WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN · PAKISTAN · INDIA

POLICY BRIEF
CHALLENGES TO WOMEN CANDIDATES AND VOTERS
2018 AFGHANISTAN ELECTIONS

This policy paper is based on Women's Regional Network's (WRN) research study, entitled *Challenges to Women Candidates and Voters in the 2018 Elections*, conducted in 2018 **by Humira Saqib and edited by Dr. Jennifer Euler Bennett.** The Full Report is available at **www.womensregionalnetwork.org**/

Introduction

In the past 20 years, sustained efforts have taken place to steer Afghanistan towards a democratized state system. Realization of a democratic system, created by people's votes, became possible after the fall of the Taliban regime, the Bonn conference and holding of the Loya Jirga to reach a consensus on the new Afghan Constitution. Women's participation in the political engagements also improved markedly since the fall of the Taliban.

To date, three rounds of each presidential, provincial council's and parliamentary elections have taken place. These elections have been fraught with several structural and institutional difficulties and are considered the most controversial elections in Af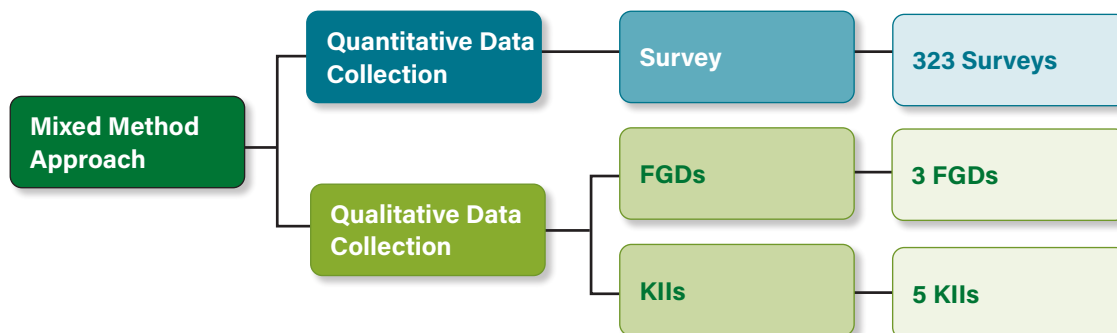ghanistan. This policy paper dwells on understanding and exploring the various challenges and issues confronted by women voters belonging to marginalized populations and of different ethnic groups, along with women candidates during the 2018 parliamentary elections.

Findings

The research findings bring to the fore the gendered aspects of the 2018 elections. It highlights several ensuing factors that point to women's unequal and discriminatory social, economic and political standings. Several challenges culminating in women's insecurities were the hallmark of the research, discouraging mass female participation in the elections and consequently, negatively impacting the end results. The research results show

Methodology

Through WRN'S signature Community Conversations study design, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through **surveys**, **Focus Group Discussions (FGD)** and **In-depth interviews (IDI)** in the three Provinces of Logar, Parwan and Kabul.

- **Mixed Method Approach**
  - **Quantitative Data Collection**
    - **Survey** — **323 Surveys**
  - **Qualitative Data Collection**
    - **FGDs** — **3 FGDs**
    - **KIIs** — **5 KIIs**

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Courtesy of TKG in Kabul

that: lack of transparency in the electoral process; fraud; coercion and redirecting women's votes, by force in some parts of the country, as well as lack of awareness of how to participate in elections (registration, biometrics, voting, inter alia.), lack of women's independence for voting and freedom to openly campaign, were some of the major hurdles and challenges experienced by women voters and candidates.

The research avidly underlines the pervasive sexual harassment and abuse of women during the 2018 elections. This was reinforced by a new challenge associated with an inappropriate use of social media, portraying women politicians as immoral. As informed, fake accounts were made, in the name of women, which led to dissemination of false information and perceptions, to defame female candidates. This was one of the driving factors that discouraged women from contesting the elections, as well as voting for women candidates. The findings also show that women candidates' lack of financial resources was grossly exploited and was another factor exposing them to sexual advances and favors by the local peers and electoral stakeholders.

Insecurity was one of the greatest challenges in 2018 elections, due to which women's participation in polling stations, especially in rural areas, was weak, thus most of them did not cast their votes. Additionally, this paved the way for misuse of women's votes and in some areas, where men voted on behalf of women, using their voter cards. This research confirms and reiterates the findings of other reports that women are still considered to be inferior. They are deemed to lack mental and physical characteristics and the required decision-making abilities to be engaged in the political arena. To this effect, women candidates have been threatened and sometimes killed by local warlords in several provinces. The statistics reveal that the mentioned challenges to women in the remote areas in Logar and Parwan Provinces were gravely accentuated compared to Kabul.

Understanding the vulnerabilities and the challenges women face can be an opportunity to meaningfully modify the electoral system in Afghanistan. Assuming the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the government have a strong will to conduct transparent elections, there should be no doubt that this will be possible only when women attain equitable political participation.

Key Issues

Key issues that emerge from this research include the following:

- **Power and gender inequalities** in social relations do not operate in a vacuum, but are structural, systemic and institutional in Afghanistan;

- **Patriarchy and bureaucracy** are mutually reinforcing systems. Men use patriarchy within the bureaucracy not only to create and sustain male privilege and power over women but also to sustain institutional hierarchy;

- **Inappropriation regarding vote-buying** by competitors in an uneven level political playing field indicates unabated institutional and structural manipulation and bad governance;

- Advantages enabled or exacerbated owing to s**tructural lack of resources of women candidates** — be it financial/economic or sociocultural capital;

- **Restricted female mobility,** emanating from patriarchal conservatism and misogynist attitudes, has led to women's security issues and independence, as well as access to public spaces, leading to political disequilibrium;

- Outright **insecurity and conflict** at the national level, as well as socio-cultural constraints imposed by family and/or community members, influential locals, political power brokers and/or religious stakeholders, amongst others.

- Gains in women's substantive representation and political mainstreaming are inextricably linked and dependent on a continued **commitment of national and international stakeholders towards women's rights and gender mainstreaming**.

Recommendations and Policy Input

1. To attain equitable political participation, a paradigmatic shift is required to focus on gender policy interventions and their impact on women's political empowerment and mainstreaming, particularly viewing participation beyond numeric concerns and individual women's agency and capacities towards structural and institutional constraints. In order to achieve this goal, **detailed understanding is required of not only the outputs of institutions but also the institutions themselves, in both their formal and informal guises**.

2. Women candidates' equal share of political influence is overshadowed by direct discrimination and a complex pattern of hidden barriers. If formal equal treatment cannot be obtained, compensatory measures, such as specific security measures and distinct government and other watchdog support should be introduced as a means of reaching equality of results. In other words, **compensation for structural barriers that women meet in the electoral process should be put in place.**

3. Women candidates should form alliances with members of the provincial assemblies and women councilors in the local government, alongside the civil society organizations, rights groups and other women activist groups. **With the collective voice and agency, women candidates can garner both social and structural support**.

4. The government and the international community must defend the red lines and proactively continue to **portray positive imaging of the significance of women's rights,** especially in peace negotiations with insurgents, as argued and lobbied by women's activists and politicians.

5. Education in general, and specifically that of females, must be the hallmark for attaining democratic knowledge and rights and to **counter the nexus of illiteracy, political unawareness and the lack of citizens' capacity to adequately participate in political decision-making and decisions in governance processes.**

6. There is an urgent need to **train and induct a greater number of women in the Election Commission**. Equally, the authorities should ensure that only women polling agents should be assigned to the dedicated women polling stations.

7. **All women registered in the national database should automatically be enrolled in the voting lists so as to encourage participation of women in the electoral process**; voting centers need to be organized in a way that women can easily attend these centers; women agents should be provided transport and security.

8. Women candidates, generally speaking, run campaigns with meagre financial resource and local support. Lack of finances and independence have affected women in effectively managing election campaigns in their respective areas. It is suggested that some of the **public funding provided by international institutions for elections should be considered to assist women candidates**, through a credible institution with specific transparent mechanisms to maintain transparency.

9. To date, men are not convinced that women have equal decision-making capacities and abilities to actively enter the political arena. Especially in remote areas, women are still considered inferior who need male support and cannot act without the permission of men. Therefore, **awareness of existing laws and issues related to women's rights will be one of the essential requirements for addressing cultural challenges to women**.

10. One of the challenges of the 2018 election is related to the investigation of complaints by women candidates in the Electoral Complaints Commission. It is recommended that a qualified (supervisory) body should be set up by election observation and women's rights advocacy bodies, who should **closely monitor women's complaints in the Electoral Complaints Commission**.

11. Structural challenges and open corruption in the electoral commissions may not be resolved in the short term, but can be countered by **stringent monitoring processes, led by both national and international election observer bodies**, and should be taken up by the justice and judicial institutions.

Courtesy of TKG in Kabul

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About the Women's Regional Network

Founded in 2011, the core purpose of WRN is to amplify the voices of unheard, marginalized women, and with them address the interlinked issues of peace, militarization, forced displacements, (in)security, justice and governance in South Asia. To this end, WRN connects women peace advocates, committed to working collectively within and across national borders and cultures in traditionally conflicted countries. WRN's pursuit is reflected in its history where its unique Community Conversations have been used to deliver specific advocacy campaigns to ensure grassroots women's concerns and their voices shape political discourse, policy development and program implementation which affect them.

Through a combination of comparative analysis, advocacy and capacity building, WRN seeks to promote a unique and valuable regional dialogue by documenting the experiences of women in zones of conflict across South Asia. For this purpose, WRN will continue to work in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India — countries consistently featured among the worst to live in as a woman in terms of inclusion (economic, socio-political), justice (formal laws, informal discrimination) and security (at family, community and society levels).

Emphasizing human security and a people-centric, gender-lens approach, WRN recognizes non-traditional crises and threats also qualify as "conflict" for women, where women's lives, security and peace are jeopardized, all the more so for those who are displaced, caught in armed-conflict, or face the brunt of exclusionary, divisive and aggressive politics.

The WRN model and approach aims to tap into and coordinate local and regional expertise on key topics related to women's human rights, peace and security across multiple and diverse movements and networks.

WRN's Achievements

■ WRN's initiatives have contributed to building on critical blocks for women's human rights and WPS, building bridges across South Asia and beyond

■ WRN has successfully raised the voices and concerns of the grassroots women, in order to positively influence government policies and actions to better serve marginalized groups

■ WRN has been able to expand its WPS capacity building platform by reaching out to a larger audience, disseminating knowledge and awareness on regional peace and security.

■ Through its online activities, it has successfully leveraged exchange of experiences and perspectives to strengthen the capacities of women around effectively advocating for women's rights

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