

## **Priority Issue: Political Participation**

The Afghanistan Constitution (article 33) guarantees that the citizens of Afghanistan shall have the right to elect and be elected and introduced a 25% quota for women's representation in parliament – a move that automatically generated a cadre of women in elected office at the national and subnational levels. In the last parliamentary elections (2010), there were 400 women candidates for the Wolesi Jirga (lower house of parliament) elections, thereby making up 40% of the candidates – a 24% increase from the 2005 elections when there were 328 women candidates. Despite some women candidates receiving more votes than men, overall votes for women candidates remained low; the quota ensures that, at a minimum, women candidates will fill all of the 68 seats allocated for women.

The only female presidential candidate running for office in 2014 was disqualified by the IECC, although three women ran for vice-president in the presidential elections.<sup>i</sup> The lack of female candidates for the presidential office shows part of a disappointing trend when compared to previous elections: in 2009 there were two female presidential candidates and in 2005 one female candidate ran for office.<sup>ii</sup>

In the last provincial council elections (2014), there were only 297 women candidates, a decrease from the 2009 elections in which there were 328 women taking part in the elections. During the 2013 revision of the election law, the quota for women in provincial councils was lowered to 20%. There are fears that the current situation represents the 'high-water mark' for women's participation, and that efforts will be made to begin lowering the 25% quota in the parliament, led by a conservative bloc of MPs.

With regard to political participation, Afghan women still face serious challenges that may stem from the following factors: inadequate education, cultural and structural limitations, ideological factors, political and economic factors, the practice of proxy voting, and violence against women. "The ideological factor remains effective to produce multiple challenges to Afghan women and prevent them from political participation. It is discussed about patriarchy as a system of male domination that shapes relationship of women in political activities."<sup>iii</sup>

Cultural and structural limitations are the most significant factors affecting female participation in elections and civic and social affairs. In Afghanistan there is a widespread belief that women should not see, speak, or interact with men they do not know, and likewise, the majority of Afghans believe that a woman's place is in the home and not engaging at a social or political level. This negative trend definitely has an impact on females studying and working in society. It also means that in a number of provinces, the IEC has not been able to find female workers to staff the polling stations to facilitate the voting process for women. Instead the IEC appointed elders to do the task of female election workers.<sup>iv</sup>

The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), which is responsible for receiving and investigating allegations of electoral misconduct, had no female staff in the majority of its 34 Provincial Electoral Complaints Commission offices during the 2010 elections. Being only able

to speak to a male investigator creates a barrier for women who wish to complain about discrimination they may have suffered, which is reflected in a much lower percentage of electoral complaints registered from women: of about 4,000 complaints during the 2010 elections, women lodged only 11%.<sup>v</sup>

To protect women's rights to political participation as voter or candidate, the following initiatives could produce favorable results:

1. Public awareness raising on women's political rights, voter registration, and polling;
2. Mobilizing local influencers to support women's political participation as voters or candidates;
3. Educating women on the importance of their participation as voters;
4. Assisting women candidates in campaigning and public speaking; and
5. Advocacy for separate registration and polling stations staffed by women for women.

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<sup>i</sup>. Abdullah Athayi, Shaping the Future - Women's Participation in the 2014 Elections, June 2014.

<https://www.boell.de/en/2014/06/24/shaping-future-womens-participation-2014-elections>

<sup>ii</sup>. Fleschenberg, A., & Development Fund for Women United Nations. (2009). Afghanistan's parliament in the making: Gendered understandings and practices of politics in a transitional country. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

<sup>iii</sup>. Ibrahim, M., & Mussarat, R. (2015). Women Participation in Politics: A Case Study of Afghan Women. *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, 4(3), 433-447.

<sup>iv</sup>. Abdullah Athayi, Shaping the Future - Women's Participation in the 2014 Elections, June 2014.

<https://www.boell.de/en/2014/06/24/shaping-future-womens-participation-2014-elections>

<sup>v</sup>. Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION.

<http://www.cw4wafghan.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/pages/cw4wafghan-womenpoliticalparticipation-factsheet2014.pdf>