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For Afghan Policewomen, Sex Abuse Is a Job Hazard

By Quil Lawrence

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The image of Afghan women wearing police and army uniforms is meant to inspire pride and hope for a future where the rights of women will be protected in Afghanistan.

So why would female police officers in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif be ashamed to admit they wear the badge?

"Except my very close family members, no one really knows that I am a police officer," said one woman at a NATO training session.

The woman, who asked not to give her name, says she tells most of her family that she works with a foreign aid organization. That's because the rumors about sexual abuse in Mazar-e-Sharif's police force are so widespread that many of these women are ashamed to say they're cops.

Profound Inequality

Protection of women's rights in Afghanistan remains a focal point for the West — and American officials regularly tout the fact that the Afghan security forces now include hundreds of women. In northern Afghanistan alone, about 300 women are serving in the police force.

But in a culture that is not fully comfortable with women working outside the home, these women face significant risks. An NPR investigation in the city discovered disturbing allegations

of systematic sexual coercion and even rape of female police officers by their male colleagues.

The women at the recent training session at a huge base outside Mazar-e-Sharif hardly looked like victims as they assembled and loaded assault rifles. But none dared to give their names as they alluded to what is an open secret in the city.

"Some women are being promoted only if they agree to give sexual favors," said one female officer.

Most of the female police have many children, and most are poor. Though they say they'd like to serve their country, just as many say they joined the police because the pay — about \$300 a month — is better than working as a maid or a teacher. The threat of job loss is a powerful one.

None of the policewomen on the training course — which consisted of a mix of men and women — would admit to being victims of sexual coercion.

Shocking Stories Of Rape

But privately, several told of terrifying experiences. The women agreed to speak on the condition that their names be withheld, and the only place they felt safe enough to talk with a reporter was in a car moving around the city.

"It's a fact. Women in the police are being used for sex and as prostitutes," said Ann — not her real name — who is in her mid-30s.

"It's happened to me. Male cops ask for sex openly because they think women join the police just to work as prostitutes," she said.

In Afghanistan, even in modern cities like Mazar-e-Sharif or Kabul, the capital, a wide array of supposedly "immoral" conduct can get a woman called a prostitute. Anything from wearing the wrong clothes to sitting in the front seat of a car, or simply working outside the home can cause dangerous rumors.

The law reflects that. With sexual assault, the woman is as often sent to jail as the man, the assumption being that any woman who puts herself in a situation to be vulnerable to rape must be immoral.

That seems to apply even to police officers: Women interviewed for this story said that if cases of rape are exposed, the woman always gets the blame.

Ann says that's why she never reported the worst attack.

She says on one occasion her house was invaded by a group of men who stayed all night, raping her in front of her small children. Ann, who is married, recognized some of them as police. She didn't report the incident for fear of public disgrace, and because she believes the police chief already knew.

A second woman in her mid-30s, Jane — also not her real name — says she was also raped by her superiors on the force after the threat of losing her job — the only income supporting her several children.

"Put it this way: If there is a young woman, and she wants to remain in her post, she accepts being used this way," said Jane.

A Type Of Sexual 'Trafficking'

The women say abuse is widespread across Mazar-e-Sharif's police force and that female officers are practically "trafficked" when they are transferred from one district to another. Pay and promotion depend on sexual favors. Ann says she would never encourage a woman to join the police.

"I have daughters of my own, and I would never ever want them to join the police force," she said.

Another woman, in her late-30s, arrived for an interview hiding her police uniform under her burqa. She says that after almost 10 years on the force, police officers stopped demanding sex from her but forced her to procure prostitutes.

"Anywhere you ask for a job in the police force, they either ask you to give yourself or bring them girls," she said. She named several policewomen who act as madams for cops in the city.

Official Denial

Afghan officials in Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul denied all the charges made in this story.

"The women police are working closely alongside their Afghan brothers. I totally reject any report that they are being abused by their male counterparts," said Sadiq Sadiqi, the spokesman for the Afghan Interior Ministry.

But advocates in Kabul say the problem is not limited to Mazar-e-Sharif.

"We've received many reports of abuse of Afghan women police in many parts of the country," said Georgette Gagnon, director of human rights for the U.N. mission in Afghanistan. "We are very concerned."

Gagnon says the U.N. is currently trying to gauge how widespread the problem is — especially as the international community draws down and starts handing over control to Afghan forces.

"Violence against women in Afghanistan is at very high levels. One of the solutions put forward is for more females to join the police force to address this issue," she said. "It will be very difficult to take this seriously when females join and are themselves abused by other officers within the force."

