

Policy Brief January 2018

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Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) is an independent social research organization with a mandate to promote social and policy learning to benefit development and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and other less developed countries through conducting social scientific research, monitoring and evaluation, and training and mentoring. APPRO is registered with the Ministry of Economy in Afghanistan as a non-profit, non-government organization and headquartered in Kabul, Afghanistan with five regional offices. For more information, see: www.appro.org.af

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APPRO also acts as the Secretariat for the National Advocacy Committee for Public Policy, comprising sub-committees on Education, Food Security, Access to Justice, Anti-corruption, NAP 1325 and Access to Health. For more

This policy brief is based on research conducted on the need for, and existence and conditions of, women's shelters in Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, and Jalalabad during November-December, 2017. The full report is available from: <http://appro.org.af/publication/womens-shelters-a-preliminary-assessment/>

Women's Shelters: From Secrecy to Mainstreaming?

Current research by Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) suggests that while the precise numbers of shelters and women accessing their services are publicly unknown, women's shelters in Afghanistan are providing hundreds of women and children across the country with safety and immediate shelter. A key driver of women seeking shelter is domestic violence but also being released from prison with nowhere to go, being forced into illegal work, fleeing a husband's addiction, forced marriage, early marriage, being denied education, or being without documents. Being turned away from the border in attempts to leave Afghanistan is a common reason for women to seek shelter in Herat. In Kandahar, although there are no women's shelters, evidence suggests that women face similar issues and thus are in need of having formal shelters.

Women's shelters remain deeply controversial, challenging cultural sensitivities and norms about women's roles and rights in family and community. Perceptions of shelters are divided between those recognizing that they are necessary to protect vulnerable women, and others believing that the shelters are unwanted and unnecessary foreign interventions, undermining the honor of women and their families.

The debate on whether or not to have women's shelters is further complicated by the fact that women in shelters face a different set of risks including sexual harassment and mistreatment while supposedly being protected. There is

evidence, nevertheless, that as shelters continue to exist and as more and more people learn about their functions, there is more openness in communities hosting women's shelters about the potentially positive role they could play in protection of vulnerable women or victims of sexual violence.

There is regional variation in the perception of shelters and the quality of the services they provide. In all cases, the women using the shelters would like to see more adequate accommodation and living spaces, tailor-made vocational training for the women, literacy courses, and programs for the women's children within the shelters.

To varying degrees, all shelters appear to have mechanisms in place to assist the women and prepare them for return to their families or society at large, based on the signing of formal guarantee letters from the women's families, sometimes involving local elders, that the women being released from shelters would never again be subjected to violence or mistreatment.

Further, the consent of the woman to leave the shelter voluntarily is a necessary component of any process of reintegration. Releases are followed up by the shelters to monitor the situation of the women in their families after return to ensure that the women remain safe. Many important questions remain regarding the effectiveness of this process, in both the short and longer terms, however.

The ongoing challenges for women's

shelters in Afghanistan – and for the women who use the services of these shelters – provide important insights into the substantial difficulties faced by the government in implementing policies and programs that would protect and promote the rights of women and enable Afghanistan to meet its domestic and international commitments, including NAP 1325. Customary belief systems, the turbulent political environment, and the debate regarding the social acceptability of women’s shelters remain substantial challenges in effecting structural measures to better protect women and advance their equal rights.

Recommendations

Government of Afghanistan

- Establish a separate budget line in the national budget for funding shelters on an ongoing basis.
- Initiate a public information campaign about the necessity of having shelters and that shelters functions do not contradict Islamic principles.
- Work with all stakeholders toward the establishment of women’s shelters in provinces where they do not currently exist and increasing their number where there is insufficient capacity.
- Facilitate closer collaboration between shelters and the ministries of Public Health and Education to ensure that the special needs of children within shelters are adequately addressed.
- Distinguish between, and make specific provisions for, the special needs of different groups of women needing

shelter, i.e., women without documentation, women having been released from prison, and women as victims of domestic violence.

- Ensure that referral processes by government institutions meet the immediate protection needs of women seeking access to shelters.

Non-Governmental Organizations and Donors

- Engage with other women’s shelter initiatives regionally to share experiences, good practices, and lessons learned for mainstreaming women’s shelters in Afghanistan.
- Consider how to raise awareness of the need for women’s shelters, in ways that are most likely to resonate with local cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs.
- Engage with religious scholars and community leaders to reach consensus about the need for shelters.
- Publicize amicable resolutions of domestic violence through the services provided by shelters, taking all necessary precautions to protect the women’s identities.
- Engage with women in the shelters around their perceived needs and interests regarding access to vocational, educational, and training opportunities.
- Advocate for and prioritize children’s rights to education and recreational spaces within shelters.
- Advocate for and support needs assessments for establishing shelters, or structures acting as shelters, for victims of domestic violence in rural / remote areas.