
Female Engagement Initiative: Professionalizing the AUP

By Captain Megan R. Spangler

As the sun came up, rows of Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) saluted the rising Afghan flag at the 202d AUP headquarters, Kabul, Afghanistan. The formation consisted of a uniform sea of blue—with the exception of three conspicuous head scarves in the back row. These three members of the AUP were wearing modified uniforms. Despite receiving the same training and earning the same qualifications as their male counterparts, these women were not issued boots or weapons and they did not serve in the positions that they had been trained to fill.

The 202d AUP headquarters (locally known as “Shamshad” for the neighborhood in which it is located) is responsible for eight provinces in eastern Afghanistan. There are about 13,000 AUP personnel stationed throughout those 8 provinces; however, only 58 women are assigned as police officers. Although a few women successfully complete each police academy class, they are not typically assigned to police positions within the provinces. Instead, Afghan women (who are, on average, better educated and, therefore, better qualified for clerical positions than their male counterparts) are frequently relegated to secretarial or administrative positions—regardless of their police qualifications.

AUP positions are designated on the *tashkil* (Dari¹ for “organization”), which is similar to the U.S. Army table of organization and equipment, where personnel duty positions are assigned on the basis of rank and position. A few *tashkil* positions, such as investigators in the Human Rights and Gender Directorate, are specifically coded for women, but women are not officially restricted from serving in other slots. In reality, though, Shamshad women are often assigned to clerical jobs in the Headquarters Company or the Logistics, Recruiting, Counternarcotics, or Human Rights and Gender Directorates. Because AUP personnel are paid according to their positions rather than their ranks, the restriction of women to the lowest positions also results in the restriction of their paychecks.

Despite assertions of their support, senior leaders of the 202d AUP seemed to merely tolerate the presence of the women. The ubiquitous stares of their male peers followed them around the compound as they performed their duties.

The 728th Military Police Battalion (which was partnered with the 202d AUP for a police mentorship mission) recognized these discrepancies and established the Female Engagement Initiative (FEI) to help professionalize the AUP. The 728th developed a strategy to increase the use of female police, and the battalion is now actively pursuing its execution.

The concept of women within the ranks of the AUP is not new. The senior-ranking female at Shamshad, the deputy gender officer, has served as a police officer for more than 20 years. She is married to another police officer and has five children, although most Shamshad women are young and unmarried. Speaking through an interpreter, she says, “These women come from two types of families—those that are open-minded and want their women to be successful and those that have economic problems and need the women to work. Lucky for us, most of our girls come from the first type.” The deputy gender officer and another experienced Shamsad female serve as strong maternal role models for the younger women. While they are enthusiastic about the FEI, they emphasize the importance of commander support for project validation.

Since 2004, Afghanistan has been a fielding ground for female engagement teams developed primarily by the Marine Corps. Female engagement teams consist of specifically trained teams of volunteer Marines and Soldiers who—using their culture-intensive training—gain the trust of Afghan women and, subsequently, engage them in discussions about local security and domestic topics (hygiene, food sanitation) while coalition patrols simultaneously interact with villagers in an attempt to track down insurgents. Inspired by the female engagement team mission, the 728th Military Police Battalion sought to establish similar relationships with Afghan women—but in the professional setting of the AUP. The women of the 728th were overwhelmingly supportive of tackling this project in addition to completing their primary staff duties.

The mission of the FEI is straightforward—to professionalize female AUP and to expand the role of Afghan women in the area of domestic security. The key to successfully activating the mission was to engage the Shamshad leadership in a combined plan of execution.

The gender officer—a 21-year veteran of the AUP—was instrumental in gaining the support of the 202d. Although he had served as the gender officer of the 202d for 8 years, he had never participated in a combined gender plan with an outside agency. His interaction with Shamshad females currently consists of conducting biweekly classes to educate the women about their rights within Afghanistan. Although he addresses the issues of workplace rights and domestic violence, more can be done.

The Shamshad commander is vocal in his support of FEI mentor interaction with the women. The Afghan females generally lacked self-confidence, and the commander directed them to conduct daily physical training in the new gym at the AUP compound. For women who had never participated in any sort of physical training and had not been issued physical training uniforms like their male counterparts, this was a challenge. The FEI mentors stepped in and helped the gender officer use the complicated logistic system to secure physical training uniforms for the women. They then worked with the gender officer to reserve the gym and organize private workout sessions, which are conducted five times per week. The Afghan women hesitantly arrived as a group for the first session. Although they were interested, they were cautious—their timid participation punctuated by nervous laughter. Since then, the women have become enthusiastic and energetic. They stomp, clap, and jump during the hour-long aerobics workout sessions.

In addition to fitness instruction, the FEI mentors plan to improve the confidence and ability of female AUP by providing training in the areas of combatives, weapons, and policing—particularly personnel searches, since the women are required to search other females when they are assigned as gate guards. The AUP themselves requested additional classes in literacy, driving, computer training, and English. FEI plans also include the incorporation of workshops and guest lecturers to address women’s issues. The team is eager to export this program to reach subordinate AUP provincial headquarters.

With a curriculum aimed at professionalizing the AUP, the 728th hopes to invigorate AUP women—making them more effective at policing and, in turn, better utilized within their organization. In addition, the 728th is working with the Afghan Ministry of the Interior mentors to increase female recruiting and to add slots to the next *tashkil* that



Female Soldiers conduct aerobics classes and assist with physical training for female AUP.

are specifically coded for women. The goal is to strengthen current female assets so that AUP leaders recognize the operational necessity for females and begin to incorporate more women within their ranks.

Using this aggressive approach, the FEI team is optimistic. However, cultural and societal attitudes toward female AUP will not be completely changed by the FEI. At the end of the year, the female AUP may only have their foot in the door, but that is one step closer to a seat at the table.

Endnote:

¹Dari is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan.

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