

Strong Women

During a meeting with colleagues at the police station in the Dehdadi district of Balkh Province in northern Afghanistan, Azada Sepher is distracted by angry voices in the lobby. A woman and a man are involved in a heated discussion. Without hesitation, the concerned 47-year-old approaches the couple and asks them what is going on.

The distraught young woman explains: 'Even though I earn my own money working as a teacher, I can't use any of it. My husband simply takes my salary away from me. It just can't go on like this, so I want to report him to the police.' Upon hearing this, the husband becomes highly agitated and the couple begins to argue again. Azada takes a skilful approach to addressing both of them and succeeds in calming them down. She then invites the couple to join her in her office.

Azada, also a full-time teacher, is one of more than 100 female citizens serving as Gender Focal Points (GFPs) in northern Afghanistan. Since 2015, the German government has been supporting the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs in their efforts to create this network for women and girls in need. The GFPs are volunteers and come from different professional and social backgrounds. They advise women and girls in their communities seeking help with legal issues and make them aware of their rights. The issues raised often involve disputes within families, but can also relate to highly serious matters such as domestic violence, forced marriages and rape. The contacts strive to help the parties in dispute resolve their differences and, if necessary, pass cases on to legal institutions, mediators – called *Huquq* offices – or the provincial branches of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Their work is of great importance because many women and girls often don't know who they can turn to in emergencies or don't feel confident enough to contact the responsible institutions. The GFPs attend regular training sessions to consistently acquire and expand the legal knowledge they need and to learn the mediation techniques essential for their work.

Over time, Azada has become skilled in dealing with angry people in dispute. As an Afghan woman herself, she knows and understands the country's cultural and social structures and can easily imagine what the husband and wife are thinking and feeling. In her office, the experienced volunteer listens patiently to both sides. Then she makes her case with choice words, explaining the wife's rights clearly to both of them in a matter-of-fact way. The husband listens carefully and then gives his opinion on the matter. At first, he still believes he's in the right. After intense discussions, however, he realises that his actions have absolutely no legal basis. He then apologises to his wife and promises to change. In a



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relaxed atmosphere, the couple say goodbye to Azada. Beaming, she recounts: ‘A few weeks later, I met the husband in his shop. He treated me very respectfully and actually thanked me for solving the couple’s marital problem so quickly.’

The GFPs have taken up quite a task. They want to support Afghan women as best they can in enforcing their rights. Little by little, they are also changing the country’s social awareness through their work. Sakina Nejrabi, also a GFP, works in the Nahri Shahi district of Balkh Province and knows from experience: ‘The situation for women isn’t easy. Most don’t know their rights. Not only their families and society, but the girls themselves think that from the day they’re born, a girl should only sit at home, get married and have children. Through our work, we are gradually changing this attitude.’ The committed activists raise awareness of women’s rights, organise information events and offer support. Sakina says she has been able to solve the majority of cases in Nahri Shahi to the satisfaction of those involved and their families. The advice is free and has been widely accepted by women and girls in need. Support from contacts like Azada and Sakina is not always enough, however. Sakina applies a pragmatic approach to situations like this: ‘I take the complicated and very serious cases to court because they need careful examination, and I support the women involved throughout the process.’

In order to further increase the professionalism of the GFPs – now active in eight northern Afghan provinces – the Ministry of Women’s Affairs organises regular meetings, conferences and workshops with the support of the German government. Here, the women share their experiences, give one another advice, form networks and exchange ideas and opinions. Representatives from the Afghan Government, legal institutions, the police force, NGOs and councils of elders also attend these events. This allows close ties to be formed between the government institutions and the volunteers. At one such gathering in April 2018, the governor of Baghlan Province put it succinctly: ‘I expect every legal institution to cooperate with and support the Gender Focal Points wherever and whenever possible.’

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