

Violence Against Women in Elections in Afghanistan: An IFES Assessment

March 2019

Executive Summary

On October 20, 2018, Afghanistan held its long-delayed National Parliamentary (Wolesi Jirga) election. Over the past two decades, Afghanistan's elections have faced logistical issues, allegations of fraud and insecurity, with unique impacts on women. The 2018 parliamentary election was no exception. Key Election Day challenges included delayed opening of polling stations; widespread confusion over biometric voter verification forms; interference of polling station staff and voter intimidation. Additionally, throughout the election period, the United States and the Taliban began peace negotiations that sidelined both the Afghan government and women from dialogues, despite the outsized impact that the Taliban's formalized engagement in Afghanistan could have on women's rights and safety.

Afghanistan's combined factors of insecurity and political instability; widespread impunity for and high rates of violence against women; and negative perceptions about women's rights have gender specific effects on Afghan women's full and equal participation in the electoral process. From September 2018 to March 2019, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) worked with the Afghan Women's Network to conduct a field-based assessment in order to assess how Afghan women experienced violence throughout the 2018 parliamentary election and the key factors that are preventing women's full political participation. The assessment also identifies mitigation strategies to reduce and prevent electoral violence against women in Afghanistan. Carried out with support from Global Affairs Canada, the assessment includes data from in-person focus groups, individual interviews and informational surveys of male and female candidates that taken together, reached 221 people across all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

Drawing on this data, the assessment highlights several key trends in electoral violence against Afghan women that must be urgently addressed:

Social media is effectively and increasingly used to amplify and disseminate attacks against women and their families to national audiences: The assessment found that character assassinations through social platforms are widely used by political opponents to discredit, humiliate or otherwise harm women candidates, and in so doing, destroy a woman's candidacy for political office. Two specific tactics include sharing women candidates' private photos – in which they were not covered by a veil – online; and spreading false allegations about the promiscuity of women candidates and their daughters. As one young woman said: *"We are afraid of being defamed, this is why we don't dare to run for office. When I was younger I always wanted to be a politician but not anymore."*

High rates of sexual harassment against women in politics perpetuates the negative perception that women politicians are immoral. Women candidates face pervasive sexual harassment which, as acknowledged by many of the respondents, is one of the driving factors discouraging women from contesting for office. The assessment found that women's lack of financial resources in particular exposes them to sexual abuse by other electoral stakeholders. Women candidates repeatedly cited examples of police, elected officials, party leaders, and election administrators demanding sexual favors in exchange for financial or political support. Within this context, becoming a female politician is synonymous with being "guilty" of sexual relations, a fact that further shames survivors of violence and discourages women from exercising their right to political participation.

Within this context of widespread harassment, representatives from the Independent Election Commission (IEC) were amongst the most widely cited perpetrators. Assessment respondents noted that IEC staff members demand sexual favors from women candidates in exchange for being placed higher on the candidate lists. If the scale of these incidents is indeed true, then rampant harassment contradicts the statements by IEC staff that *“there is no tolerance for harassment (including psychological) and this is very serious.”* Additionally, public perceptions about impunity for IEC officials engaged in sexual abuse against women candidates and other women electoral stakeholders undermines the IEC’s ability to attract women staff, who in 2017, held fewer than seven percent of IEC staff positions.

There are widespread concerns that women’s marginalization from the ongoing peace talks with the Taliban will undermine women’s rights and democratic progress in Afghanistan. Assessment respondents repeatedly noted concerns that women’s rights to political participation and representation are being traded for short term “peace” deals between the Taliban and the United States. While the Taliban have publicly maintained that they will respect women’s rights, in reality, the assessment found that Taliban actors used threats and other violence throughout the 2018 election period to specifically discourage women’s political participation as voters and candidates. For example, respondents noted that the Taliban circulated a letter before the election threatening women that if they left their homes to participate in politics, *“we will know.”*

Harassment of women candidates contributes to families’ reticence to support women family members contesting for office. Respondents expressed that due to cultural beliefs, women cannot participate in politics without the active support of their families. As a result, one of the first hurdles women must overcome is to persuade their immediate families to support them in filing as candidates or even just registering to vote. Unfortunately, due in part to concerns that women will be harmed if they engage in politics, family members often discourage women from political engagement. Assessment respondents further highlighted that “family shame” around women voting and running as candidates has increased from the last election. This mentality can constitute VAWE in the case that family members use intimidation, harassment, or other tactics to inhibit women’s rights to engage in all aspects of the electoral process.

While the assessment finds significant obstacles to achieving women’s full and equal political participation, there are windows of opportunity to consider as well. These include a legal framework that protects women and stipulates punitive action for those who violate women’s electoral rights; an existing network of women’s rights groups and advocates who have had notable successes working together to advance legal reforms; the development of government policies, such as the National Action Plan that includes commitments to addressing women’s safety and security; and existing structures – such as shuras and community councils – which are viewed by some women as accessible platforms for obtaining help for survivors facing violence. Highlighting these and other windows of opportunities, the assessment concludes with practical recommendations for key stakeholders, including the government, international donors, civil society, the IEC and political parties, that could help move the bar when it comes to the elimination of VAWE and full political participation of women in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan grapples with peace negotiations and prepares for future elections, including a presidential election currently scheduled for September 2019, strategic efforts are urgently needed to ensure that women’s rights to participate as electoral and political decision makers are safeguarded and bolstered.

Recommendations

To the Afghan Government:

- Strengthen the regulatory framework relating to campaign finance and establish a sufficiently resourced monitoring unit at the IEC that is equipped to more effectively enforce campaign finance provisions. Such provisions would reduce the cost of electoral campaigns and in so doing, even the playing field between male and female candidates.
- Establish a system of public funding of political parties and create incentives for political parties to increase women's representation by giving additional funds to those that run or elect more women.
- Strengthen educational outreach on the reporting channels for violence against women and build the capacity of legal authorities to investigate such cases in formal courts.
- Update the 2016 Election Law, EAW Law and/or other relevant legislation to explicitly recognize violence against women candidates and elected representatives as criminal, and establish reporting mechanisms that can be used by women in public office.
- Encourage legal authorities to collaborate more closely with the ECC to prosecute VAWE crimes.

To the Independent Election Commission (IEC):

- Ensure that the Gender Unit has the resources and authority needed to carry out its role, and that representatives from the IEC Gender Unit are on hiring panels for senior level staff, as well as integrated into decision making processes.
- Establish a gender quota to mandate a minimum number of senior level women officers in each provincial office.
- Implement an IEC public awareness campaign that includes specific steps taken to enhance the IEC's commitment to enhancing neutrality, professionalism, gender equality and women's participation.
- Strengthen internal codes of conduct to include prohibition of any forms of violence against women, both within and outside of the IEC, clarify penalties for violations, and establish confidential reporting channels.
- Conduct and publish pre- and post-election technical assessments (PETAs) to identify and plan for the gender differential needs throughout the electoral cycle. Key areas of focus could include a systematic analysis of women's legal rights, mapping of women only polling station placements, gender sensitive voter information requirements, and the level of women's representation across election administrators and security providers.
- Implement and enforce a zero tolerance policy for sexual harassment policy for all staff.
- Implement gender sensitivity training for IEC staff and security actors that includes a focus on the unique ways that VAWE impacts women's political participation, and as such, undermines the democratic process. Trainings should highlight the roles and responsibilities of IEC staff to identify and address VAWE at polling stations and throughout the electoral process.
- Conduct robust voter and civic education that includes a focus on the importance of women's political participation, as well as information on mechanisms for addressing gender based electoral violence. Such campaigns could include gender sensitive messaging that demonstrates that male family members and respected leaders endorse and stand with women candidates.
- Acknowledge online hate speech, including against women candidates, as unacceptable, and a violation of electoral laws.

- Ahead of elections, deploy mobile registration teams that include women to facilitate the voter registration of women, particularly in more rural areas.

To Civil Society:

- Support public awareness campaigns that highlight the importance of women's political participation as elected leaders. Campaigns could highlight: women's rights to democratic participation, as laid out in the Constitution and Islam; examples of men's support for women political leaders; online violence against women as an illegal act; and campaigns such as "#MeToo" where female politicians share their stories as success stories.
- Train judges, police and others, especially in the provinces, on how to adjudicate and investigate VAWE cases, and produce reference materials to support these efforts.
- Provide leadership trainings to women in politics that include a focus on building solidarity networks with other women leaders. IFES global She Leads women's leadership training could provide a model.
- Serve as watchdog to monitor lawsuits and other election complaints filed around gender specific election violations and publish results.
- Conduct gender specific election observation (either independently or inclusive of larger observation missions), using internationally recognized checklists.

To Political Parties:

- Develop and adopt political party codes of conduct and action plans that include a commitment to respecting women's rights to a safe and secure political environment, zero tolerance toward sexual harassment, and a rejection of utilization of gender based hate speech and other forms of violence against women through social media platforms.
- Implement requirements for gender-balanced boards for selecting party candidates.
- Require gender-sensitivity training courses for political party members.

To International Donors:

- Support programs that promote civil society's role as watchdogs against misogynistic coverage of women candidates; and targeted capacity building support to electoral stakeholders – including IEC and ECC officials– with a focus on gender sensitivity, gender inclusive budgeting and planning.
- Support strengthened IEC public awareness efforts that include a focus on women's political participation and the essential role that women play as equal stakeholders in the democratic process.
- Support efforts by national NGOs to build awareness of violations, publishing results of any court cases and reinforcing other zero-tolerance messaging toward sexual harassment in the electoral process.
- If peace negotiations move forward, guarantee that women are well represented at the negotiation table and prioritize the demands made by Afghan women, as outlined in the Afghan Women's Network's 2019 statement on the Doha Peace talks. These include: ensuring that the democratic structure of government is maintained; protecting women's equal rights in the Constitution and in all Afghan laws, especially rights to safety and security; maintaining commitments to international and regional human rights agreements; and protecting freedom of expression and assembly – both during and after the peace negotiations.