

## **Afghan Police Struggle to Recruit Women**

**Author:** [Sharif Sayidi](#)

Potential recruits held back by family restrictions.

Police chiefs in the western Afghan province of Herat Province say they cannot hire enough female officers because potential recruits are being barred from joining up by traditional-minded families.

Many Afghans interviewed by IWPR expressed the commonly-held belief that women are vulnerable to “moral corruption” -- a term that applies to any form of sexual impropriety – if they work outside the home and interact with men.

Officials are desperate to fill roles where women fill essential roles, for example where police have to search female suspects, but are finding it hard to go against the prevailing sense of morality despite outreach and publicity campaigns, and the fact that women have the right to work under Afghan civil law as well as Islamic precepts. (See **Police Recruit More Women to Bolster Searches** for more on the campaign.)

Fereshta, 26, has dreamed of joining the Afghan National Police, ANP, for years, but her family has forbidden her to do so, and she is left stuck at home.

“When I saw policemen as a child, I’d ask myself whether women could become police officers as well. I’d tell myself that if women were ever allowed to join the police, I would be the first policewoman,” she said. “But the wrong-headed beliefs held by my family – and by society as a whole – have prevented me fulfilling my ambition.... My family said that they’d be shamed if one of their women was working with strange men day and night, and that women of honour did not go to such places.”

Young people in Afghanistan are generally expected to follow the wishes of older family members, other relatives and even respected neighbours.

Police in Herat say they are worried that the lack of female officers is preventing them doing their job to the full.

The province has just 80 women working for the ANP and related security agencies. Nationwide, the picture is equally depressing – only 1,000 of the ANP’s total 122,000 officers are women.

As head of female recruitment at Herat police headquarters, Shogufa Wafa is all too aware of the problem. She says female officers are indispensable in cases where women are accused of drug-running or other crimes, including child abductions.

Wafa’s team have gone round girls’ schools to encourage them to consider joining up women to join the police, but have met with resistance.

“Last year, just three women were recruited into the police force – fewer than the number of women who leave force every year,” she said.

Retention is a huge problem because serving officers still face pressure from their families. In addition, they get a lot more abuse from members of the public than their male counterparts.

“We don’t have problems at headquarters, but we do get trouble from people outside – when we go into the city, they insult us, sometimes using bad words,” Wafa said.

The department for women’s affairs in the Herat provincial administration has been conducting awareness-raising campaigns, workshops and seminars to persuade people that female police officers are an important part of society, and is planning a series of short films on the subject.

The women’s department says it has received ten complaints in the last three months from woman whose families have stopped them joining the police.

Aside from traditional interpretations of Islamic law and Afghan custom, Nur Khan Nekzad, spokesman for Herat’s police force, traces the problem back to the Soviet-backed regime of the 1980s, when people believed government offices were dens of immorality.

In the modern Afghan police, he said, there were no cases of “moral corruption”.

Nekzad noted that prejudices around the issue was one the Taleban were keen to exploit.

“They don’t want the number of women in the police to increase, because the presence of female police officers will....contribute to curbing their activities,” he said.

The insurgents were well aware that male police were not allowed to search women, he added.

Sayed Abdul Wahed Asemi, an Islamic scholar who heads the provincial office in charge of organising the annual Hajj pilgrimage, said there were precedents for women serving in the police.

“In the history of Islam, there have been women who either fought the enemy in a jihad or helped and encouraged their husbands, fathers and brothers to fight better, from behind the scenes,” he said.

The cleric added the proviso that women must restrict their contacts with male colleagues.

“Women should not talk to male police in private, unless it’s related to their work. Their hejab [Islamic dress] must be in accordance with the precepts of Islam, and they must be accommodated separately from the men,” he said.

Opinions among Herat residents are divided on the issue.

Daud Shah, a father in Herat, insists that no right-thinking man would allow female family members to work away from home, as that would leave them susceptible to abuse.

In any case, he said, “How can one trust the police force of a government that’s sinking in financial and moral corruption from the top down, and police themselves are involved in criminality? Everyone can see it’s wrong for women to be working alongside men for the government, particularly in the army and police.”

Not all men, however, are against women joining the force.

“One of my aunts works for the police,” Yunus, a young man who works in a Herat sweetshop, said. “She gets a good salary and she’s happy with her job. She can attend to the housework as well as other women, and also do her government job very well. Her husband is happy, too.”

**Sharif Sayidi is an IWPR-trained reporter in Herat, Afghanistan.**

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