

(In)visibility: Women and Community Policing in Northern Uganda

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Based on fieldwork in Northern Uganda, this brief concerns the invisibility of women in policing. Community-based policing, as a method of preventing crime and increasing protection for society, is often considered to be “close to the people.” However, as the most vulnerable group in communities, women have special needs and expectations regarding successful policing that are not sufficiently considered in theory and practice. This renders women mostly invisible.

Official reports and figures of the Ugandan police demonstrate the underrepresentation of women (at 17 percent) with higher ranks being dominated by men. Additionally, official crime statistics demonstrate that women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence. It is time to take female perspectives into account by listening to women’s experiences and expectations of policing by examining their everyday life (security) situations. This study, conducted in the Gulu district in Northern Uganda in 2019, reveals these expectations and needs as expressed in interviews with police officers, magistrates, local NGO members, and local leaders.

WHAT WOMEN EXPERIENCE

Women in Uganda turn to the police when they are in need, but do not perceive the force to address their concerns adequately and consider the police to be corrupt and unprofessional:

“Generally, the police do not perform most of their roles. They ask for transport to carry out arrests or transport suspects to the police station”.

“The police are not conversant with problems in communities.”

“Whenever the police come to a scene of a crime, they cause more insecurity by beating people, spraying tear gas, arresting people or even shooting live bullets at people around the crime scene”.

One of the main problems faced by women in Northern Uganda is transit - e.g. moving between their homes and workplaces. Often these women are “prisoners of transit”¹, meaning that, due to their economic situation, they are required to walk from place to place. As interviews with women suggest, these walks are perceived to be dangerous, especially at night. As a result, women try to avoid leaving their homes after dusk, and express feelings of insecurity:

“When there is a power/electricity blackout, thieves and robbers use the darkness to rob and steal. Rapists too use that moment”.

Rather than fulfilling the needs and expectations of female citizens, women are mainly invisible in the policing process, both as police and citizens.

WOMEN ARE INVISIBLE IN POLICING

Community policing was imported to Uganda by the British Department of International Development in the 1990s in order to polish the negative image of the police, who were seen by the public as corrupt, brutal and inefficient. One element of this was to train community liaison officers to bring police and communities closer together, with the first six female officers entering the force in 1998².

Today, the Ugandan police force numbers nearly 45,000 (7700 of whom are female officers) in 339 police stations and 1,399 police posts spread over 114 policing divisions³. Women are thus underrepresented in the police force, particularly in the upper ranks: Uganda has never had a female General of Police or Deputy Inspector General of Police, and only 3 of 19 Assistant Inspector Generals are female. The Ugandan police attribute this low ratio to the “gender sensitive nature of policing”, and any attempts to address this have been slow and ineffective.

For example, domestic violence is among the most common crimes in Uganda and disproportionately affects women, yet, rather than protecting victims, the Ugandan police response “traumatizes them by blaming them more⁴.” Victims are required to report crimes in crowded offices without any protection of their fundamental rights, and the police do not guarantee privacy or security⁵. Only in 2018 did the Ugandan police slowly begin to launch units specially trained in dealing with cases of sexual violence, and there is still a lack of necessary infrastructure and awareness among officers.

In 2018, the most prevalent crimes were assault, domestic violence, defilement and threatening violence, with the district of Gulu reporting the highest crime rates⁶. Women were disproportionately affected by domestic violence and human trafficking, indicating that women are especially vulnerable of particular crimes. Moreover, these figures are likely higher, as many cases go unreported.

HOW WOMEN COPE

Women are not passive with respect to policing; while the police themselves may not fulfill their expectations, women nevertheless try to organize social life and security in their communities. One method utilized is the existence of by-laws, that are developed in consideration of the everyday needs and circumstances of community members to encourage peace. They may regulate cleaning and hygiene in houses, dress codes for married women, the use of alcohol or drugs, or the social lives of children and adolescents. By-laws may be enforced by the police through punishments such as imprisonment. Women have also adopted informal practices and

codes of conduct which directly affect their daily lives, such as avoiding leaving home after darkness and “avoid(ing) unnecessary movements outside the home”. They may light up their rooms at night, pay private security guards, and even rely on bad weather to keep potential criminals at bay. All these practices play a major role in helping women feel safer, but women also hope that community policing will help to fulfill their expectations of security.

VISIBILITY IS NECESSARY

It is crucial that women become more visible in processes of policing. An increase in the recruitment of female police officers would help to create awareness of women’s needs in society, but it would be necessary for Ugandan police to also begin promoting women to higher positions - women need to become decision makers. Including women at higher levels would guarantee the consideration of female perspectives.

In summary, women in Uganda are commonly forgotten in projects and plans; their everyday lives, concerns and expectations play only marginal roles in policing activities. It is therefore time to listen to women and translate female concerns into policing actions, as the dangers, fears, and crimes faced by women are not only ‘women’s problems’, but problems in society at large that result from dominant patriarchal structures and male violence. Hence, community policing programs must consider the causes of insecurity, and, as is the case with by-laws, be developed and implemented closer to communities, to increase the security for all members of society, but especially for invisible members of communities.

Notes

1. Criado Perez, Caroline 2020: Unsichtbare Frauen. Wie eine von Daten beherrschte Welt die Hälfte der Bevölkerung ignoriert. München: btb Verlag, p.83.
2. Raleigh, Christopher; Biddle, Keith; Male, Celia; Neema, Stella 1998: Uganda Police Project Evaluation. London Evaluation Department. Department for International Development (DFID), p. 73.
3. Uganda Police Force 2015: Statistical Abstract 2015. Uganda Police Headquarters: Kampala.
4. Interview with program officers, GBV shelter, Gulu, Northern Uganda, 21.2.2019.
5. Cf. Veit, Alex; Biecker, Sarah forthcoming: Love or Crime? Lawmaking and policing of teenage sexuality in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
6. Uganda Police 2018: Annual Crime Report 2018. Uganda Police Headquarters: Kampala.

Author Bio

Sarah Biecker is a research fellow at the University of Bremen, Germany. Currently she is working on female perspectives on policing in Northern Uganda. She was guest researcher at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and worked extensively on questions of policing, bureaucracy and power. She conducted field research in Rwanda, Uganda and Germany.

The Project

The ICT4COP research project seeks to understand human security in post-conflict settings by researching community-based policing and post-conflict police reform.

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) is the project coordinator.

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