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# GENDER DISPARITIES IN INDIAN POLICE SERVICES: BARRIERS AND REFORMS

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Harshita Choubey, Assistant Professor, School of Law and Public Policy, Avantika University

## ABSTRACT

Despite policy advancements and growing awareness, gender disparities remain a persistent challenge in the Indian police services. Women, who first joined the force in 1938, still comprise only 11.7% of the total personnel—far below the recommended 33% benchmark. Their roles are often confined to handling cases involving women and juveniles, reinforcing outdated gender norms. This paper critically examines the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers hindering women's full participation in policing, such as biased recruitment systems, limited promotional pathways, workplace harassment, inadequate infrastructure, and patriarchal work culture. Through a doctrinal research approach, it draws upon legislation, government reports, academic literature, and real-world case studies to assess existing challenges and reform initiatives. Particular focus is given to progressive models adopted by states like Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, and institutional platforms like the National Conference of Women in Police. While policy frameworks such as state-level reservation mandates and the Model Police Act have laid a foundation for gender inclusivity, gaps in implementation continue to obstruct meaningful progress. The study argues for comprehensive reforms combining legal mandates, organizational restructuring, and cultural transformation to achieve true gender equity in policing and strengthen public trust in law enforcement.

**Keywords:** Women in policing, gender disparity, Indian police services, gender-sensitive reforms, institutional barriers, law enforcement, policies, workplace discrimination, representation of women, police reforms in India.

## INTRODUCTION

In the 20th century, women around the world achieved significant progress in their fight for rights and social inclusion. Building on that momentum, the 21st century is increasingly being recognized as a period where women are stepping into roles of equal participation across various professional domains. Women today work alongside men in fields once considered off-limits, proving their competence and leadership. However, challenges still persist in some traditionally male-dominated sectors, including policing.

In India, women began to formally join the police services in the early 1970s. Initially, their roles were narrowly defined—focused mainly on assisting in cases involving women and children, guarding female inmates, and supporting administrative tasks within women's bureaus. They were rarely included in core field duties or leadership roles.

Historically, the idea of women working in policing was met with doubt and hesitation. Over time, however, research and real-world experience have shown that women are not only capable but often bring strengths to the role—such as effective communication, lower use of force, and a more empathetic approach, particularly in sensitive cases like those involving gender-based violence.<sup>1</sup> These qualities make them valuable assets in today's policing systems.

Even though the number of women in law enforcement has grown over the years, the progress remains slow. According to recent data from the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D), women made up only about 11.7% of the Indian police force in 2023. This figure remains far below the 33% representation recommended by various policy committees.<sup>2</sup> This gap reflects ongoing issues such as unequal recruitment, promotion barriers, lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure, and cultural biases.

Women's participation in policing is not just about diversity—it's a matter of necessity. Laws like the POCSO Act and procedures involving women victims legally mandate female officers' involvement. Data from the NCRB shows that crimes against women remain a significant

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<sup>1</sup> Cara E. Rabe-Hemp, *Female Officers and the Ethic of Care: Does Officer Gender Impact Police Behaviors?*, 31 J. Crim. Just. 345, 346 (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Police Research & Development (BPR&D), *Data on Police Organizations as on 1st January 2023*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Gov't of India, at 115, <https://bprd.nic.in> (last visited June 10, 2025).

portion of overall IPC violations, making the presence of empathetic, trained women officers essential to ensure just redressal.

This study seeks to explore the specific challenges faced by women in police services in India, particularly in comparison to their male colleagues. Using a doctrinal research approach, it analyzes laws, government policies, academic literature, and case studies to better understand the structural and societal obstacles limiting women's full participation in policing—and how these can be addressed through reform.

## **WOMEN IN INDIAN POLICING: A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW**

India has seen a significant transformation in the role of women across professional fields over the last few decades. Liberalization, globalization, and a growing focus on education have helped move women from traditional household roles to positions of influence in politics, administration, and law enforcement. However, despite iconic milestones—such as Indira Gandhi as India's first female Prime Minister, Pratibha Patil as the first female President, and Kiran Bedi as the first woman IPS officer in 1972—the journey toward equality remains incomplete. Representation of women in public service sectors, including the police, continues to be disproportionately low.

Kerala holds the distinction of being the first state in India to induct women into its police force. This historic inclusion dates back to 1933, when the then-Travancore Royal Police appointed its first woman officer—setting a precedent that other states would follow decades later.<sup>3</sup> In a significant move to make policing more accessible and sensitive to women, Kerala also established Asia's first all-women police station in Kozhikode in 1973, inaugurated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.<sup>4</sup> Kerala continued its progressive stance by forming the country's first all-women police battalion in 2018, which included a fully trained women commando unit.<sup>5</sup> These initiatives have positioned Kerala as a trailblazer in the gender

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<sup>3</sup> National Conference of Women in Police, CRPF, <https://crpf.gov.in/Welfare/National-Conference-of-Women-in-Police> (last visited June 11, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Aswin, *Asia's First Women's Police Station in Kozhikode Set to Celebrate Golden Jubilee*, The Hindu (Oct. 20, 2023), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kozhikode/asias-first-womens-police-station-in-kozhikode-set-to-celebrate-golden-jubilee/article67430281.ece>.

<sup>5</sup> Kerala Police, *Kerala's First All-Women Battalion Launched with Commando Unit*, available at <https://keralapolice.gov.in/page/women-battalion> (last visited June 11, 2025).

mainstreaming of police services and offer a replicable model for other states seeking to enhance women's participation in law enforcement.

Historically, women in policing were relegated to roles considered 'suitable' for their gender—handling female detainees, child protection cases, and administrative duties. These assignments reflected the deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset that deemed women unfit for frontline, physically challenging, or leadership roles in law enforcement. Although legally entitled to equal rights, many women remain unaware or unable to access opportunities for upward mobility in policing due to structural, cultural, and institutional barriers.

Recent government data shows that women currently make up about 12.3% of India's police force, up from 5.9% in 2013, yet far short of the 33% representation recommended by the Parliamentary Committee. While states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra are taking progressive steps, the overall landscape is still marked by discrimination, limited promotions, and a lack of supportive infrastructure like separate restrooms, housing, and childcare facilities. Reforms such as all-women police stations and gender-sensitization training have begun to address these issues, but sustained institutional change is essential to achieving real parity in law enforcement roles.<sup>6</sup>

## **STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN POLICE SERVICES**

Despite several policy-level acknowledgments of the need for greater female representation in law enforcement, women continue to face deeply embedded structural challenges within the Indian police services. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and multiple governmental reports have identified recurring systemic hurdles that continue to undermine gender parity in policing. These challenges span recruitment procedures, workplace environments, promotional tracks, and organizational culture.<sup>7</sup>

### **1. Biased Recruitment Frameworks:**

Recruitment processes at the state and central levels often include separate entry cadres for men and women, particularly at the constable level. While this appears to create dedicated

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<sup>6</sup> *India Justice Report 2023*, Women in Police, TATA TRUSTS, <https://www.indiajusticereport.org/state-rankings/police> (last visited June 11, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, *Rough Roads to Equality: Women Police in South Asia* (2015).

opportunities for women, in practice it restricts their upward mobility, as promotional channels are often limited to specific, lower-level posts.<sup>8</sup> The practice of reserving only a few positions for women in officer-level ranks results in stunted career growth and maintains male dominance in senior roles.

In contrast, the state of Andhra Pradesh has set a positive precedent by adopting a gender-neutral recruitment system, which eliminates separate cadres and prescribes identical qualifications (except for physical measurement tests), allowing equal opportunity for promotion and service progression. This model exemplifies the urgent need for nationwide adoption of common recruitment cadres to foster genuine equality in the force.

## 2. Workplace Harassment and Gender-Based Discrimination:

Women in policing regularly face both overt and subtle forms of harassment. These range from verbal taunts to physical abuse, often from male colleagues or superiors. Fear of retaliation, absence of robust internal complaint mechanisms, and a prevailing culture of silence deter many from reporting such incidents. Notable real-world examples include:

- **Kolhapur, Maharashtra (2011):** Ten women constables alleged sexual exploitation by trainers at a police training school. The issue came to light when two of them were found to be pregnant during routine medical check-ups.
- **Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh (2015):** A First Information Report (FIR) was filed against two police constables and a driver under charges of rape and misconduct.
- **Delhi (2016):** Twenty-four policewomen filed complaints against an inspector for repeated sexual harassment. Despite departmental awareness, the victims were harassed for months, made to perform degrading tasks like removing stray animals from office premises.
- **Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (2017):** An Additional Superintendent of Police was arrested for physically assaulting a female constable.
- **Chennai, Tamil Nadu (2025):** A senior female officer was removed from duty after being accused of mishandling sexual assault cases and coercing survivors to drop charges—a

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<sup>8</sup> India Justice Report 2023, Tata Trusts, <https://www.indiajusticereport.org> (last visited June 11, 2025).

grim reminder that internalized gender bias can manifest even among women officers.<sup>9</sup>

These cases reflect the dire need for independent grievance redressal bodies and strict enforcement of workplace safety standards across ranks and regions.

### **3. Infrastructure Gaps and Leave Disparities:**

Basic facilities such as women's restrooms, separate changing areas, and safe accommodations are lacking, particularly in rural or traffic postings. The situation is more dire for lower-ranked personnel, who often work under field conditions without designated women-friendly amenities. Even where infrastructure exists, it is typically reserved for higher-ranking officers. For example, the new police headquarters in Rajasthan had a women's restroom limited to IPS officers only. Similarly, maternity and childcare leave benefits are unequally distributed. While IPS officers are entitled to 180 days of maternity leave and up to two years of childcare leave, women in state police services receive only 135 to 180 days, with unclear implementation and difficulty in availing these benefits.<sup>10</sup>

### **4. Overburdened Work Hours and Transfer Policies:**

A 2019 study across multiple states found that over 90% of police staff work beyond 8-hour shifts, with many clocking over 12 hours daily.<sup>11</sup> Women officers, especially in lower ranks, bear the double burden of professional demands and domestic responsibilities. Transfers to distant, unfamiliar locations—often without consideration for family constraints—further discourage women from entering or remaining in the force.

### **5. Patriarchal Institutional Culture:**

The Indian police force has historically been male-dominated. Gendered stereotypes persist, casting women as incapable of handling violent crimes, public order maintenance, or tactical field duties. As a result, women are often relegated to “softer” tasks such as handling cases involving women and children, counselling, and administrative roles. A study conducted in Tamil Nadu confirmed that male officers often view female colleagues

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<sup>9</sup> “Woman cop shunted for ‘favouring’ assaulters,” *Times of India*, June 10, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, *Rough Roads to Equality: Women Police in South Asia* (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), *Status of Policing in India Report 2019*.

with skepticism, believing women are unsuitable for challenging assignments.<sup>12</sup> To prove their capabilities, women must perform at consistently higher levels just to gain equal recognition. This leads to exhaustion, frustration, and often, attrition from the service.

## **6. Limited Promotional Pathways:**

Separate entry streams for male and female candidates hinder women's ability to rise through the ranks. Most women officers remain in lower positions such as constable or head constable. Data shows that while male constables often progress to the role of sub-inspector or inspector, only a small percentage of female constables achieve similar promotions. Without proactive steps to establish inclusive promotion policies, this bottleneck will persist.

## **POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS FOR GENDER EQUITY IN POLICING**

### **1. Policy Reform Measures:**

The male-dominated composition of Indian police forces has long been a subject of concern, prompting various policy initiatives aimed at gender inclusivity. One of the earliest efforts came through the Model Police Act, 2006, which was the first legislative document to explicitly acknowledge the underrepresentation of women in law enforcement. It advocated for "diverse gender representation in the composition of the police service" and mandated that "each police station shall have a Women and Child Protection Desk, as far as possible staffed by women police personnel, to record complaints of crimes against women and children and to deal with cases relating to special legislations applicable to them."<sup>13</sup>

A Second Committee constituted in 2013 under the Ministry of Home Affairs also focused on enhancing diversity and gender equality in policing, with targeted recommendations to bridge the gender gap.<sup>14</sup> Further, the Parliamentary Committee on the Empowerment of Women undertook detailed reviews in 2012 and 2013, offering significant observations and recommendations on recruitment practices, infrastructure, and promotion avenues for women in the police forces.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> CHRI, *Women Police and the Quest for Equity in Tamil Nadu* (2020).

<sup>13</sup> Model Police Act, 2006, § 54, available at <https://bprd.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/ModelPoliceAct06.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Second Committee on Gender Diversity in Police, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Report of the Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women, Rajya Sabha (2012 & 2013).

Furthermore, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has consistently urged state governments to achieve a minimum of 33% female representation in their police departments. In response, various states have introduced their own reservation quotas for women, which vary, ranging from 15% in Uttarakhand to 35% in Telangana. These states include Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Bihar, Sikkim, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Tripura, Telangana, and Uttarakhand. Despite these policy frameworks, most states have failed to meet their gender-based recruitment targets, highlighting a persistent gap between policy intent and implementation.

## **2. The Role of the National Conference of Women in Police (NCWP):**

The National Conference of Women in Police (NCWP), launched in 2002 by the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) with backing from the Ministry of Home Affairs, has emerged as a key initiative in advancing gender inclusion within Indian policing. The NCWP has become an annual institutional forum for identifying challenges faced by women police officers and recommending structural reforms. It provides a collaborative environment where female officers from across State Police Organizations and Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) can participate in leadership training, experience-sharing sessions, and policy dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

The 11th NCWP, held in Chennai in May 2025, witnessed participation from over 140 officers, who engaged in critical deliberations around workplace infrastructure, leadership development, maternity benefits, mental health support, and gender-equity in promotions. The conference concluded with a set of impactful resolutions advocating for enhanced female representation, institutionalized reservation policies, and merit-based advancement mechanisms.<sup>17</sup>

The NCWP has also been instrumental in pushing for welfare-centric reforms like gender-sensitive toilets, separate barracks, maternity leave policies, and creche facilities—some of

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<sup>16</sup> *National Conference of Women in Police (NCWP)*, CRPF & BPR&D, available at <https://crpf.gov.in/Welfare/National-Conference-of-Women-in-Police>.

<sup>17</sup> *11th National Conference of Women in Police held in the city*, The Hindu (May 3, 2025), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/11th-national-conference-of-women-in-police-held-in-the-city/article69575108.ece>.



which are now being implemented across CAPFs. These changes underscore the critical role that institutional platforms play in translating policy discourse into actionable outcomes.

## **CONCLUSION**

The representation of women in Indian police services continues to be limited, especially in decision-making and frontline roles. True gender diversity in policing is not solely about increasing the number of women officers but about fostering an environment where their perspectives and contributions are recognized, respected, and integrated into the core functioning of law enforcement. Structural barriers such as unequal recruitment systems, discriminatory work cultures, lack of supportive infrastructure, and slow policy implementation remain major obstacles.

While various legislative and administrative efforts—such as the Model Police Act, state-level reservation policies, and platforms like the National Conference of Women in Police—have attempted to address these issues, their impact is often diluted by poor execution and lack of accountability. Bridging this gap requires strong political will, institutional reforms, continuous monitoring, and a shift in organizational attitudes toward inclusivity.

Ensuring gender equity in policing is not only about safeguarding the rights of women officers—it is essential for enhancing the effectiveness, fairness, and credibility of law enforcement in a diverse democracy like India. The Constitution guarantees equality, and it is imperative that this principle is fully realized within police institutions. Moving forward, a combination of policy reform, cultural change, and practical support systems will be crucial to ensuring that women in policing are not just symbolic figures but active, empowered leaders in the pursuit of justice.