

Women and the Elections: Facilitating and Hindering Factors in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections

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Introduction

Although women's participation in parliamentary elections in the rhetorical discourses of changes in Afghanistan's post-2001 context is framed as 'new', a quick overview of the historical-political context informs us of women's presence in the political sphere much earlier than 2001.¹ Women's suffrage or right to vote or be elected was granted in Afghanistan's constitution in 1964²; despite the fact that women continuously faced limitations to practicing their right to vote and be elected, in 1965 four women won seats in Kabul, Herat and Kandahar provinces.³ Following the political turmoil of the mid-1970s, up until the early 1990s women intermittently continued to hold parliamentary seats and under the PDPA regime, membership of the PDPA was a pre-condition for running for parliament both for men and women.⁴ Then and in today's context, the key questions that need to be raised are: what motivates women who vote or run for parliament, and what are the facilitating and hindering factors that determine women's political participation? The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's (AREU) 2012 comprehensive synthesis paper, "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections,"⁵ highlighted different dynamics of women's participation both as voters and as candidates in Afghanistan's elections in 2005, 2009 and 2010 for parliamentary and provincial council elections. Keeping in mind this paper and the 2014 provincial council elections processes, this policy note will draw on the evidence from the aforementioned study as well as the author's own observations in order to formulate key policy recommendations ahead of the upcoming parliamentary and district council elections.⁶

The policy note will briefly present a framework that can help us in analysing and drawing upon motivations for women voting and running for elections, and factors that facilitate and/or hinder their participation as voters and candidates; this will be followed by formulating key policy recommendations that can address challenges to women's participation in the upcoming parliamentary and district council elections.

Democracy and Patronage-Based Politics

In the post-2001 context, after the Constitutional Loya Jirga in 2004, a quota of 27% was introduced to ensure women's representation in both houses of parliament. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, women secured 30%, or 75 seats, across Afghanistan, which is 3% above the quota. After decades of violent conflict, war and the massive level of discrimination against women by different ruling regimes since the 1970s, the experience of democracy through voting and being elected was reinvented and opened the sphere for men as well as women to run for office. Although the allocation of seats was seen as a complementary part of ensuring a full representation of women in a democratic system, most of the reserved seats, however, especially in the 2009 elections and increasingly afterwards, were filled by women who were sponsored formally or through informal channels by power-brokers, warlords or those who found themselves unable to compete against their rivals in the election contests.⁷

1 Noah Coburn, and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape*, (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2014), 10.

2 Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan: 1966" (American Universities Field Staff, 1966), 3.

3 Oliver Lough et al., "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2012), 6n33; The four women were Khadija Ahrari, MP for Herat, Masuma Esmati Wardak, MP for Kandahar, Roqia Abubakr, MP for Kabul and Anahita Ratebzad, also MP for Kabul.

4 Orzala Ashraf Nemat, "Afghan Women at the Crossroads: Agents of Peace or its Victims?" (New York City: Century Foundation, 2011), 11. Between the 1990s and late 2001, under mujahiddin and then Taliban rule there was no parliament or formal political representation of women.

5 Lough et al., "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities."

6 Mujib Mashal, "Afghan Parliament's Term Is Extended After Squabbles Delay Elections," *New York Times*, 20 June 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/20/world/asia/afghan-parliaments-term-is-extended-after-squabbles-delay-elections.html?_r=0 (Accessed on 08 July 2015). According to a declaration by the presidential palace, the current parliament's term was extended until after the next elections. It said that the date for both parliamentary and district council elections would be announced by 19 July 2015.

7 Peter Dimitroff, "The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Elections in Afghanistan" (Kabul: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2005), https://www.ndi.org/files/2004_af_report_041006.pdf (Accessed on 12 July 2015); Tone Sissener and Linda Kartawich, "Afghanistan: Parliamentary and Provincial Elections September 2005" (Oslo: Norwegian Centre).

In order to understand the key question this policy note is aiming to respond to, it is necessary to situate Afghanistan's post-2001 parliamentary elections and how the question of women's inclusion was dealt with, in a particular context of liberal state-building intervention in conflict-affected settings that are mainly governed by a patronage-based system of rule. This is important as it allows us not only to list challenges and opportunities, but also to have an in-depth analysis of what leads or roots these facilitating and hindering factors. In developing contexts, patrimonial systems of governance are in part about controlling violence and the distribution of resources. Women in such contexts are traditionally used as a currency to strengthen political coalitions or resolve disputes and conflicts between rival groups through marriages.⁸ However, with the introduction of modern concepts with preconditions to guarantee women's inclusion in the political structures, one can observe a different form of women's symbolic use to secure their representation in the political sphere on the one hand but ensure that they are entirely subject to patrons who sponsor them politically and economically on the other. Kandiyoti points out that women's rights and their political participation become an iconic characteristic of liberal interventions and argues that generally supporting women in Muslim countries is a leading justification for Western interventions in these contexts.⁹ According to O'Reilly, the relations between gender and liberal interventions are mutually constitutive and reinforcing; she emphasises that gender identities are seen as an "enabling condition of liberal interventionism and vice versa."¹⁰ Therefore, when elections (as one of the main components of liberal democratic systems) are held in a context that is ruled by patronage-based networks, the results demonstrate neither an entirely democratic outcome, nor is it seen as purely patrimonial. The outcome of elections in such societies represents a rather more complex hybrid system that maintains its strong patronage basis while appearing as a form of a democratic elections outcome. Which aspects of this hybrid system gain stronger momentum and are more effective is entirely subject to the various economic and political leverages of each force.

Motivation, Facilitating and Hindering

Women's motivations and decision-making: The relative openness of the socio-political atmosphere for women's political participation in general in the post-2001 context could be seen as one of the key motivations, not only for women to seek leadership positions across the country, but also for various power holders or patrons who use women's quotas in their own interest by sponsoring women who then become advocates for their political and economic interests within the system. This happened particularly in areas where contestations among male candidates from rival groups were more intense. In such areas, independent women or those without patronage network support lost the elections to women who enjoyed such support.¹¹ Women's own motivation for seeking elected posts as members of Parliament and Provincial Councils mainly included experiencing their citizenship rights as equal members of society, gaining more power and authority, material interests and having higher sources of income, and representation of their constituency based on geographical, ethnic, political affiliation, etc.¹²

The decision-making process among the women candidates differed between those who ran relatively independent campaigns in comparison with those who run campaigns sponsored by stronger patrons or power-brokers. In the former case, women had far more liberty on how to run their campaigns and who to reach out to as they were able to use their own constituencies and use their agency, building coalitions with other members to reach their goal.

These constituencies could be women and men from the social or socio-political group in a given locality that they represent. While some women's campaigns only focused on women in different areas, particularly in rural contexts, others targeted larger populations or, for instance, a particular social group such as a clan, tribe or an ethnic group. Where women candidates were directly sponsored by an influential power-broker, they lacked such independence and had to rely on the sponsor's organisational network in terms of running campaigns, producing campaign material and even visits to certain areas and meeting people, officials, etc. As voters, women were encouraged to take part by voting in some instances according to their own wishes, while in others, following the family or larger community's desire to vote for a selected candidate. It is therefore concluded that motivations among women as candidates and as voters differed depending on the context, the position and affiliations a candidate could have with larger power-brokers and his or her popularity (or lack of) in the given context.¹³

8 Nancy Lindisfarne and Nancy Tapper, *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 74. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21-23.

9 Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan" (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005), 1

10 Maria O'Reilly, "Muscular Interventionism: Gender, Power and Liberal Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 4 (2012): 529-548.

11 Author's discussion with provincial candidate in Nangarhar province, 2012.

12 Lough et al., "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities," 47-8.

13 Although rare, in the later elections (e.g., in 2010 and the provincial council elections of 2014) some women also acted as patrons or network support to other women; one example being the Kufi sisters running in two provinces.

Facilitating factors: The key facilitating factor for women's participation in parliamentary elections is the political commitment by the government and its international sponsors. Afghanistan's constitution makes it obligatory for women to take part in elections and stipulates a 27% quota for women's inclusion in the Lower House of Parliament, a 50% quota in the Upper House and 20% reserved seats in the provincial and district councils (Article 30 of Electoral Law).¹⁴

The role of international donors both in terms of reiterating political commitment for ensuring women's inclusion and also in terms of providing resources is another very crucial facilitating factor. A collective interest by the majority of donors also, in a way, encouraged the government of Afghanistan to take this matter seriously and provide support to female candidates both during campaigns and as members of elected councils. Though mixed in instances, the government's commitment to women's political participation by strengthening more effective roles for women in politics and ensuring their voting rights are guaranteed is reassuring. For instance, while for some of the members of the previous (and current) government, women's political participation is a necessity and constitutional obligation, others use this as leverage to attract international donors' attention and also use women's inclusion in parliament as a means to attain their personal or group goals.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, the opening environment in the post-2001 context in terms of acceptability of women's public role (depending on the history and contextual characteristic of each area), has also been an important factor in facilitating women's role in politics and in electoral democracy in particular.

The emergence of a new class of women leaders, from rural communities to urban settings, who have become active particularly in the provision of social services, has also introduced at least a number of women in politics who are capable enough to emerge as independent candidates and run their own campaigns for elections. Nevertheless, co-option and, in instances, defeat of some of these women by rival candidates who enjoyed support from patronage networks, also represents an important point where women's public role as independent agents is being threatened by some who still try to keep women under the influence of patronage networks and a patriarchal system of rule.

Hindering factors: The most dominant hindering factor to women's political participation has been the lack of sufficient security and safety arrangements.¹⁵ Female political leaders, including elected members of parliament and councils, have become a regular target of assassinations, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks.¹⁶ Taliban and other armed groups continued to issue public threats against women candidates as well as voters and female staff of the electoral offices.¹⁷ While the lack of security led to further instability and enhanced the fragile status of women politicians, it also could be seen as an indicator of the fear that opponents of women's political participation feel from the increasing and more active role of women in decision-making. The government's failure to provide reasonable security assistance for women leaders' protection and to investigate cases of murdered women politicians and public figures weakens motivation among other women to stand as candidates for elections or take part in campaigns and voting to a large extent.¹⁸

Within the system, too, there are both covert and overt opponents to women's political participation. The use (or more precisely, abuse) of quotas and women's space in the political system by different power-brokers and patronage networks, including drug-mafia, warlords or strongmen and other corrupt officials is another serious hindering factor. As the use/abuse of quotas challenges a common assumption that while in appearance we see female representation in parliament, in reality women who are elected to reserved seats through the mentioned channels continue to fail in pushing forward the women's agenda either due to insufficient capacity to address these concerns or because of their subjugation to the aforementioned power brokers.¹⁹

14 *Constitution of Afghanistan*, Article 83-4, 2004 (SY 1382) <http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/The-Constitution.pdf> (accessed 14 July 2014); *Afghanistan Electoral Law* (Official Gazette no. 1112), Article 30, 2014 (SY1392), http://www.iec.org.af/pdf/legalframework/law/electorallow_eng.pdf (accessed 14 July 2014).

15 Although, as Lough et al. highlighted in "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities," in the 2009/2010 elections there were some security arrangements to protect female candidates, it was not enough to prevent attacks. Nor have perpetrators of attacks on female political leaders been held accountable.

16 Orzala Ashraf Nemat and Ajmal Samadi, "Forgotten Heroes: Afghan Women Leaders Killed in Impunity, Ignored in Justice" (Kabul: Afghanistan Rights Monitor, 2012).

17 Lough et al., "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities," 13.

18 Nemat and Samadi, "Forgotten Heroes."

19 Christine Roehrs, "Damage Avoided, for Now? The Very Short Debate about the ERAW Law" (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2013), <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/damage-avoided-for-now-the-very-short-debate-about-the-eraw-law/>; Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, Masood Saifullah, "A Step Backwards for Women's Rights in Afghanistan," *Deutsche Welle News*, 10 July 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/a-step-backwards-for-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/a-18576568> (accessed on 15 July 2015). Some significant examples of these are the blockage of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law in parliament by conservative MPs, and the absence of a large number of female MPs when women ministers and, recently, the first female candidate for the Supreme Court were voted on.

Another important hindering factor has been the limitations for female constituents to vote for women whom they believe can voice and understand their needs. These groups often were marginalised because of the dominance of other candidates and their voters who enjoyed support from various patronage networks and stronger power-brokers.²⁰ In sum, while the legal framework and political commitments were considered equal in terms of women and men's rights to vote and be elected, opportunities for women, both as candidates and as voters, have been far too unequal and limited.²¹

Policy Recommendations

- **Building systematic awareness capacity** for women leaders, familiarising them with having a good contextual analysis and understanding of the political and economic environment in order to make better calculations and build the right forms of coalitions to succeed. Women candidates need a proper understanding of coalition-building with other social or socio-political groups in order to utilise stronger community support; however, without having these skills, they risk continuing to serve other groups' interests. Women voters, too, need to be included in civic education awareness-raising, and electoral staff should ensure they have a secure environment to cast their votes, away from the pressure or influence of powerful figures and their loyalists.
- There is an urgent **need for a comprehensive security joint plan** by the ANSF on how to ensure female parliamentary and district council candidates' (and members') security. Those prone to more risks particularly need to be made aware of potential risks and the means to avoid them. It is understandable that the government on its own cannot be expected to guarantee safety of female leaders, but a good and action-oriented security and protection plan along with training for female candidates can help to reduce the risk factors significantly.
- The **national political and economic elites** need to have a clearer understanding of the importance of meaningful participation of women in decision-making and how it benefits them in all aspects. Confrontational approaches to engage with political and economic elites should be replaced by constructive engagements between them and women leaders, both at national and sub-national levels where women's meaningful inclusion becomes a precondition for recognising the role of political elites in democratic processes.
- **Election reforms** as a necessary part of strengthening the legitimacy of future elections need to include further transparency techniques in monitoring of campaign expenditure, vetting procedures, inclusive elections awareness campaigns, voting registration and all aspects of its work. More transparency can result in balanced and better participation by all citizens, including women.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's turbulent political history over the past four decades has resulted in a mix of different or, in some instances, no opportunities for women to emerge as elected leaders in the political sphere.

This policy note highlights the importance of situating women's political participation in a broader context of liberal state-building interventions in patronage-based systems of governance. This framework provides an in-depth understanding of the main motivations, and facilitating and hindering factors for women to take part in democratic processes as voters and as candidates and elected members. In order to tackle challenges and hindering factors, the policy note recommends building a systematic programme for awareness of women candidates and voters on the political economy of the localities they represent and on coalition-building; constructing a comprehensive security plan for protection of voters, candidates and members of elected constituencies and the need for constructive and informed engagement with political and economic elites and overall elections reforms to ensure transparency and effectiveness of the electoral system. It concludes that meaningful participation in the democratic political processes is not just about having women elected and counting the number of female voters, it is about the change that elected women can bring about in improving women's legal, political and social status in society.

²⁰ Lough et al., "Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities."

²¹ Ibid.