimination from colleagues and superiors, a lack of training facilities and opportunities for promotion, even basic equipment and uniforms.

Due to the stigma and challenges at work, there is a lack of educated women wishing to join the police, which hinders their ability to do the job well and contributes to the negative perceptions of women police in the community.

More needs to be done to keep policewomen safe at work and within their communities, to recruit talented women and give them greater opportunities to do valuable work.

**Why is Oxfam recommending that more women join the police force when it is such a dangerous occupation that may lead to abuse and even rape or death?**

More policewomen are desperately needed to make Afghanistan safer for all women but understandably more women will only join if the job is made safer.

The priority must be to ensure that joining the police is a safe occupation for women. This requires changing attitudes to reduce the stigma in communities, increasing awareness of the benefits of policewomen and providing separate facilities like female-only changing rooms and living quarters in stations.

**What needs to be done to protect them?**

Steps must be taken to reduce stigma in communities, provide adequate facilities such as separate bathrooms and changing areas, provide training to all members of the force on the importance of women in the police and ensure that sexual abuse or harassment is not tolerated.

Increasing the number of police women to a critical mass will help women feel more comfortable within the force, protect them against harassment and enable them to be more effective.

**The target of 5000 is almost impossible? What is a realistic target?**

Since 2005 the number of police women has grown from 180 to 1551, so progress has been made. However, out of a force of 157,000, women make up less than 1%.

The Ministry of Interior's Ten Year Vision has set an ambitious goal of 10% of both Interior Ministry and Afghan National Police staff to be female by 2024.<sup>i</sup>

The current organizational structure (or, tashkeel) of the Afghan police contains 3,249 positions reserved exclusively for women.

**You say there have been important changes for women's rights, however the figures in the report indicated huge levels of crime and violence against women. Have there really been any significant gains?**

Under the Taliban the majority of schools were closed and very few girls received an education. Today 2.7 million girls are enrolled in school. There are now women working as doctors, teachers, and lawyers, as well as in the national security forces. 27% of MPs are women, through a constitutional quota system, and the Afghan government is committed to ensuring that women fill 25 per cent of government jobs.

There have been gains, but as the withdrawal of the international forces and full transition to the Afghan Security Forces approaches, these gains remain fragile and the Afghan government and the international community cannot be complacent. Female police are critical to keep Afghan women safe and to maintain and increase the gains that have been made in women's rights throughout the country.

### **How at risk are women's rights?**

There have been some concerning developments in the last 18 months. In March 2012, the Ulema council (a council of religious scholars) issued a declaration, which was subsequently endorsed by President Karzai, stating that women are worth less than men.

In May this year the groundbreaking Elimination of Violence Against Women law (EVAW) came under threat from conservative forces within Parliament who wanted to drop several articles from the law. The law, which has already been signed by decree by President Karzai, is the first of its kind to legally protect women and is seen as one of the most significant achievements for women's rights in the country in the last decade. This shows that opposition to women's rights in the country remains high.

High profile women continue to be targeted with threats and several have been assassinated.

### **What is Oxfam doing for female police?**

Oxfam invests in support and awareness, working with Afghan partner organizations to change attitudes towards violence against women, both within communities and the police force.

Oxfam's projects help to train male and female community leaders on using the formal justice system rather than informal systems, which often do not deliver justice for women. For example, sometimes young women who have been raped are made to marry the perpetrator to protect family honor.

Partners are working with local leaders explaining how the police should protect and serve them, and the role that policewomen can play, including more effective support for female victims of violence.

One of Oxfam's partners has extensive experience training local religious leaders on women's rights in Islam, especially economic, health and property rights.

Oxfam carries out national and international level advocacy to promote the need for urgent reform in relation to Afghan women and the police.

### **You say women police are not properly being utilized? What kind of roles should women be working in in the police force?**

Once in the police force, many women are relegated to performing menial tasks or administrative work. With the exception of female body searches, women are rarely engaged in core police functions such as investigating crimes or carrying out arrests.

Critically, more women must be placed in community policing roles such as Family Response Units. These specialized three-person units are designed to tackle

domestic violence and support victims of violence more effectively. The units can really make a difference to reducing violence against women.

**How can it be ensured that women are not just making up the numbers to meet targets rather than participating in useful police work?**

Donor funding of the Afghan police by major international donors like the US, UK and Germany must be conditional on recruiting and retaining more women police, as well as training to help professionalize women in the force and ensure they are placed in effective community policing roles such as Family Response Units.

**Why is the lack of women in the Afghan police an issue for the West/international community? Once NATO withdraws surely it is a problem for the Afghan government?**

Despite the withdrawal of the majority of international forces in 2014, donors—including the USA, the UK, and Germany— will continue to fund, train, and equip the Afghan police. Because they hold the purse strings for the force, the international community must ensure that the right investments are made to create a police force that is effective, representative and can keep all Afghans safe.

**How much would the recommendation you are making cost the West/international community?**

The NATO conference in Chicago in May 2012 allocated \$4.1 billion a year to fund the security forces, with the Afghan Government proportionally paying more each year until at least 2024. A substantial percentage of this security sector reform funding should go towards the recruitment and professionalization of female police to benefit all Afghan women, society, and the Afghan police.

**Do you think that women will once again be banned from the police as part of any deal with the Taliban?**

Oxfam is concerned about how women's rights may be used in peace negotiations. Whilst there have been significant gains for Afghan women over the last ten years, these could easily be reversed. Women, not just policewomen, must not be used as a bargaining chip to reach an imperfect peace.

Oxfam is also concerned that women are under-represented in peace processes in Afghanistan.

**With the police the source of so much crime and corruption as well as violence against women, surely the whole force needs to be overhauled not just the recruitment of women?**

A quality, well-trained and accountable civilian police force that serves all Afghans is crucial for the country. For too long, the focus was on quantity rather than quality of recruits which led to a force that was largely ill-trained and ill-equipped to do the job. Whilst there have been improvements in the last couple of years, more does need to be done. Any reform of the police must include improving the numbers and effectiveness of women in the force.

The Afghan Local Police (ALP), responsible for many abuses, need to receive better training; and more effective vetting, recruitment, oversight and accountability

mechanisms need to be put in place in order to prevent human rights abuses.

**The majority of the Afghanistan police force is poorly trained and a target for the Taliban, these are not just problems for women in the police.**

This is true: serving in the police is one of the most dangerous jobs in Afghanistan. However, policewomen are particularly vulnerable to attacks and abuse not just by anti-government groups for being part of the police force, but within the force itself as well as the community because of the stigma attached. For example, high profile policewoman Islam Bibi who was murdered in June, received death threats from her own family.

**Why is Oxfam concerned about number of women in the police in Afghanistan? What has it to do with reducing poverty?**

There can't be development if there is no stability. And women police are critical to this. Women make up the majority of people living in poverty and women's rights are at the heart of everything Oxfam does. Millions of Afghan women and girls suffer from extreme violence and abuse. They desperately need more policewomen to help them receive the justice they are entitled to and gain greater power over their lives.

**How does Afghanistan compare to other countries?  
Currently, 1% of Afghanistan's police are women. In comparison:**

England and Wales	25%	(2009)
Ireland	23.1%	(2009)
US	11.8%	(2010)
Canada	19.6%	(2011)
Australia	24.4%	(2011)
South Africa	23.5%	(2011)
Nigeria	12.4%	(2011)
India	5.17%	(2010)

Afghanistan is not the only country that struggles to recruit representative numbers of women into its national police force. However, cultural and religious barriers mean policewomen are even more critical for the implementation of the rule of law and protection of women in Afghanistan.

**Why focus on increasing the number of female police now?**

The Afghan government and international donors have launched an initiative to transform the force from one focused on the counter-insurgency and conflict into a civilian police force. It is the first large-scale police reform in the country. Recruiting more women into the police must be a key part of the reform but so far it has not been a high priority. In the lead up to the withdrawal of the majority of NATO forces next year and transition to full Afghan government control, it is more critical than ever to have an effective police force to enforce the rule of law and keep all Afghans safe.

**Oxfam says there are 1551 women currently in the police force, however, the Ministry of Interior cites 2200 women. Why the discrepancy?**

The Ministry of Interior included all the women who have been trained to be police, while the 1551 figure (which is from the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan) is the number now working in the police force in some capacity.

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<sup>i</sup> National Police Strategy (2010) and National Police Plan (2011), both available on the MOI website. Draft Ten Year vision supplied by international officials February 2013.