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Police Reform and Gender in West Africa: An institutional perspective

Many thanks to the North-South Institute and the Centre for International Governance Innovation for inviting me to participate in this roundtable on gender and informal justice.

For those of you who are not familiar with the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), we are an international foundation established in 2000 by the Swiss government. We have over fifty states as members of our Foundation Council, including Canada. Our focus is on providing support to security sector reform/governance. Out of a staff of over 100, we have ten that are part of our Gender and Security Programme. We specifically focus on providing research, training, policy and technical advice on gender and SSR – including field projects in the Western Balkans and West Africa.

In January 2010, we initiated a regional gender survey of security sector institutions in the fifteen ECOWAS states - funded by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Sweden and Norway. The Survey is scheduled to be finalised by the end of 2010. The aim of this presentation is to share information on the methodology and challenges of undertaking this survey; initial findings regarding gender and police services in West Africa; and conclude with field support and policy research priorities that have emerged from the initial findings.

Methodology and Challenges

The rationale behind undertaking this Survey was that there is currently little to no information on gender and security sector institutions in West Africa. Which means that there is no baseline for regional or temporal comparison. Previously, we didn't even have access to basic information, such as how many male and female police personnel there are in the different countries.

The Survey is focused on four security sector institutions: the armed forces, police services, justice and penal systems – with a focus on gathering baseline institutional data. In consultation with SSR and gender experts, we developed a set of twenty-five to thirty key indicators which formed the basis for a questionnaire. The indicators fall into five key areas: policy/procedures, institutional structure, personnel, training and internal/external oversight mechanisms. We hired an external consultant to coordinate the research process and then identified local researchers in each of the fifteen ECOWAS countries to gather the data for the questionnaire. The research methodology was composed of desk research along with structured interviews.

We encountered many challenges during the research process:

- Identifying local researchers in each of the fifteen countries proved difficult. Gaining access to information on security sector institutions was also challenging. Especially for the researchers with an academic or human rights background.
- Lack of transparency was a major obstacle. Officials often responded that data could not be shared due to state secrecy, even going so far as to accuse the researcher of being part of a 'foreign intelligence service' that was going to sell the information to neighboring countries. In Guinea and Guinea-Bissau researchers were physically intimidated and threatened. In other countries, sources wished to remain anonymous as they feared being disciplined or court-marshaled for sharing information.

- Unreliable data was another challenge. Many of the police services did not collect and store reliable data themselves. Therefore, the answers would differ depending upon who was interviewed.
- Terminology was also an issue in certain contexts. For instance, the use of the term 'security sector reform' by the researcher in Nigeria was unwelcome and detrimental to data collection.

Initial Findings

Despite these challenges, we currently have data on gender and the police services of twelve ECOWAS countries (excluding Benin, Guinea and The Gambia).

Policies and protocols

- Only Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone have specific institutional gender policies within the police service.
- Six out of twelve countries have fourteen weeks maternity leave.
- Four countries have three-day paternity leave, namely, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Togo. This is surprising considering comments that we have received from interviewees regarding paternity leave not being an 'African tradition' and seen as a Western concept. It is also interesting to note that despite many innovative initiatives in Liberia, they do not have paternity leave in the Liberia National Police.
- In Burkina Faso and Togo, female personnel also have the right to breastfeed for one hour per day.
- The militarized nature of the police service is reflected in some countries' policies regarding marriage. For instance, in several countries, police personnel have to wait several years before getting married and need to ask permission to marry. In Côte d'Ivoire, one must apply for permission to get married, then the Director of Intelligence investigates the proposed spouse and has the right to withhold permission if the proposed spouse is deemed to be of 'bad character.'
- Only Sierra Leone has a separate policy on sexual harassment; Liberia addresses this issue in their gender policy. Generally speaking, many interviewees responded saying that sexual harassment does not exist within their institutions.
- Cape Verde, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone have standard operating procedures for responding to violence against women. For the other countries, they simply state that GBV is investigated like any other crime as cited in the penal code.

Institutional structure

- Burkina Faso and Liberia have internal gender units or gender affairs sections. Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Ghana all have gender focal points in their ministries of interior – but these focal points are often under-resourced and even forced to work without an allocated budget.
- Only four out of twelve countries have specific police units for gender-based violence or violence against women (Cape Verde, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone). For Nigeria, responding to violence against women has fallen to the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, and in Burkina Faso and Mali, it is the Vice and Child Protection Squads.

Personnel

- The lowest number of female police personnel can be found in Guinea Bissau with 0.6% women – though this is not the most reliable number. Second lowest is Burkina Faso with five percent.
- Highest rates of female police personnel are Liberia (17.31% with 580), Sierra Leone (16%) and Ghana (13.9%). Though Ghana has the largest number of female personnel with 2164.

- Ironically, Burkina Faso, despite the low overall number of female personnel has the highest rate of women in senior management positions. Due to a quota set in 1999, five out of twenty-five appointed police commissioners were women – a rate of 25%.
- Strategic targets or quotas for female recruitment and/or advancement are rare. Only Liberia seems to have a 20% target in place. In a few countries, quotas were used to limit women’s participation, so removal of quotas was seen as a positive step to encourage higher numbers of women to participate. For instance, in Mali, the number of women recruited to the police varies on a yearly basis ‘depending on need’.
- Women seem, theoretically, to have access to all positions in the police service. That said, few to no women are usually in the special operations units. One interesting anecdote is that in Côte d’Ivoire in 2010, they had a surge of female graduates in the police academy – unsure of what to do with all the female graduates, the police set up an all female traffic control unit.
- Female police associations also seem rare, only in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Though in Côte d’Ivoire they have established an informal, internal gender committee led by a female police commissioner and composed of thirty-three police women. It is divided into three sub-committees on work, social and ethics. One of their goals is to advocate for the right to form a police women’s association. However in many of the Francophone countries and Nigeria, forming associations within the police is illegal. In Togo, they have gotten around the ban by individual female police officers becoming members of the International Association of Women Police.

Training

- Only five out of twelve countries seemed to offer gender training. Aside from in Liberia, the gender training is always offered by external actors – largely international organizations but in some countries the gender training is run by women’s organizations or ministries of gender/women.

Oversight

- Though police services all have internal and external oversight mechanisms such as police inspectorates, ministries of interior, human rights commissions, etc. there seems to be minimal to no action by these oversight bodies on gender issues.
- In four countries, local police boards existed (Burkina Faso, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) and three have in place referral systems for GBV victims.
- In most countries, interviewees deny the existence of cases of GBV perpetrated by police personnel. Only in Côte d’Ivoire (three domestic violence and one rape reported in 2010) Liberia (three officers charged and brought to court) and Sierra Leone (one officer reported in 2009) was any data available.

Field Support and Policy Research Priorities (not in order of priority)

1. Develop institutional gender policies and protocols, especially concerning response to GBV cases.
2. Review and revise human resources policies, especially regarding marriage and family.
3. Establish domestic violence/family support units within the police.
4. Research what recruitment and retention initiatives work to increase the number of female police personnel.
5. Support the establishment and professional advocacy work of police women’s associations.
6. Institutionalise gender training in police academies, including the development of education/training curriculum and training-of-trainers. Research the impact of gender training for police personnel.

7. Strengthen the capacity of internal and external oversight mechanisms to pro-actively respond, investigate and penalise sexual harassment and other forms of GBV.
8. Establish local police boards with active participation of women's organizations.
9. Support civil society organizations, through capacity-building and resource provision, to exercise effective oversight of the police.
10. Research rates of sexual harassment and GBV perpetrated by police personnel and effective prevention initiatives.

Undertaking this research has opened my eyes to how much we still do not know regarding gender and policing in West Africa. Additional research and support on gender issues is an urgent priority and I look forward to discussing how we can work together to address these needs.