

Women Find a Place in Law Enforcement

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While their numbers are still few, women are once again joining the police force.

Nahid, 18, from Kushhal Kan in the western part of Kabul, leaned against the wall as she watched hundreds of young male recruits, march in formation in a graduation rehearsal at Afghanistan's only police academy.

Her decision to become a police officer had caused a family row, she said. Her uncle cut off all relations with her parents, who supported her decision to enter the academy.

But despite such challenges, women are once again joining the ranks of the police in Afghanistan.

Female police officers were common under the communist regimes that ruled the country from 1978 until 1992. Burhanuddin Rabbani's government dissolved the police and the military when it came to power in 1992.

From 1996 to 2001, under the Taleban regime, the police academy building remained vacant until it was remodelled and reopened at the end of 2001.

So far, four classes have graduated from the academy. Niaz Bibi, the head of the women's section of the education affairs department of the academy, said that only two women were among the 578 graduates earlier this month. A total of 50 women had graduated in the previous three classes.

Bibi blamed the lack of female recruits on the unstable security situation in the country as well as the lack of dormitory space for female candidates from other provinces.

"If the situation in the country was a little more secure, many more women would join the police," Bibi said.

But Gul Nar, a female teacher in Alfat high school in Kabul, doesn't think the country is ready for female police officers.

"The situation in our country is still not appropriate for women and girls to become police," Gul Nar said. "The minds of our people are not ready to accept this yet."

Despite this attitude, a recent recruitment drive in Kabul led by Bibi appears to have paid off. A total of 120 men and 60 women from Kabul signed up for classes at the academy this June. Bibi added that she believes she'll have no problems finding 150 cadets and recent graduates to conduct security checks on female voters during up upcoming presidential election.

Anyone in good health aged between the ages of 18 and 35 who has completed at minimum the 9th grade is eligible to join the force. According to Bibi, all 52 female cadets who've graduated from the academy were later employed as academy staff or got jobs at the ministry of interior or Kabul police headquarters

manning security checkpoints or joining the rapid reaction team.

The average salary countrywide for new male and female officers is 2400 afghanis per month (about 48 US dollars), and 3200 afghanis (about 64 dollars) for a higher rank, said Bibi. There is no salary difference for male and female police, she added, and positions at the academy are typically higher-paid.

Aziza Nazari, the deputy of the human-rights department of Afghanistan's ministry of interior, said that a total of 105 women are currently working as police officers in the country.

Currently, female police officers only deal with cases involving female suspects. Some also work as crime scene investigators, examining female murder victims.

Aziza explained that, just as female doctors are needed to treat female patients, female police officers are needed to interrogate and investigate female suspects.

"I am encouraging my 12-year-old daughter to become a police officer, because it's a sacred profession," said Habiba Sultani, the head of the interior ministry department responsible for temporary police holding cells for women. "It is important that women should be interrogated by a female police officer and men by a male police officer."

Jamila Barkezai, 38, is part of a team of two female and six male crime scene investigators with the ministry of interior. She first joined the Kabul police force in 1986, but her career was cut short when the department was disbanded in 1992.

She welcomed the opportunity to resume her work at the end of 2001, when the current government allowed women to resume their professions.

She said that she was first inspired to pursue a career in law enforcement after watching American films showing female police officers while growing up in her hometown of Kandahar.

But she said that such a career isn't for everyone.

"Lots of families don't want the female members of their family to go to any school, because lots of people in our society don't have education and they don't know about a (modern) woman's role in society," she said. "Even though none of my family members were police, they were interested when I joined the police academy."

The crime scene investigations department, founded in February, is made up of 62 men and 8 women according to department chief Nazar Muhammad Nikzad, who believes the presence of women in the police force is very important.

"We plan to employ women in all areas of the ministry of interior," Nikzad said.

Like the veteran Barkezai, Zahra, 24, a new recruit at the police academy, said she decided to become a police officer after seeing a foreign film. "In that [Italian] movie, a woman was a police [officer] and arrested a criminal," she said. Although she's from the central province of Bamian, Zahra said she's be

willing to serve anywhere in the country.

Despite continued resistance to the notion that women should receive any type of education, there's a sense of optimism that more women will soon be wearing police uniforms.

As a new recruit, Nahid, her blonde hair tied up in a bun, wears the same traditional police green uniform as the men, with a green peaked hat, her shirt tucked into her trousers and flat, black shoes. While the uniforms fit fine, the police-issue shoes are frequently too big for women. So they often wear their own shoes or go barefoot.

Despite reservations about whether women should be police officers, in a country where there is still resistance to women getting any kind of education, there's optimism that acceptance of women in uniform will come and their numbers will rise.

Shahnaaz, 18, an academy recruit at the Tahiyeye Maskan area of Kabul, said that people in her neighbourhood give her strange looks when she gets off the bus every day dressed in her uniform, and walks the five minutes it takes to get to her home.

But she said she's able to ignore the stares and believes she's serving as an inspiration to some as well.

"When I wear the police uniform, lots of my neighbours are encouraged to join police," she said.

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