

Networking Women: The Australasian Council of Women and Policing

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Abstract

The challenges presently being faced by women police officers in Pakistan are not unique to that country. Nations in Asia and the Pacific have formed the Australasian Council of Women and Policing to address the needs and concerns of female law enforcement personnel. Lessons learned from this successful endeavor can be applied to Pakistan and other developing regions to ensure that females are properly represented in all ranks and policy making positions and that police organizations are representative of the community being served.

Keywords: Women in Policing; Australia; Australian Council of Women and Policing

Introduction

Females in the law enforcement profession are critical to ensuring the safety and empowerment of women in the community and play an ever increasing role in coordinating women's access to the criminal justice system. Without a proportionate number of women in our police services, half of the population of our communities is not represented in the police services responsible with protecting their human rights. Excluding women from the ranks of law enforcement can mean that women's concerns and interests are not fully understood and critically, it means that they could potentially be ignored by the criminal justice system. It was this relative exclusion of women from policing and in particular from law enforcement leadership and decision-making positions that first inspired the creation of the Australasian Council of Women and Policing (Tynan 1998).

The Australasian Council of Women and Policing (ACWAP) is an active group of women and men in Australia and New Zealand that is working to improve the law enforcement profession as it relates to females. It has established networks with women's groups within criminal justice organizations as part of its strategy to enhance the position of women in the field of policing. ACWAP has as one its goals to actively participate in the global network of women in policing and as part of its work around this goal, shares its experiences of its establishment, how it is developing its networks, and its plans for the future. ACWAP members hope to strengthen the voice of women in law enforcement everywhere by working with other emerging women's organizations, exploring the challenges, opportunities, successes and failures encountered and by sharing the lessons learned.

The Second Islamic Women and Policing Conference held in Islamabad in November 2011 was an opportunity to highlight how women in policing in Islamic countries and Islamic female officers everywhere are an important part of the future of the policing profession. Policing is very different for women and men in both how females are represented within law enforcement and justice agencies and how these organizations respond to women in the community. The nature of crime committed by women and men is different, as is the nature of victimization. For example, in Australia violence against women is more likely to be committed in the home by someone known to the woman, whereas for men there is a greater chance that the violence they encounter will take place in public and involve someone they do not know (ABS 2005).

Women in Law Enforcement

The abundance of men in police leadership positions (Harwood 2006) impacts upon the stated priorities of policing organizations and upon the challenges for females within this vocation. Although there is still not the evidence base to assert that having more women in policing will make a fundamental difference to the profession (Beare 2011), women in policing and those in the community are of the view that this possibility is very likely. We know that females have different priorities from men. Women understand other women's lives, they prioritise the well being of their children and families, and bring a perspective that can be missing in law enforcement decision making (Harwood and McDermott 2011). Evidence in other fields indicates that having a critical mass of women in key decision making roles will make a difference to how policing is delivered to the community (Carter and Wagner 2011).

This is what a small group of female law enforcement officials from various police services around Australia had in mind when they came together in 1995 and decided that something had to be done to make criminal justice administrators and the community aware of the importance of women in policing. Working from a small base in Canberra, this group set about organising the First Australasian Women and Policing Conference. The 1996 conference was the first time in Australia and New Zealand when women from every policing jurisdiction came together to talk about females in that profession.

In 1997, the Australasian Council of Women and Policing was inaugurated, in response to the groundswell from women in policing who wanted females to be able to shape the field (Bolen and Ramsay 1996). The vision was for an independent feminist organisation that could work within and

external to law enforcement agencies to improve policing for women. It was not just about changing policing to remove the barriers for women within law enforcement, but it was also about improving how policing responds to women in the community.

Australasian Council of Women and Policing

The Australasian Council of Women and Policing (ACWAP) is an international network of women and men with an interest in improving the field of policing for women. It has members in every Australian state and territory and representation from New Zealand. ACWAP has three predominant goals:

- improve the policing services provided to women;
- improve the opportunities and outcomes for women within policing; and
- participate in the global network of women in policing.

By having a focus on both women within law enforcement and also on how policing services respond to women in the community, ACWAP differentiated itself from the International Association of Women Policing and looked more to the models being used by the European Network of Police Women and the US-based National Center for Women and Policing, a Division of Feminist Majority.

ACWAP actively works with other women and criminal justice organizations in sharing information and creating a global network. It works closely with other women's groups in Australia and New Zealand and actively participates in their activities. ACWAP has also partnered with the Australian Institute of Policing, a non-for-profit organization which has the aim of professionalizing policing for a range of activities and to share information and ensure that women, both as police officers and as members of the community, are part of the professionalization debate.

ACWAP's Activities

ACWAP's largest undertaking is the biennial Australasian Woman and Policing conferences. Each conference since 1996 has explored a particular aspect of law enforcement and how it can be improved for women. The conferences bring together practitioners, researchers, activists and community representatives to provide a forum for the various perspectives to be discussed and developed. The conferences are an important platform for the development and maintenance of effective networks and have been the catalysts for a variety

of projects. The last conference was held in Hobart, Tasmania in August 2011 with the theme “*Policing and Community – Making it Happen!*” Over 250 delegates attended and examined how law enforcement professionals could better connect with the community served to improve policing for women; policing, community and local government; and policing for women in the Pacific community. The eighth Australasian Women and Policing conference will be held in Adelaide in 2013.

Every year ACWAP coordinates the *Excellence in Policing* awards and recognizes the winners at a gala dinner. These awards are an opportunity for the people who are making a real difference to women’s lives to be recognized. ACWAP established the awards in 1999 to address the lack of recognition for the important work being done in law enforcement to improve policing for women. The regular mechanisms for recognising achievements within law enforcement are often framed in a way that do not consider the different perspective and abilities that women bring to policing.

In 1995, there had been no existing apparatus to engage with women in policing in Australia and New Zealand, so in the lead-up to the groundbreaking 1996 conference, a small group who would become the founding members of ACWAP published *The Whip* (Women Here In Policing): *the Newsletter of Australasian Women Police*. It was first published in November 1995 and continued for two years, supported by a number of police jurisdictions, police credit unions, and police unions. In 1998, *The Journal for Women and Policing* was first published and continues to be distributed to police stations around Australia, university libraries, and other women’s organizations. It is not a peer reviewed journal, and complements the journal *Australasian Policing* published by the Australian Institute of Policing.

The *Journal for Women and Policing* presents ACWAP with an effective way of communicating with women working in law enforcement and provides a tangible national and international presence. It is a visible way ACWAP engages with the women and men in policing as well as stakeholders who are not in the law enforcement profession, such as women’s refugees, and women from other male dominated occupations such as firefighters and emergency medical technicians/ambulance personnel. The journal is also an important vehicle for publishing research about women and policing.

The role policing plays in protecting women’s human rights is a key theme for ACWAP. The field of policing is a gatekeeper to the criminal justice system and its importance in relation to protecting women’s rights is often overlooked. Despite its limited resources and volunteer commitment, ACWAP

continues to actively participate in the debate about women and policing. It does so by providing information and/or contributing to occasional submissions to government enquiries; ACWAP members also participate in international and national events and conferences whenever possible.

ACWAP has produced a booklet entitled *Fitting In or Standing Out? A Woman's Guide to the Policing Profession*. This publication provides candid advice to women who are thinking about policing as a career, or who have just started in the law enforcement field. Positive but realistic accounts of what they can expect when joining a police service are provided by serving women officers, affording a perspective that is not available in the formal guidebooks written by police agencies.

ACWAP has also developed a leadership training package that provides a platform for females in policing and women in the community to build better links. The program *Women Leading Change* brings these groups together to learn about leadership skills and to develop and practice those skills in a real-life community project.

Networking

ACWAP is active in developing and maintaining its networks with other women's groups, other policing organizations, government agencies and researchers. Networking is fundamental to ACWAP's approach to all its activities. All its undertakings are considered in light of maximizing networks, promoting ACWAP and extending its reach. Importantly, having developed these networks, ACWAP also works hard to make sure that members and stakeholders are able to use and share information, and support others in the network.

These networks are not just limited to other females in policing. ACWAP has found some of its strongest allies in other feminist organizations and women's groups. ACWAP's work with other women's groups has enabled those outside law enforcement to develop an appreciation that women in policing have a legitimate role to play in the feminist debate, particularly on topics such as violence against women and females working in non-traditional occupations.

Networks help organizations share their support and resources. ACWAP has found that by supporting and working with other organizations (particularly women's organizations), this has been fruitful and in turn has developed the organization's capacity and outreach. ACWAP's networks also

provide a connection for those who might otherwise feel like they are alone; by engaging in these networks women can hear how others are dealing with similar issues. This is where activities like a journal and conferences are particularly important and are very effective. It is also important that networks are both personal and organizational. While formal networks are critical, it is the personal networks that seem to achieve effective outcomes.

Having a focus on developing and maintaining internal and external communication is key to developing and maintaining a strong network. It widens outreach and allows local issues to become part of the international voice of women and policing. ACWAP has found that using its networks to contribute to the debate about how the law enforcement profession can be improved for females ensures that its message is heard widely and louder than it would be otherwise. It means that not only those in policing hear its message, but that other women's organizations and other criminal justice networks acknowledge that message and incorporate it into their work.

Lessons Learned

Based on ACWAP's experience with networking, the following advice has been offered to participants at the Second Islamic Women Policing Conference:

1. Have Confidence in your Vision

The first stage of developing a network is to develop goals and aims and to plan what it will take to achieve them. For example, will it be similar to the ACWAP, with regular events and publications, or will it function by having a more localised approach with only an online presence that is used to share information?

A successful network needs to have confidence in its own vision to not become vulnerable to pressures that may potentially derail it. No matter what the model, it is important to have some immovable, non-negotiable underlying philosophies, so when others are trying to influence the network, the integrity of the network is not lost. For example, with ACWAP, it is a feminist organisation and has a feminist approach. In establishing a network, the overseeing committee will need to be clear about what the network is about, who it is for, what its limits are, and how independent it will be. It is this level of autonomy that seems to have been one factor that has led to the success of women's networks in Australia. For example, some of the other networks that were established for women within the police services have faltered; one of the

reasons for this is that while these internal groups may benefit from access to resources, they can be vulnerable to the shifting attitudes of senior managers.

The vision of the organization also needs to be sustainable. For example, ACWAP has found that having its focus not only on women in policing, but also on why the community needs more females in policing has been key to its success. In the Australasian context, if there is only a focus on improving the situation of women in policing, ACWAP's continuing relevance would be questionable as this is a role that could be addressed by trade unions. It is also a focus that has only two stakeholders, the police service and the female employees, whereas ACWAP looks to a wider constituency of women and men in both the profession and in the community who are committed to improving policing for women.

2. Some Achievable Outcomes (Conference, Journal and Website)

When planning for the network's activities, plan for some visible, achievable successes. Plan to have something tangible in the short term, medium term, and something that is a long term goal. Include activities that can be used to illustrate what the network is trying to achieve, for example, a journal, newsletter, or a regularly maintained website. These can be used when recruiting new members to the network or sourcing funding or support for the network.

Keep it simple; always link everything you do back to the organization's goals. For example, ACWAP does this with every conference. Its first conference in 1996 explored the goal around improving the opportunities and outcomes for women within law enforcement services; its 1999 conference used violence against women as a case study to examine how it could improve the police services provided to women; and at the 2002 conference, *Women and Policing Globally* was a joint conference with the International Association of Women Police and the Australian Federal Police and brought together females from every continent to explore the issues around those three themes that ACWAP has as its goals.

3. Regular Short and Medium Term Activities

Give the network reasons to come together. Without a reason for the network to come together it runs the risk of losing momentum, visibility and relevance. For example, ACWAP has its annual *Excellence in Policing* awards. While it is a lot of work to do every year and there is the risk that people

nominating others for the awards may feel burdened having to do a nomination every year; this continues to be ACWAP's one, highly visible annual event.

4. Communicate and Stay in Regular Contact

Networks are not something that can be established and expected to thrive. They need constant tending, they need a reason to exist, and they need to be an important source of information from and for its members. This can only be achieved by regular, informal and formal contact. The informal contact is essential so the friendships and relationships build; the formal meetings exist so that there is a reminder about why the network is important. It needs to be regular but most importantly, it needs to be fun.

5. Ask for Assistance from other Women's Groups

Other women have done this before. They have been doing it for a long time and have some great resources that can be drawn upon. It could be advice, it could be contacts, it could be background to an issue, or it could be assistance. As a rule, what it should not be is financial support. Women's groups are underfunded and better funding can often be sourced from businesses and government.

Conclusion

A network of Islamic female police professionals would be an interesting concept and it is possible that women colleagues in Australia who are Muslims may be interested in joining the network. Basing a law enforcement or criminal justice network around a religion or faith, however, limits its support, particularly in secular countries. Nevertheless, if such a network were established, the ACWAP would surely be interested in exploring how it can work together with the new network as part of its role and goal of improving the policing profession for women.

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Helen McDermott is a founding member of the Australasian Council of Women and Policing.