

Policy Brief October 2018 (Updated)

About APPRO:

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

APPRO is the founding member of APPRO-Europe, a network association for disseminating applied research findings from conflict environments, conducting training, and carrying out evaluations. For more information, see: www.appro-europe.net

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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 shelter services are publicly unknown, women's shelters in Afghanistan are providing hundreds of women and children across the country with safety and immediate protection. (1)

Key drivers for women seeking shelter are domestic violence, being released from prison and shunned by family with nowhere to go, being forced into illegal or bonded 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 also a common reason for women to seek shelter in border cities such as Herat.

Women's shelters remain deeply controversial, challenging cultural sensitivities and norms about women's roles and rights in family and community. To date, Kandahar does not have women's shelters, most likely due to strong objections from different quarters within the community but despite the evidence suggesting that victimized women in Kandahar are also in need of the protection that formal shelters could offer.

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, their families, and their communities. To the traditionalists and the conservative, shelters are thought of as encouraging women to disobey their husbands, daughters to disobey their parents, or sisters to disobey their male siblings as self-appointed guardians of family honor.

Women's shelters are presumed, in conservative quarters, to be places where groups of women reside without male guardians and are thus prone to becoming engaged or involved in immoral acts. For example, there was outrage among Afghanistan's international donors and Afghan women's rights activists when, in 2012, the then Minister of Justice rhetorically asked: "What safe houses? What sort of immorality and prostitution was not happening at those places?" (2)

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 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.

(1) For APPRO's research on women's shelters, see "Publications" at: www.appro.org.af

(2) The Telegraph, "Afghan women in shelters are prostitutes, says justice minister", June 21, 2012.

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There is evidence 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 shelter could play in protecting vulnerable women or victims of sexual violence.

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 monitoring process, however, in both the short and longer terms.

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.

Traditionally conservative belief systems, the turbulent political environment, sporadic armed conflict, 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.

Women's shelters have also been resented, or disapproved of, from within the government. All women's shelters receive their funds from international donors. These funds are often many times larger than the budgets allocated to the Ministry of Women's Affairs, for example, resulting in resentment and accusations of corruption and misappropriation by government officials, and rebuttal and counteraccusations of corruption by NGOs that run the shelters with the latter suggesting that the concerns about who manages the shelters is less about the best care for the women and more about who gets the funds. (3)

Proponents of independent shelters, run by non-government organizations, argue that being independent of a government that struggles with systemic corruption within its own structures minimizes the possibility of bribes being used by abusive fathers, husbands or brothers to retrieve women from the shelters.

Recommendations

Government of Afghanistan

- Establish a separate budget line in the national budget for funding shelters on an ongoing basis.
- Maintain the independence of women's shelters to protect them from the administrative corruption prevalent in government departments.
- Initiate a public information campaign about the necessity of having shelters and that shelters' functions are consistent with Islamic principles.
- Work with all stakeholders toward the establishment of women's shelters in provinces where they do not currently exist and increase the number shelters where there is insufficient capacity.
- Facilitate closer collaboration between shelters and the ministries of Women's

(3) See, for example, "Afghan Official Says Women's Shelters Are Corrupt", The New York Times, February 15, 2011.

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Affairs, Public Health and Education to ensure that the special needs of the women and their 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.
- Commission an independent assessment of shelters to establish their relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and impact.

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 and how they should be managed.
- 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 needs and interests regarding access to vocational, educational, and training opportunities.
- Advocate for and prioritize children's rights to education, basic health and recreational spaces within shelters.
- Advocate for and support needs assessments for improving existing shelters and establishing new shelters, or structures acting as shelters, for victims of domestic violence in rural / remote areas.