Rachel Reid and Rama Mirzada

SACKED, DEMOTED, BUT STILL NEEDED: Women in Afghanistan's Civil Service

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Women's role in Afghanistan's civil service has rapidly diminished under the Emirate, through mass dismissals, pay cuts and demotions. At first, thousands of female employees deemed not "essential" by the new rulers were told to stay home, where they received significantly reduced salaries. Tens of thousands remain employed, mostly as primary school teachers and, in much smaller numbers, as health and social care workers, security checkers and in other roles. Onerous demands that women travel with a mahram and avoid mixing with men have also made employment untenable for many. In 2020, women made up a quarter of government employees; by 2026, that had fallen to 16 per cent, with more job losses likely. Male employment, meanwhile, has grown by nearly a third.

For this report, Rachel Reid and Rama Mirzada, with additional interviews by Amin Shabgard, spoke to six women who had been sacked and six who are still employed, drawing also on extensive desk review of data on the public sector. Their accounts showed the profound consequences of these restrictions on individual women and their families. Those who lost their jobs face deep financial hardship as households struggle with the cost-of-living crisis. They also describe the severe mental health impacts of losing their livelihoods and sense of purpose, with little hope of finding another job, as women are excluded from many professions and personal connections are often needed to secure employment. Those who have kept their jobs express a great deal of anxiety about job security. Some have been forced to accept significant demotions, such as an experienced police officer who once commanded a team of female police and is now reduced to conducting body checks of women entering a ministry. Almost all have seen their salaries fall, alongside new restrictions on dress, travel and office life.

The lives of most of our interviewees had been deeply shaken. For Afghan society, the long-term consequences are greater still. An existing generation of experienced female civil servants is being marginalised, while the failure to train a new generation of women is hard to quantify.

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INTRODUCTION

Within ten days of seizing power, an Emirate spokesman announced that women in the public sector must stay at home, unless their work was deemed 'essential'. The measure was presented as temporary, while workplaces were made more 'suitable' for women, they said. Instead, it was followed by further restrictions, pay cuts, demotions and dismissals, steadily eroding women's place in the civil service.

In May 2024, the salaries of women forced to stay at home were cut to 5,000 afghani (USD 70) a month (see AAN's report). Another blow came in January 2026, when reports emerged that women working from home would be dismissed (Hasht-e Subh, Amu). For those women, many of whose families depend on their income, re-employment prospects are dire, given the wider restrictions on female employment. These shocks for women came amid wider cuts and turbulence in the civil service, including repeated delays in the payment of salaries (Amu), pay cuts and a 2025 order from the IEA's Supreme Leader to reduce the government payroll by 20 per cent (Amu).

Although there has been a small drop in male employment since the order to downsize, the overall level has increased since 2020, while the number and proportion of women in government have fallen substantially. Women used to make up around a quarter of government employees, but by the first quarter of 2026, that figure had dropped to 16 per cent.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), however, cannot function without women. Almost all ministries and departments still require some female employees. Tens of thousands of women therefore still work in essential public-sector roles, mostly as primary school teachers, with small numbers in the health sector and pockets in other ministries and departments. Some of those retained, however, were demoted to the lowest rungs, such as security guards checking other women or cleaners working in female-only buildings.

This report draws on 12 interviews with women: six who lost their jobs and six who are still working, as well as extensive desk research, including publicly available

data on civil service employment trends.[1] Initially, AAN reached out to almost 30 women who had been sacked, but all but six were too afraid to speak. The twelve interviewees were from the central, western, northern and eastern regions.

The report starts by laying out the big picture of backsliding in women's employment in the public sector, with an overview of civil service data, which still provides detailed, disaggregated information. This is followed by case studies of six women who lost their jobs. To understand what they are going through, we asked about their work, pay and how they received information from their employer. We also asked about their coping strategies and plans for the future. This is followed by interviews with six women who were still employed, who told us about pay cuts, demotions, changes to their working environments, and uncertainty about how long they might be able to keep their jobs. The report closes with thoughts about what all of this means for the future of women's employment in Afghanistan and the social ramifications of their marginalisation.

[1] This report uses data published by the General Statistics and Information Authority (GSIA), formerly National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA). The GSIA uses the Afghan hijri shamsi (Islamic solar) calendar, rather than the Gregorian calendar, which starts in the Gregorian equivalent of mid-March.

THE RESTRICTIONS: SEGREGATE OR STAY HOME

The erosion of women's place in the civil service stems from the Emirate's relentless drive to segregate men and women in the public sphere. This has led to a succession of direct and indirect restrictions on where and how women can work, including 'stay home' orders, bans on the employment of women in certain sectors or offices and, later, pay cuts and dismissals. There have also been demotions, with women suddenly finding that their years of experience, training and qualifications are worthless and having to accept menial jobs to survive. In addition, wider restrictions on women, particularly their ability to travel, have made it more difficult for them to work.

In the first few days of the Emirate, however, there was still hope for working women. Two days after the IEA took control of the government on 15 August 2021, Islamic Emirate spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said women would work "shoulder-to-shoulder" with men in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in "educational, health and other areas" (Al Jazeera). But on 24 August 2021, he declared that women should – temporarily – not go to work until the IEA could ensure they would not be "treated in a disrespectful way" by the Taliban's own soldiers (CNN):

> *We are happy for them to enter the buildings, but we want to make sure they do not face any worries. … Therefore, we have asked them to take time off from work until the situation gets back to a normal order and women related procedures are in place, then they can return to their jobs once it's announced.*

In September 2021, when the IEA announced the formation of its interim government, it appointed no women to ministerial or advisory roles (CNN). The Ministry of Women's Affairs was abolished and former female employees were barred from entering the building, which was handed over to the Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Reuters).

A few days later, a senior Taliban figure, Waheedullah Hashimi, stated bluntly that "men and women cannot work together. That is clear. They are not allowed to come to our offices and work in our ministries" (Reuters). At the time, Hashimi suggested that women would still be needed in some sectors, such as health care and education. However, the insistence on gender segregation became a de facto ban on

women in some ministries and government offices. For example, in September 2021, Kabul's new mayor, Hamdullah Namony, said female employees should stay home until further notice, unless they could not be replaced by a man (The Guardian). In the same month, the Ministry of Finance made plans to dismiss women and replace them with their male relatives, according to sources in the ministry (Kabul Tribune). In August 2022, female flight attendants at the state-owned Ariana Airlines were instructed not to report for work (BBC).

Female health studies students walk along a street in Kabul. Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 3 December 2024

In May 2024, an order was issued to cut the salaries of female staff to 5,000 afghanis, which AAN described at the time as a "bombshell." A July 2024 clarification said that only women who had been instructed to stay home would face the pay cut (ToloNews). The decree, nevertheless, affected women in almost all sectors and all departments in the capital and provinces, with one report putting the number of stay-at-home employees at 6,354 women (Pajhwok).

A WIDER GOVERNMENT DOWNSIZING?

When the Emirate seized power for the second time, it inherited a civil service that was far larger and more professionalised than the one it had run in the 1990s during its first reign. Alongside the exodus of senior civil servants who feared retribution, the IEA quickly dismissed thousands of senior employees, such as judges, generals and attorneys and set about offering jobs to many of its own supporters.[2] The security forces were a particular area of growth: capped at 344,000 at the end of the Republic, they are estimated to have grown to between 380,000 and 450,000 under the Emirate, with military expenditure taking up close to half of government spending according to one UN estimate.[3]

This level of expenditure on the security forces and civil service was not sustainable, however, given the shuddering economy. By the end of 2024, the economy was still volatile, with weak growth that could not reverse the contraction that followed the Emirate's takeover and subsequent economic isolation (World Bank Update 2024). In March 2025, the Emirate's Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, ordered a government downsizing, saying that "the authorities know what is in the nation's best interest" and that the changes would "improve efficiency, reduce institutional inflation, and curb bureaucracy" (ToloNews).

The downsizing was said to entail the dismissal of 20 per cent of civilian and military employees (Zan Times). This figure appears to be an overall goal, with different institutional-level goals for layoffs announced or leaked, or happening in waves of

[2] On the dismissal of judges, see Hamed Pakteen, Practising Law Under the Emirate: Afghan defence lawyers fight for space in a transformed justice system, AAN, 2 May 2026. On wider patterns of removals and recruitment in the civil service, including the military, see Waheedullah Hamoon, Bohdan Krawchenko and Tamara Krawchenko, Governance and Public Administration Under the Taliban, Asian Affairs, 56(1), 87–111. See also Survival and Stagnation: The State of the Afghan economy, AAN, 7 November 2023 and The Taliban Have Staffing Issues. They Are Looking for Help in Pakistan, 13 January 2022, New York Times.

[3] For estimates of Republic-era Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, see the quarterly report of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) to Congress, 30 January 2021, p60 (available on Reliefweb). For current force strength estimates, see the 16th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, December 2025, United Nations Security Council Committee Established pursuant to Resolution 1988, 8 December 2025, para 40. Expenditure on the security sector made up 45% of total government spending in fiscal year 2026, according to the World Bank's Afghanistan Economic Monitor, August 2026, p7.

dismissals. For example, Radio Television of Afghanistan sacked around 300 staff within days of the proposed downsizing according to a report by Rukhshana, a drop of around one fifth of the workforce (reflected in government data in the first quarter of 2026). The Ministry of Economy announced plans to cut 13 per cent of its employees (Amu), while the Ministry of Public Health told Amu TV that it planned to shed 6,400 employees, a significant proportion judged against the current staff level of around 24,000.

In addition, widespread pay cuts were introduced for all employees, male and female, based on grade.[4] While salary caps were enforced across all grades, the reductions were proportionally deepest for those in the lowest grades, particularly combined with the rising costs of living at the household level (Zan). The cuts follow months and, in some cases, years of delays in salary payments and cuts to other benefits, most notably pensions, as AAN reported in 2024.[5]

[4] According to Hasht-e Subh the April 2025 decree, No. (5377/717), ordered a reduction of civil service salaries across all ranks. Grade One was set at 21,700 afghanis (334 USD), Grade Two at 14,600 afghanis (224 USD), Grade Three at 12,000 afghanis (185 USD), Grade Four at 9,500 afghanis (147 USD), Grade Five at 7,800 afghanis (121 USD), Grade Six at 6,420 afghanis (100 USD), Grade Seven at 5,540 afghanis (86 USD) and Grade Eight at 4,960 afghanis (77 USD). The salary for senior executive grades is now 37,800 afghanis (586 USD), previously 48,800 afghanis (758 USD) and for higher executive grades is 29,700 afghanis (461 USD), previously 39,650 afghanis (616 USD).

[5] Pension payments were restarted in 2025, for at least some retirees, according to Hasht-e Subh.

THE REALITY: AN INCREASE IN JOBS FOR MEN AS WOMEN'S JOBS ARE SLASHED

It is women who have borne the brunt of the layoffs, based on an analysis of data from the General Statistics and Information Authority (GSIA).[6] In 2020, women in high-paid roles in the public sector ranged from judges, generals and professors to doctors, while most worked for the Ministry of Education as teachers. Together, they made up around one quarter of public sector employees. By the first quarter of 2026, their number had fallen by 10 percentage points.[7]

Comparing 2020 employment levels with the first quarter of 2026, male employment in the civil service increased by 32 per cent, while the number of women on the payroll fell by 26 per cent. In 2020, there were 106,869 female and 308,033 male civil servants. By the first quarter of 2026, the number of women had fallen to 78,639, while the number of men had risen to 407,016.[8] The decline in female employees precedes the Emirate's 'downsizing' initiative, but they are disproportionately affected by it, in terms of an acceleration of their dismissals since 2025. This is perhaps unsurprising given the free rein that ministries have been given to remove female employees who are not "essential."

Civil Service Employment by Sex: 2020 vs Q1 2026

	2020	Q1 2026	Change
Female employees	106,869	78,639	−26%
Male employees	308,033	407,016	+32%
Women's share	26%	16%	−10 percentage points
Total male and female employees	414,902	485,655	+17%

Source: NSIA Statistical Yearbook 2020 and GSIA Quarterly Statistical Indicators, Q1 2026

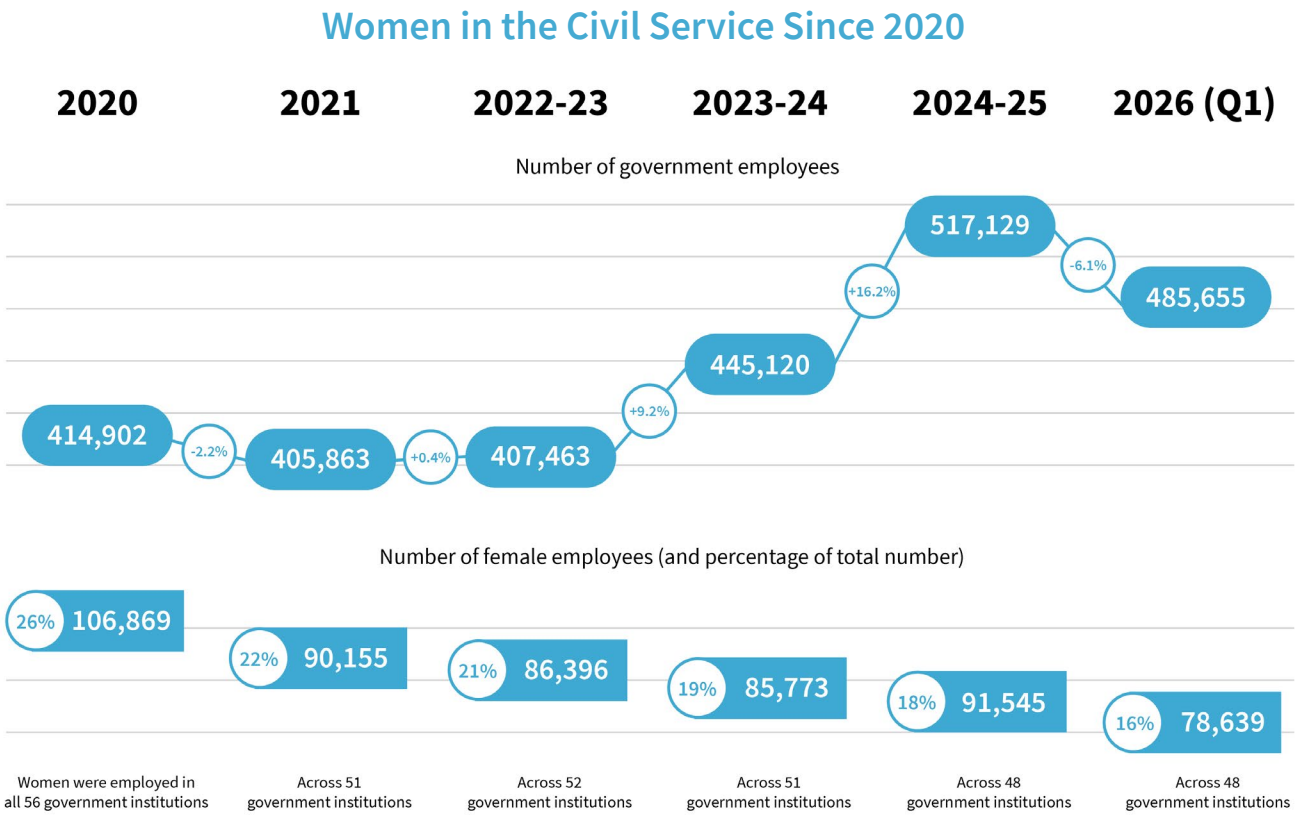
[6] See footnote 1.

[7] See the NSIA 2020 Statistical Yearbook and GSIA Quarterly Statistical Indicators, First Quarter 2026.

[8] According to GSIA's Quarterly Statistical Indicators, First Quarter 2026, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour had not reported its female employment figures. The total of 78,639 female civil servants may therefore be revised in subsequent reporting.

When it comes to downsizing for male employees, the stated ambition of 20 per cent job cuts has barely transpired – so far. Between the first quarter of 2025 and the first quarter of 2026, male employment fell by 4.4 per cent, while female employment fell by 14.1 per cent.

It is useful to look at where, institutionally, the growth and contraction have occurred. For men, employment expanded in the security sector, a new Office of the Supreme Leader, a new General Directorate of Supervision and Overseeing the Execution of the Decrees and Orders of the Supreme Leader, as well as a staff for the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which has an eight times larger workforce than the Ministry of Women's Affairs whose offices it took over.[9]



Source: NSIA Statistical Yearbooks 2020–2025 and GSIA Quarterly Statistical Indicators, Q1 2026

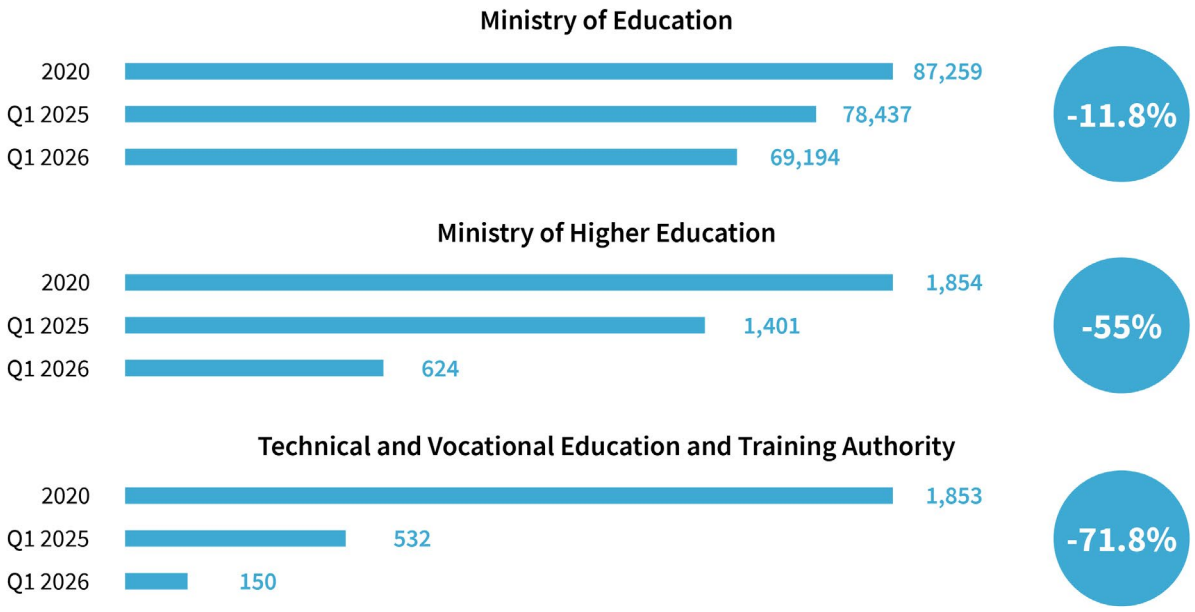
Female employees have been laid off across much of the civil service. The largest absolute drop, unsurprisingly, was at the largest employer, the Ministry of Education, where female employment fell by more than 18,000 women between 2020 and

[9] See AAN's 2023 report, What Do The Taleban Spend Afghanistan's Money On? Government expenditure under the Islamic Emirate. See also Waheedullah Hamoon, Bohdan Krawchenko and Tamara Krawchenko, Governance and Public Administration Under the Taliban, Asian Affairs, 2025, 56(1), p99.

the start of 2026 (see the table below). However, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) saw a larger percentage drop, with more than half the female workforce removed since 2020 (more than 1,200 positions, see table). Women, of course, have been almost entirely banned from higher education. The ministry reportedly asked universities to submit lists of staff and lecturers for dismissal, citing a March 2025 order from the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to reduce staff by 14 per cent (Hasht-e Subh). The women's media outlet Zan Times reported that Kabul University alone eliminated 60 women's positions and the few remaining female staff were reportedly told they were likely to be replaced by men.

Ministries With Notable Cuts in Female Civil Servants

(2020, Q1 2025 and Q1 2026)



Source: NSIA Annual Report 2020 and GSIA Quarterly Report Q1 2026

The Technical Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVET) lost more than 70 per cent of its female staff, with numbers falling from 532 in the first quarter of 2025 to 150 a year later. The real drop, however, took place in the preceding years, with 1,853 female employees at TVET in 2020 (2020 Statistical Yearbook, p31).[10]

[10] GSIA's Q1 2026 report notes that the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs did not provide full data on its female employees for that period. The data that is provided suggests that female employees fell from 2,269 to just 20 (from a pre-IEA level of 3,949 in 2020). This appears to be a 99 per cent decline, but it will likely be subject to revision in future reporting. It is likely to involve a drop, however, given the wider trends, as well as data that the ministry did report of significant drops in the numbers of female children in government-run kindergartens and nurseries, likely resulting from closures (p33).

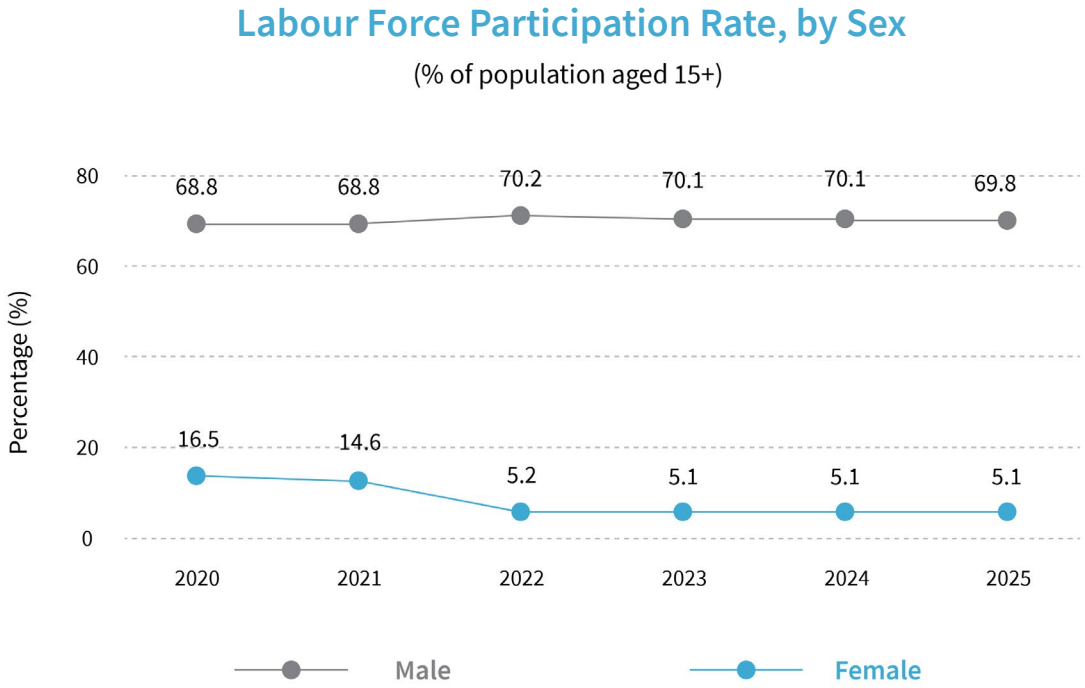
It is worth noting that there are anomalies in certain ministries, with female employees increasing slightly, which may have sector-specific explanations. For example, there was a small increase in female employees in national banks in the first quarter of 2026 (to 218, having been 204 a year earlier). However, the number was higher in 2020 (350 female employees), so it may be that too many women left their positions or were removed soon after the change of government, leaving gaps in essential roles for women (see this 2026 Hasht-e Subh report on female bank employees). If the slight bounce in employment was about filling gaps, it was at the low-skilled end in this instance, since in 2020 there were more than 20 women in higher-skilled jobs, Grades 1-3, with none at those levels in 2025, according to the statistical yearbooks.

The most marked increase is in the Ministry of Public Health, though this may reflect complex developments in healthcare provision. MoPH employed 3,080 women in 2020, which rose to 5,391, or 75 per cent, by the first quarter of 2026, according to GSIA. However, this divergence reflects the fact that a substantial part of Afghanistan's healthcare provision has been delivered by NGOs since the Republic era, including significant numbers of women. These NGOs negotiated an exemption to the Ministry of Economy's December 2022 ban on Afghan women working for NGOs (BBC). Those NGOs still effectively employ their female staff, but they have to register them with the Ministry of Public Health: this seems to be what accounts for the apparent jump in the ministry's female employees. So while it may look like an increase, the overall number of female healthcare workers has fallen, with some regions, such as southern Afghanistan, facing dire shortages of female doctors and midwives (see AAN's 2025 report, Rural Women's Access to Health in Afghanistan: "Most of the time, we just don't go").

Despite these cuts, there are still more than 78,000 women working in the civil service, as of March 2026 (GSIA). Like it or not, the Emirate cannot run government services for the whole population without women. Though, as the United Nations keeps reminding them, they seem intent on reducing the female workforce to a critically low level (UNICEF).

WIDER LABOUR MARKET TRENDS FOR WOMEN

For women who lose their jobs in the civil service, alternative sources of employment are very limited, given the labour market trends. Women were banned from NGO workplaces in December 2022 (Al Jazeera), as well as from UN offices (Associated Press), both major employers of women alongside the civil service. A 2023 study by UN Women found that over 70 per cent of female NGO employees in 127 national organisations surveyed were the primary breadwinners for their families and although 73 per cent of organisations reported that they are still paying the salaries of women staff, 95 per cent reported that if the ban remains in place, the affected women would not be able to find another job (p6). The net effect on female labour force participation is clear: by 2025, only 5.1 per cent of females aged 15 and above were economically active, compared with 69.8 per cent of men (World Bank). Under the Republic, in 2020, the female participation rate was 16.5 per cent. As the table below shows, female workforce participation has plummeted.



Source: World Bank, using ILO estimates.

For our interviewees who lost their public sector jobs and are acutely aware of how hostile the current labour market is to women, the ramifications are all the more devastating.

THE INTERVIEWEES: WOMEN WHO WERE SACKED

Beneath the discussion of policies to shed 'non-essential' female employees lie individual stories of women whose careers, financial security and mental well-being have been turned upside down. Our interviewees include a senior administrator with more than two decades of experience; a schoolteacher supporting a family of eight; a senior journalist who cannot find another job, a university lecturer forced to move to a cheaper house to make ends meet; a woman who was sacked from a kindergarten and who now finds it hard to feed her family and a former employee of MoWA who reluctantly turned to marriage as her career options were closed. They describe being pushed into financial hardship and forced to make difficult decisions to live with less, including lost opportunities for their children's education. They also speak of depression, a loss of purpose and self-worth and the stresses that flow from feeling confined to their homes. We have changed their names and omitted some personal details to protect their identities.

Five of our six interviewees were fired during the government downsizing in the spring of 2025; one was fired before the process began. Three of our interviewees were still working in an office when they were sacked, while three others had been told to work from home on a reduced salary. None of our interviewees received an official letter from their employers explaining the reason for their dismissals. Instead, they were informed either by a published list showing their names or by a phone call.

Zahra had been a university lecturer for almost a decade. Under the Republic, her salary had been 31,000 afghani (USD 477). Under the Emirate, it was reduced incrementally, then plunged to 5,000 afghanis in the summer of 2023. Until, in April 2025, she was fired. "When my salary was cut to 5,000 Afghanis, I still remained hopeful, but after I was dismissed, I became profoundly depressed."

She discovered she'd been laid off when the university's human resources (HR) department posted a list, "and my name was on it." At her university, almost all the female professors were let go, except "around 11, because if they were dismissed, that would mean their entire faculties would have to be shut down."

During the period when she had been on reduced pay, she did not go to the university and was not given alternative work. After her dismissal, there was no redundancy package. "The HR department said I could mark my attendance until May 2025. They only paid a final salary of 2,500 afghanis, because we were dismissed in the middle of the month."

Meena, from the northern region, worked for the Ministry of Agriculture for more than two decades. She escaped the first round of layoffs, which hit two of her colleagues in the spring of 2025:

> *They told me at the time that I wasn't on the dismissal list. But then, [a month later], I was told that I had been dismissed. I told them that layoffs should only happen annually, not monthly, but no one really responded. I really don't know what happened.*

Before her dismissal, she'd also been subject to the pay cut. She and her colleagues were told to report to the office once a month:

> *We said that taking our salary wasn't halal [permissible] for us, if we did nothing and only went to the office once a month. After that, we were allowed to visit the office once a week. For two consecutive years, I did that and received 5,000 afghanis per month.*

She shared a story about colleagues who overcame the pay cut:

> *One of my colleagues whose salary had been cut, went to Kabul and managed to get her salary changed back to what she was getting under the Republic. We protested and urged the department to increase our salaries as well, but we were told that she had brought a written order from the ministry in Kabul. We explained how bad our financial situation was and urged them to restore our salaries, but our request was rejected. But now two women are being paid their original salaries. They told us they had a connection in the government.*

Shabana worked for the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the central region. Closing the Ministry of Women's Affairs in September 2021 and replacing it with the Ministry of Vice and Virtue was one of the first institutional reforms by the Emirate (BBC). For Shabana, this meant staying home:

> *I wasn't working and I wasn't going to the office. Then when the order to reduce the female employees' salaries came, my salary was reduced to 5,000 Afs, which I received for eight months.*

Her salary was eventually stopped, but she was not formally told she would be dismissed: "I asked for the official letter of my dismissal, but I was never given proof of it." Her attempts to seek clarity got her nowhere: "I went to the [regional] zone's office, but they said they knew nothing. I found the ministry's phone number to ask for information, but no one responded to my calls and messages." She kept returning to the provincial office to find out what was going on, but said people there just made excuses:

> *They promised I would be eligible to be hired for one of the vacant positions. There were vacancies, but they reserved these jobs for their friends and family. They went to women who had never been to school, who had no education, yet they were hired into those positions. … At first, they promised to hire me at the technical and vocational institute, but later I heard they'd already hired their family members.*

She is bitter about her experience: "To put it simply, I was played."

Wazhma, a primary school teacher from the central region, also only realised she'd been fired when her salary stopped being paid. A notification about teachers being laid off had been posted on Facebook in late 2025:

> *Since I don't use Facebook, I didn't know about it until the students' exams were finished and their results were announced. My colleagues knew I was dismissed, but they didn't tell me because they were feeling sorry for me. They knew what my financial situation was like.*

For Wazhma, this was not just a financial blow, but a professional one, since she'd been teaching for two decades: "Everyone – teachers and school officials – were happy with my work."

Rabia worked in the northern region for almost a decade, employed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). She was sacked in 2025:

> *I worked in the kindergarten until I was laid off around eight months ago. We had a representative in the kindergarten, who brought the list of the employees who were dismissed; that's how I was informed of my dismissal.*

Under the Republic, she had worked in social protection services at MoLSA, which provided assistance to vulnerable groups, including widows and orphans. Under the Emirate, her duties were changed: "The government did not want women

to work in the main department, so they changed women's responsibilities: some worked from home and some, like me, worked in a kindergarten."

Sana had been a senior journalist at a state-owned media outlet in the western region. Soon after the Taliban took power, she was told to work from home: "I was still writing articles, analysis and preparing reports for publication." She was fortunate: her salary was not cut to 5,000 afghanis, but it was cut by a quarter. "I was paid, but I was not going to the office because we were not allowed, except when we had to mark our attendance."

The news of her dismissal, in the spring of 2025, came as a surprise:

> *I was told by my office that this dismissal is nationwide and that women working for the government would be dismissed across the country. They said that because the environment is male-dominated, women shouldn't be working.*

Plunged into financial crisis

These job losses should be seen in the context of turbulent economic times for Afghan families, with inflation, particularly of food and fuel, pushing more and more households into poverty (see two reports on household poverty by AAN from July and August 2026). They show how families facing prolonged economic crisis tend to progressively exhaust their savings, selling assets and borrowing before resorting to increasingly harmful survival strategies, including child labour, migration and early marriage.

One of our interviewees was the sole breadwinner in her family, but all other interviewees also made important contributions to their family budgets. We conducted our interviews several months after they had been fired. The women told us about the devastating impact their dismissal had on their families' finances and their lives. Many of them no longer have any income to cover their daily needs, pay for medical treatment or shop for their children.

The former university lecturer, Zahra, said that she and her husband were forced to make difficult changes:

> *When I was first dismissed, it was challenging because my husband's [government] salary was also reduced, so it was hard to manage everything. We had to move to a cheaper house and borrowed some money from friends just to cover our needs.*

Midwives and nurses check the documents of pregnant women at a private hospital in Kabul. Women are now barred from most training as health workers. Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 10 December 2024

She has to ration the family's diet: "We're not eating meat unless we have guests; instead, we just eat vegetables."

Her salary had been heavily reduced, but it was still an important contribution: "Before, I was spending my salary to buy books, notebooks, food and clothes for my children. … But now I've lost that too."

The loss of women's work has ramifications for their daughters: "I was grateful to receive even those 5,000 afghanis," said Meena, a former employee of the Ministry of Agriculture, "which I used to pay for my children's training courses and their needs." One of her daughters is 13 years old: "I used to pay for her to attend training courses. After my dismissal, I told her I could no longer afford to pay her fees."

She now relies on her husband for essential expenses, but he doesn't earn much as a shopkeeper: "Even though he is my husband, I hesitate to ask him for money to buy my medicine all the time." Both he and her children are sympathetic: "They say that I worked hard for years so there is nothing to worry about."

The end of her career forced Shabana, a former employee of MoWA and our youngest interviewee, to make a difficult choice: "I got married because my education and work prospects went nowhere. I was doing nothing and was not ready for marriage; I had to marry because I had no other choice." Previously, all her efforts had been on her professional life: "I had tried hard to get that job and dreamt of achieving more success. I studied for years and then prepared myself for this role by doing internships for many months."

When she spoke to us, she had just given up something of huge symbolic value:

> *Two weeks ago, I sold my gold ring, which I bought after receiving my first government salary. It was very precious to me, but I needed money and had no option but to sell it.*

Wazhma, the schoolteacher, was her family's sole breadwinner. For her, the impact was enormous:

> *When I had a salary, I could pay for all our needs. Now, I have no access to financial resources. If my children become ill, I can't cover their treatment costs. I have countless needs to fulfil.*

She says she feels helpless. "I no longer have any income and I've got no money left for next month." What troubles her most is her responsibility to her children: "I haven't been able to fulfil even 50 per cent of my children's desires so far in my life."

For journalist Sana, too, "The greatest pain is that when my children ask for something, I can't buy it for them."

This was most acute when one child needed medical treatment:

> *When my son fell ill, I took him to the doctor. The doctor hospitalised him, but I had no money to pay for his treatment. I had to call my brother and ask for assistance. I've experienced many similar situations since losing my job.*

She still has her husband's income to rely on, but it is limited: "we can only manage our daily needs," she says. "I can't take my children shopping; I can't take them to the amusement park. Before, I could take my children to restaurants, but now I can't."

Rabia, a former MoLSA employee in the north, also looks back on a "happier life when I had a salary," recalling simple pleasures: "I could go to our friends' gatherings, enjoy some leisure time, afford better food and buy better clothes." That is all a thing of the past:

> *Over the past months, since losing my job, I haven't been able to accept my friends' invitations or buy nice food. We did have some savings, but we had to spend them on my mother's treatment.*

Meena, with over a 20-year work career, described the impact of her financial hardship:

> *Before I was fired, my heart was full. If I needed money, I could borrow from a friend and pay it back when I received my salary. But now I don't borrow even 100 afghanis because I know there's no way to repay it.*

She felt resentment not only for the loss of her income but also for the loss of her pension:

> *Now I worry a lot. My children say that God is kind and that if they get jobs, they won't leave me without support. I had hoped that at least I could get a pension and not be left without future security. I worked for such a long time, but now I won't even get my pension.*

The psychological toll: a loss of hope and self-worth

All the women talked of the psychological impact of losing their jobs, including depression, purposelessness and a lack of hope. Many recognised the wider suffering of women, like Zahra, who said that "mental health issues increased among all female university lecturers," including herself:

> *It affected me mentally and left me feeling depressed. My colleagues and I were working on scientific research articles, but after being dismissed, we could no longer continue with that project.*

Wazhma, the schoolteacher, is the sole breadwinner for her family and the mother of six children. She says her dismissal had a particularly heavy impact on her eldest daughter:

> *The oldest one got depressed after university was closed to her: we had to get medical treatment for her. After that, I sent her to study midwifery. She has her educational certificates, but she's still unemployed, because there aren't any job opportunities.*

As the sole provider, "I am the only one responsible for the family," she says, but she has to keep her stress to herself:

> *I worry deeply, but I don't say anything or show it to my children because I fear they'll get ill again. My daughter only got well after two years of treatment. I'm afraid that if I show how sad I am, she'll get ill again. It's really difficult.*

Rabia experienced severe health issues after being fired from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs: "I was completely unable to walk; my feet just didn't feel anything. Losing my job and dealing with personal issues made my life very hard." Her struggles are partly due to being trapped at home:

> *It's not easy living with my mother, even though I'm married, to be unemployed after working for so long, or to stay at home when I'm capable of working. Previously, I at least had a job to keep me busy. Now, life is really hard. I'm depressed. It's hard even to speak to you.*

For Sana, the sudden end to a 16-year career was a blow to her sense of self:

> *The worst effects are isolation, depression and loss of confidence or self-worth. Sometimes, I feel like I'm a totally useless person who is of no benefit to my family, children, or society.*

Meena said that the dismissal, after such a long time in government, "shocked me and led to an illness that caused pain all over my body." She cannot afford to travel to Kabul for treatment, so she has to go to a small local hospital.

Many of the women struggle with feeling trapped at home; "I used to have a strong sense of self-reliance and independence, but now I feel as though I am in prison," said Zahra, the university lecturer.

> *Overwhelmed by this sadness, I find myself arguing with family members, making excuses, or provoking fights. Whenever someone in the family says something, I feel they're indirectly criticising me and I feel under pressure.*

Shabana was also feeling trapped at home:

> *My friends have been getting in touch with me to hang out, go outside and eat at restaurants, but I can't accept their invitations because I have no money. I am suffering from depression and prefer to stay at home rather than go out.*

She tried to keep busy for a while, but found it difficult:

> *For a year, I studied English after losing my job. There wasn't a day without a problem caused by the Taliban at our training centre. It's been nearly a year*

> *since I've had nothing to do, just staying at home and watching TV. I know I'm suffering from depression, but I can't afford to see a therapist.*

This echoes the findings from a quantitative study from December 2023 by ODI/DROPS, which identified unemployment and growing poverty as major contributors to women's deteriorating mental health. It was based on a survey of 2,112 women across 17 Afghan provinces and focus-group discussions with 159 women in 11 provinces. Participants linked restrictions on employment to financial dependence, anxiety, depression and a sense of having no future prospects (pages 7-12). The more recent UN Women's nationwide monitoring survey conducted in 2026 revealed that nearly six in ten women (58.9 per cent) report worsening mental health over the past year, including 22.6 per cent who say it has become significantly worse (UN Women).

The struggle to get hired

For those dismissed from the civil service, alternative career options seem very limited for most of our interviewees. Most of the women tried and failed to get back into employment, either by applying for government vacancies or trying to get jobs with NGOs. Only two women we interviewed found work, but those jobs lasted only for a few months. Zahra was one of them:

> *I applied to lots of NGOs and was lucky enough to get a job as a trainer at one of them for six months. But it's been over a month since I became unemployed again. Finding a job is really hard. Nowadays, you can't get one unless you've got a reference, even if you have a strong career background.*

Shabana was also, briefly, employed elsewhere. But it was during the period when she was still, erratically, getting her reduced government salary:

> *We weren't getting our salaries regularly. We might only get paid after a gap of three or more months. During these long gaps, we never knew if we would be paid again. Amid this uncertainty, I applied to an NGO and was accepted – I scored really high marks. But the Department of Economy got me fired after three months, when they saw my name among the NGO's employees. They said I was still getting the 5,000 afghanis salary from the government and then four months later, I was also dismissed from my government position.*

Now unemployed, "I apply for jobs every day," she says, "but I have yet to succeed."

Then Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, Adela Raz arrives with her daughter for a high-level UN meeting on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Women are no longer permitted to hold senior government positions under the Emirate. Photo: Manuel Elías/UN Photo, 20 November 2019

Wazhma made an appeal to the Ministry of Education to be re-hired but to no avail, even with the help of a connection:

> *I went to meet the governor with my brother and the head of the ulema council. The governor sent a letter to the education department. The people in the education department said there are about 30 vacancies and that they would like to do something for me, but only if they are allowed to.*

Others echoed this refrain – the vacancies are there, but they are closed to them. "I applied for many positions, but I was not accepted," said Sana, the journalist.

> *Women are not allowed to work in the media; if they do, their numbers are very small. Now, the number of women looking for work has increased, making it even harder to find employment. Another problem is that everyone, everywhere, tries to hire their own relatives and friends first.*

Patronage and family connections had already become an issue within the post-2021 civil service, as had the Emirate's tendency to offer jobs to its own supporters,

including reports of favouring ethnic Pashtuns.[11] The Republic had been notorious for similar nepotistic tendencies, though it made some efforts to reform the civil service in later years.[12] The Emirate's reward system may have gone too far, at least when it came to newly appointed civil servants giving jobs to relatives: in March 2023 the Supreme Leader issued a decree ordering officials to sack their sons and other family members (BBC).

The theme of connections nevertheless came up often. Rabia said this was true even for jobs at international organisations:

> *Some organisations, including UNICEF, announced vacancies, but I had no connections to get those positions. I sometimes contact my former colleagues, but they say there are no vacancies. The organisation where I used to work says it has no funding and that all its former employees are unemployed.*

There was a similar story from Meena: "I haven't even looked for another job because everyone needs a reference to be considered. When you don't know anyone, no office will hire you." She did enquire with a former colleague: "but he said that the authorities hire their own relatives and friends. He also said that the order was sent from the centre not to hire any women."

[11]See for example, the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, from June 2025, p 6.

[12] Reforms included overhauling the recruitment process with greater transparency and merit-based appointments, as well as new standards and training initiatives, all overseen by the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission. See for example, Cutting Into Afghan Patronage: A Struggle to Make Government Younger, New York Times, 9 January 2018.

THE LUCKIER ONES: KEEPING JOBS, BUT LOSING SALARY, RANK OR SECURITY

The female civil servants we interviewed who were still in work had a range of experiences. Overall, their situation was less bleak than those who'd been laid off, but for some it was still fraught with uncertainty. One had to accept a massive demotion in order to stay in work; most faced pay cuts and new obstacles in their jobs, including longer, harder commutes, sometimes with the added expense of a *mahram* (male guardian while travelling). The most positive story came from one woman who preferred working in a segregated office, while another reported little change in her working life.

It was Roya who experienced the most dramatic change: she'd been a senior police sergeant commanding 12 female police officers. She was reduced to taking work as a security checker. "After the fall, when the Republic collapsed," says Roya, "I stayed home. The majority of the women who had been working as police officers had to stay at home." Soon, some women were instructed to return to duty, mostly to provide female body checks at ministry gates and checkpoints. But female employment in the security services is charged by the fear that many felt, both male and female, that there would be retribution from the Taliban:

> *In the beginning, no one would come forward because they were afraid, but still, those who had previously served in search departments—whether at Kabul's gates or in ministries—were called back again. They were told that their security would be ensured and that the Emirate needed them.*

She said it tended to be the more mature women who went back: "Their only duty is to search – some are in the ministries, such as the Ministry of Interior. Sometimes they go with male police officers on searches and arrests." Roya was wary of such work, but her family needed the money:

> *Despite being afraid, I had to take this risk and go back, in order to support my children. I reached out to an acquaintance for an introduction. After reviewing my documents and having a short interview, I was hired.*

She was, however, working at a significantly demoted level:

> *Previously, I worked as a sergeant and received a salary of 14,000 afghanis (around 210 USD). In addition to the basic salary, we received a food and travel allowance, which altogether came to 18,000 to 20,000 afghanis (270-300 USD). But now, because I'm just serving as an ordinary security checker, my salary is 9,000 afghanis (130 USD).*

Women in these jobs have to observe lots of restrictions:

> *First, full hijab [dress code] must be observed. Second, they cannot go anywhere except from the designated place for women; they can only sit in that one place, they cannot patrol the compound and they cannot have any contact with men. The workspace for women is completely separated from men.*

Female police recruits take part in a training exercise at the police academy in Kabul. Under the Emirate, most female police officers have been dismissed, while those who remain have largely been relegated to low-level roles, such as carrying out security checks. Photo: UN Photo, 2010.

She says there are a small number of women working in administrative roles in the office, but they have no interaction with men, to the point where, if documents need to be exchanged between the men and the women, "there is an elderly man in the women's office who transfers the documents between male and female colleagues." In the past, she says, it wasn't like this. There was segregation, but

"men and women could hold meetings together in the workplace or visit each other's offices. Now, there is no such interaction at all."

She doesn't like the changes, but she will put up with them: "It is impossible for me to leave my job. No matter how many restrictions and conditions they impose, I'll accept them as long as I can keep my job, so that I can provide for my children." Her husband is working, but his salary is low and they live in a rented house. In this situation, rents have doubled, as have children's expenses, food supplies and other household necessities.

Another interviewee was offered only a security checker role, despite having previously been a director of human resources in a department of the Ministry of Finance. Sitara, who lives in the western region, said that after the Taliban took power, she stayed at home for three months. Then they offered her this new, lowly role in a remote place: "I didn't want to agree to it, but in the end, I had to accept." She supports her brother and his family, leaving her no choice. Because the job was far from her home, she was offered accommodation near the workplace, which was not viable for her as a single woman: "I couldn't agree to this, I'm single, I couldn't stay there without a man: it wasn't secure or appropriate for me or for my coworker to live there."

Eventually she was offered another job, though this one involved a long and dangerous commute: "The last time I made the journey, I was almost killed in a vehicle accident." It was also expensive: "we had to pay 600 afghani (9 USD) a day from our own pocket to commute between work and home." Her salary was less than half of what she had previously earned: 8,000 afghanis (124 USD) down from 20,000 afghani (300 USD). She told her manager it was impossible, "because we had to spend all our salary and borrow even more, just to be able to travel every day." In addition to these practical challenges, she felt ill-equipped for the work:

> *A security checker is responsible for checking women's bodies and bags. This is work that I'm not familiar with. Women might smuggle drugs or other illegal items – I'm not someone who knows what different drugs look like. Professionally, my presence wasn't useful there.*

For a while, the complaints she and a colleague made were dismissed: "They asked us either to resign or go back to the job." Eventually, their appeals for clemency were heard: "We both explained to our boss that we were the only breadwinners in our families and had no other income." She and her colleague were offered

administrative positions in another department, in their home city. In contrast to the security checker job, Sitara is content with this work. She says she complies with the strict dress code:

> *Recently, Ministry of Vice and Virtue announced that women should wear chadar namaz [full-length outer garment] and a mask. I'm someone who obeys the laws, so I wear whatever they say. When I go from one building to another, I wear the chadar namaz and mask. When I'm in the office, I take them off.*

In this position, her salary is closer to what she earned under the Republic, but things are tight: "Unfortunately, with the salary I currently receive, our standard of living isn't what we'd hoped it would be. But if I left or lost my job, my family would have no stable income to rely on."

A woman prepares bacterial cultures at the Ministry of Agriculture's Plant Protection Laboratory in Kabul. Photo: UN Photo, 1960

Another interviewee who was forced to take a less suitable job is Laila, who has been a teacher for over a decade, in the eastern region. With girls' high schools shut down, Laila stayed at home. "The first year the Taliban came," she told AAN, "They cut 1,000 afghani (15 USD) from my salary." In 2025, they cut another 750 afghanis.

In a way, she was fortunate: she was seconded to a primary school to teach, whereas "the Taliban dismissed most of the teachers who were high school graduates."

Her new workplace has its own problems: "The remoteness of the area, the low salary and having to take three forms of transportation [a rickshaw and two buses] to get to the school and then three to get home." The high school where she used to teach was a ten-minute walk from home. Some have it worse, she acknowledges: "I know other teachers who change transportation five times to reach the school."

The atmosphere at the school, however, is largely unchanged from what she's used to. "We need to wear full hijab and long clothes. Apart from that, there is no other change in the atmosphere and culture of the school where I teach."

She hopes to keep her job, despite the problems. "Right now, my salary is low, but it's still some help alongside my husband's income, which I'm glad of. Without my job and salary, our situation would deteriorate and the whole family would face problems." She is comforted by the thought that "every year new students register, so the government really needs us." But, with the Emirate, there are no guarantees:

> *I'm not sure what will happen in the future, because the government changes policies a lot. If they suddenly decide to close primary schools for girls, I will lose my job. So there is no job security. I won't leave my job until they force me to. Nobody loves to lose their job, but if the government decides to dismiss you, you can't do anything about it.*

We spoke to two nurses still working: Ayesha in the central region and Palwasha in the eastern region. They reported a mix of continuity and change: both had faced cuts to their salaries – Ayesha's was modest, but she has only been working for two years. Palwasha's salary had been cut by one third, but remittances from a family member living in the United States have cushioned the blow. In Palwasha's hospital, one of the main changes has been the presence of the ministry of vice and virtue enforcers:

> *They have restricted women's clothing, for example they'll question us if we don't wear masks. Amr bil Maruf also made it compulsory for us to attend their religious classes: we have to take two sessions every week. … If someone misses a class, they're fined, not in money, but by being marked absent or asked by the office for the reason, which causes a lot of hassle for the employee.*

Palwasha welcomes the emphasis on a conservative dress code and segregation. "Personally, I am in favour of their policy because it is safer for me, so I feel more comfortable," adding that she "dressed the same way under the Republic." Perhaps underlying this is the widespread harassment women have tended to face from male colleagues, as Ehsan Qaane reported for AAN in 2017.

For Ayesha, in the central highlands, the culture of segregation seems less rigid. Her office has separate entrances for men and women and inside the office, "we have to wear a mask and don't talk much with our male colleagues." But at the same time, she says, "male and female employees are working together. Sometimes when I can't go to the office, my male colleague manages my work and when he is absent, I manage his male patients." Her colleagues, however, who have been there longer than her two years, say the change for them is very noticeable:

> *My colleagues who've worked here since the Republic feel a huge change. They say that in the past, both male and female employees could do things like monitor pharmacies or take part in procurement. Now all of this work is done by men alone. Men and women have separate offices. We can go to men's offices, but rarely.*

Segregation does have an impact on Ayesha's field visits: "Under the Republic, women could travel alone, but now women have to have a mahram. Our clothes must be long and loose and our face should be covered with a mask." She is concerned that the restrictions on female employees make it harder for her to do her job well:

> *We can't do field visits to prepare good reports. For example, if there's a criminal incident, I have to travel to remote districts where the incident happened, but the office doesn't provide transport and, even if it does, I must have a mahram. Since I can't always have a mahram when I travel, I can't deliver the reports. This creates difficulties for me. If these limitations increase, we'll be forced to stop working.*

For Ayesha and her family, her income is vital:

> *My siblings are students and I support them. My mother has kidney disease, so we have to take her to hospital every month. Her medicines are very expensive: I have to pay around 8,000 afghani (120 USD) every month for them.*

The interviewee least affected by the Emirate's policies towards female employees is Freshta, who works for the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS), which is on the government payroll. She's worked for the ARCS for 12 years, at a residential centre for widows and their children. She told AAN:

> *A day after the government fell, my office contacted me to come to work. … There haven't been many changes at ARCS. In the past our office wasn't segregated; now it's completely separated from the men's office. We've got two male guards, otherwise, men only come to our office when they have to. Overall, the number of female employees has increased under the Emirate compared to under the Republic.*

The nature of the workplace – particularly the residential home for widows and their children – meant that under the Republic, too, "it was decided that men should be allowed in." She's had to adapt her dress to the Emirate's more

conservative requirements, but hasn't faced changes to her commute: "I haven't been asked yet to have a mahram to go to the office." Freshta notes that other working women in her city face plenty of changes: "Women are not allowed to work in any other office, but here women must keep working."

Overall, she sounded sanguine about the situation. Since her job involves supporting widows, she says "women's employment is essential" in her office, so she doesn't feel particularly insecure. She is fortunate, since she bears a heavy financial responsibility in a household of 20: "God forbid, I don't want to be forced to leave my work because I am my family's main breadwinner."

Freshta's experience is a clear reminder of why it is impossible to remove all women from the civil service. She was, however, lucky. While the facilities for women of the Red Crescent have survived, many similar services, including shelters for widows run by NGOs, have been closed (RFE/RE). For many other female employees providing equally essential, skilled services, the experience has been much harder.

ON THE HORIZON: MORE WINNOWING, MORE MISSING WOMEN

For women who were sacked, as our interviewees testify, the financial impact is often their first concern. The loss of household income can be devastating in a context where three out of four Afghans are unable to meet their basic needs (UNDP). More insidious, perhaps, is how often women's anxieties about daily living are compounded with despair over their loss of purpose.

Even when women are allowed to keep their jobs, our interviewees' experiences show how challenging their changed environment can be, from the experienced professional reduced to a low-skilled role, to the professional whose tasks are narrowed from what they were previously entrusted to perform.

But a lowly job is better than nothing, as Roya made clear: "Our work is hard, our pay is low: we do the work because we have to. But still, we are happy that at least we have a job."

Roya is also comforted that the work of female security checkers is indispensable, even under the Emirate:

> *In every office or ministry, the search section is important: for women, it is essential. … Every office needs women in its search section, just as in the Ministry of Interior and in every district, they need female police officers.*

More than 78,000 women are still employed by the Emirate, for now. However, the layoffs that have taken place since January 2026 did not happen simultaneously and it seems likely that there will be more to come.

The Emirate's idea of which female jobs are "essential" is very narrow, however, such as providing other women and girls with health and education services. Even in these sectors, their roles are hugely limited: to primary schools but not secondary schools or universities, or a few remaining shelters for widows, but not the previous network of shelters for women fleeing violence. As Ayesha says, the needs go beyond this:

> *Of course, female teachers are essential to teach little girls. But it would be better for the Taliban to open high schools for girls as well. If they did that, it'd be one hundred per cent necessary to have female teachers to teach them, because*

> *the Taliban won't let men teach teenage girls. Besides teachers, women are needed in other fields too, they need to have an active role in society.*

Some female employees still work in courts, banks and airports because female members of the public are, technically, allowed to access these services, at least in some areas. In reality, most of the female employees in these institutions are now restricted to the most menial tasks, and access to these services for ordinary Afghan women is heavily curtailed.

The wider consequences of marginalising female employees across public life are hard to overestimate, particularly when combined with the shuttering of professional training for women. Even in the sectors the Emirate deems female employment essential — health and education — it is preventing the next generation of women from studying, training and joining the workforce. UNICEF estimated in 2026 that closing secondary schools, universities and training colleges for women and girls means that by 2030 Afghanistan could lose up to 20,000 teachers and 5,400 health workers. The cumulative impacts of these restrictions on women's professional space, in these and other sectors, both for the women and the would-be service users, may take years to fully comprehend.

Rachel Reid and Rama Mirzada

Sacked, Demoted, But Still Needed: Women in Afghanistan's Civil Service

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Cover photo by AFP, 21 July 2026 / Girls sit for an exam at a primary school in Kabul. Most female employees still working in the public sector are primary-school teachers.

If you would like to share feedback or get in touch, please contact the research team at info@afghanistan-analysts.org.

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