

POLICY BRIEF

Freedom through Association: Realizing the Potential of West Africa's Female Police Staff Associations

UN Photo/Christopher Herwig

Scant attention has been paid to how those working within public security organizations, including police services, can create a more inclusive culture. An issue of concern to every society, an inclusive culture is especially critical where conflict or oppression has tainted citizens' views and reduced police credibility. As security sector institutions work to better reflect the diversity of the populations they serve, women and minority groups may be discriminated against by existing staff and institutional culture. Associations of female police officers have the potential to improve this situation by empowering women and helping them become better police officers. In turn, this contributes to improved policing services and greater security.

In West Africa, only Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone have female police associations and gender policies within police services. In all three countries, increasing the number of female police officers has been key to gender-sensitive reform. Moreover, these associations are valued by their members and external supporters and have the potential to grow into much more influential bodies. How can female staff associations in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone support their members? What are the challenges they face and the opportunities they present to creating police services that are professional, democratic, and respectful of human rights?

Powerful Potential

Female police staff associations hold considerable potential to empower women and to improve working conditions for their members and the quality of police services for the public. This is true for associations in all three countries, despite their differences, many of which are highlighted in table 1.

Across the board, associations are well placed to advocate on behalf of their memberships. Indeed, the constitution of the Ghana Police Ladies Association (POLAS) calls for it to engage in lobbying, advocacy, and professional development. Issues such as training in hard skills and gender analysis would contribute to improving women's confidence

This policy brief brings together findings from NSI's project *Freedom through Association: Female Staff Associations and Gender-Sensitive Police Reform in West Africa*.

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The thirty-third class of police officers of the Liberian National Police (LNP) participate in a graduation ceremony.



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Policewomen in Ghana, for example, see their association as essential for networking and support and rely on help from regional chapters when they are transferred

Table 1: Police Reform and Female Police Staff Associations in Comparison

| Country | Ghana | Liberia | Sierra Leone |
|--|---|---|--|
| Police reform initiated | Early 1990s | 2005 | 1999 |
| Reason for police reform | Democratic reform across state services | Civil war; police implicated in human rights abuses | Civil war; police implicated in human rights abuses |
| Quota for female police officers? | No | Yes, 20 percent | No |
| Female police staff association | Police Ladies Association, established 1989 | Liberia National Police Women's Association, established early 1990s (currently inactive) | Sierra Leone Police Female Staff Association, established 2007 (previously known as the Women's Forum) |
| Female security sector staff association | None | Liberia Female Law Enforcement Association | Women in Security Sector – Sierra Leone |
| Police gender policy? | No | Yes, since 2005 | Yes, since 2008 |
| Compulsory membership? | Yes | No | Yes |
| Dues collection | Deducted from paycheques | Voluntary contribution | Voluntary contribution |

and advancing their careers. Associations could also advocate on behalf of individual members in cases of workplace conflict. However, any attempt to strengthen advocacy roles must proceed with a view to maintaining a positive working relationship with the police service.

Associations also have the potential to work outside of police services with private sector and civil society organizations to help them achieve their goals. POLAS has initiated an encouraging relationship with a Ghanaian mobile phone service provider to secure discounted rates for its members, something which should improve communication among members and between its national and regional branches. Civil society groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone are able and available to provide training on issues such as gender and security to police officers and could be key allies in advocating for gender-sensitive change within police services.

Strength in Numbers

One of the most important roles that female police staff associations play in these three countries is in the area of social support. Associations collect dues from members which they use to provide financial support to members and/or their families at important moments in life, such as marriage, childbirth, retirement, illness, and death. This role is doubly important to policewomen in conflict-affected countries where war-weary communities and weak governments have few resources available for such support.

Associations provide moral and psychological support to their members. Policewomen in Ghana, for example, see their association as essential for networking and support and rely on help from regional chapters when they are transferred. POLAS also works to build ties with other groups of women in the security sector. It has been successful largely by being a Ghanaian-led and developed organization, two major factors for creating buy-in among members.



Associations are also important convening bodies for social activities that serve both to promote camaraderie among members—and in some cases their male colleagues or spouses—and fundraise for other association activities. Social activities are an opportunity for members to network with their colleagues. This is particularly useful given that police hierarchies often prevent junior officers from interacting with more experienced senior members. In some cases, these activities can help female police officers address problems quietly through unofficial channels. In the all-too-common case of sexual harassment of a junior female officer by a senior male officer, pursuing recourse through networks rather than filing a formal complaint may yield more positive results that better protect the victim.

Female police officers who were participants in focus groups in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone praised their associations for helping to place women in decision-making roles and opening up doors in a male-dominated profession. Results can be seen in Liberia, where women have served as inspector general and deputy inspector general of the Liberia National Police.

Challenging Circumstances

Female police staff associations in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone face numerous challenges. In addition to working with publics that see the police

UN police advisers briefing on increasing female police in peacekeeping.

as corrupt, lazy, or abusive and male colleagues who often view them as sex objects, policewomen and their staff associations face a host of administrative obstacles. Indeed, the Liberia National Police Women's Association (LNPWA) has great potential, but is currently inactive due to internal challenges. Concrete and strategic steps need to be taken to revive this association.

All three associations need to build capacity in management and financial and strategic planning, including fundraising. Without increased capacity, they are unlikely to be able to sustain their activities. Leadership and management are not shared equally among executive members, putting associations at risk from the departure of key individuals.

None of the associations is fully independent of its associated police service. Female staff associations often use internal police communication and financial administration tools, hold meetings in department common areas, and meet during work hours. While this may allow more members to participate, it may also hamper an association's advocacy role. For instance, although the Sierra Leone Police Female Staff Association's (SLPFSA) officials are elected, the group must go to the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) executive for supplemental funding and permission to interact with outside groups or hold national meetings. Reliance on the SLP for financial resources—probably the association's biggest concern—may have unintended consequences for the SLPFSA when it exercises its voice.

While associations are used to addressing grievances occasionally, they do not assume strong roles in mentoring younger officers. They do not address the lack of confidence that appears to be a universal issue for female police officers that prevents them from taking on certain roles, like bank duty because it involves carrying a rifle. Despite potential benefits such as independent funding options, associations rarely work with other women's organizations, civil society actors, international organizations, or donors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

On the surface, the advocacy roles of female police staff associations in West Africa are noticeably weak. Associations are seen as social groups and support networks that are permitted to exist because they pose

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no threat to the status quo. Quiet lobbying by influential members appears to be the preferred method for addressing problems.

The importance of these associations, however, is not lost on women in the security sector. POLAS, LNPWA, and SLPFSA were the first of their kind in their respective countries and inspired women in other security institutions to start their own groups. Despite some differences, they all face many of the same opportunities and challenges in reaching their full potential. To help them realize that potential and have a positive impact on police reform, national and international stakeholders and donors should consider, as appropriate:

Graduates of the thirty-third class of police officers of the Liberian National Police, including 104 female officers, are pictured during a swearing-in ceremony.

- creating partnerships with female staff associations in the security sector to improve training, knowledge-sharing, and sectoral monitoring and reform efforts;
- allowing general staff associations to help address the many complaints from female police officers that are often shared by their male colleagues, and seeking associations' input on security sector policies that affect women;
- sharing information about services, activities, conferences, and funding opportunities that can benefit and empower policewomen and their staff associations;
- actively combating barriers for women, for example by supporting public and internal education campaigns and working to end gender-based stereotypes;
- expanding networking opportunities for women and making sure female staff associations in the security sector are invited to those events;
- providing help for umbrella associations in organizational development, fundraising, and support to their members;
- ensuring skills are suitable and sustainable by having female staff associations drive training and capacity building, with coordination among stakeholders to reduce duplication of efforts; and
- continuing to support positive female role models, for example by assigning all-female police battalions to peacekeeping operations. 🌐



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This NSI policy brief is based on Freedom through Association: Female staff associations and gender-sensitive police reform in West Africa, a report by Jenny Becker with Caroline Bowah Brown, Aisha Fofana Ibrahim, and Akosua Kuranchie. The full report is available at: www.nsi-ins.ca.



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