

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

“the new government can neither afford to ignore women’s political interests nor fail to capitalize on their contribution to the peace negotiations during the era of transition and transformation.”

- Abdullah Athayi, June 20, 2014

If women as voters are to have a meaningful say in who governs Afghanistan, they must be able to access information about the electoral process and have counterparts within electoral institutions that can facilitate their access to the process. This fact sheet examines the state of women’s political participation in Afghanistan. Please also see our other fact sheet, Women in Government, for information on women’s representation in appointed positions in government.

AFGHAN GOVERNMENTS ON WOMEN’S RIGHTS

The notion of mainstreaming gender equality into politics is not new to Afghanistan. Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, who ruled from 1880-1901, encouraged the political participation of women, even using religious rhetoric to justify his political motivations, as noted by scholar Maliha Zulfacar (2006). He further sought to improve the status of women by prohibiting childhood marriage, forced marriage, and the forced marriage of a widow to her deceased husband’s brother, as well as granting women inheritance and divorce rights.

As has often been the case in Afghanistan, reforms on women’s rights were not maintained once the ruler changed. Under the rule of Amir Abdul Rahman Khan’s successor, Amir Habibullah, hardly any of these



Photo Credit: Duaine Goodno

Women voting in Kabul in 2004 at first presidential election in Afghan history

changes were sustained. But when a reform-minded king, Amir Amanullah Khan, came to power in 1919, he revived efforts to emancipate women, seeking to bring women into public life. His most controversial move was to abolish mandatory veiling. But he, and his wife, the university-educated Queen Soraya, sought to establish and spread girls’ education, also encouraged women and girls to go overseas for further study. However, not all within Afghan society welcomed his advancements. Resentment grew amongst various religious and tribal leaders, and some perceived some of the changes as at the behest of outsiders. The

backlash led to Amanullah’s abdication in 1929, and his reforms for women were promptly halted.

The next leader who again sought to improve the status of women was Prime Minister Daoud Khan, in power from 1953-1963 as Afghanistan’s monarchy was becoming more democratic. Women were encouraged to participate in national development, to become educated, and to work outside the home in ‘gender-appropriate’ roles – such as teaching, nursing, and administrative roles – much like the situation elsewhere in the world at the time. Further social and political liberalization occurred

"All the Muslims are needed. It becomes the absolute duty of every woman to respond to the call without the permission of her husband; of every slave without the permission of his master; of every indebted man without the permission of his creditors."

- Amir Abdul Rahman Khan
(Ruler 1880-1901)

over the next decade, 1963-1973, and a woman named Kubra Nurzai was made cabinet minister of the Ministry of Health (1966-1969). During this period, women were elected for the first time into Afghanistan's parliament. In 1965, Khadija Ahrari, Masuma Esmati Wardak, Roqia Abubakr and Anahita Ratebzad became the first female parliamentarians of Afghanistan.

While women political dissidents were targeted during the Soviet occupation period when Afghanistan was led by a Communist political party, women who were aligned with the ruling People's Democratic Party of

Afghanistan (PDPA) also held seats of power at this time. In fact, the deputy head of state from 1980-1986 was a woman, Anahita Ratebzad, a founder of the PDPA who had previously served as Ambassador to Yugoslavia, and had held two cabinet posts (Minister of Education and Minister of Social Affairs). She was rumored to be the partner of President Babrak Kamal, and widely considered to be one of the most powerful members of the communist government.

When the Mujahideen seized power in 1992, women continued to work in the civil service, but could have little role in public life as lawlessness took over, and the Mujahideen government began imposing fundamentalist rules over women that greatly restricted their mobility and freedom of association, expression and political participation. The situation worsened drastically when the Taliban came to power in 1994 in Kandahar and in 1996 in Kabul. Among many other restrictions, women and girls were banned from school, women were banned from working, and even from appearing outside their homes without being accompanied by a male relative.

There were no elections, and no place whatsoever for women in public life.

Today's Afghan Government is a major improvement over the days of the Taliban, but there is still a long way to go. Afghan women's organizations are unsatisfied with the pace of change, often finding that the rhetoric towards women's rights does not match the action. Nevertheless, women are represented, in numbers varying from minuscule (one mayor in the country is female) to considerable (over a quarter of parliamentarians are women) at all levels of the political system. Women can and do vote in elections, and women's organizations have mobilized to raise women's civic awareness and help them gain a voice in political decision-making. The challenges today are an ongoing Taliban influence in many areas and a lack of security, that endangers women who seek to participate in politics whether as voters, candidates or as representatives. Other challenges are traditional social and religious mores that prevent women's full and meaningful access to the political process.



Photo Credit: CW4WAfghan

"We have the right to choose our president."

Afghan women gather in a peace march in 2004 to encourage women to register to vote at the Presidential election.

Afghan Women and Historical International Legislation

- Afghanistan was one of the 48 countries that voted in favour of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the UN General Assembly in 10 December 1948
- Afghanistan signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1980 (however, CEDAW was only ratified in 2003)
- Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994, five years after the Convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AS POLITICAL CANDIDATES

In the 2010 elections, 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 candidates, as reported by the US Institute for Peace (2012). One additional woman was elected to Parliament above the 68-person quota for women's representation, and in four provinces, female candidates received the highest number of votes of any candidate. Nearly a quarter of women candidates (55 of the additional women candidates) ran in

Kabul – suggesting that running for office is more attractive for women in safer, urban areas. Nevertheless, at least three women ran in each province, including in conservative and insecure areas. For instance, in Zabul and Nuristan, both small and culturally conservative provinces, women candidates made up nearly half of the total field of candidates. Both of Nimroz province's parliamentary representatives are women. This is an Afghan first, where in four of the more remote provinces – Farah, Nuristan, Nimroz and Zabul – women won more votes than any male candidates. Still, women only made up about 16% of total candidates and without the constitutional quota fewer women would have won seats. In addition, votes for women candidates remain low in the 2010 elections. The quota ensures that, at a minimum, women candidates will fill all 68 seats allocated for women and that are likely to win additional seats.

One finding from the 2010 parliamentary candidate statistics is that women face less competition for seats than men do, therefore making it enticing for political parties or coalitions to recruit powerful women to run on their platforms, according to USIP (2012). One entity monitoring women's political participation is the Free and Fair Elections Association (FEFA), an Afghan electoral monitoring organization that tracks threats and attacks against candidates as well as voters. In a FEFA brief, it was reported that in 2010 mullahs were preaching that it was improper for women to seek election, and FEFA document some cases of personal attacks against specific women. In addition to cultural, religious and political opposition to the involvement of women in politics, FEFA also reports there are inadequate mechanisms to express grievances or report misconduct against women.



Women voting in the 2014 Presidential Election in Kabul. Photo Credit: UNAMA

The Independent Election Commission

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) was established under Article 156 of the Constitution, and is the institution responsible for administering and supervising elections and referenda, and acts independently. The IEC is committed to promoting gender equality in elections in line with the international human rights instruments that Afghanistan has signed, particularly CEDAW, ratified in 2003. The IEC aims to increase female participation in the electoral processes as voters, candidates, electoral administrators, and observers. In order to achieve greater participation of women. The IEC created its Gender Unit in 2009. Learn more at: <http://www.iec.org.af/>

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AS VOTERS

Afghanistan went to the polls again in 2014 and recorded high voter turnout at 7 million voters, of some 12 million eligible, including 36% women in the first round in April 2014 and 38% women in the runoff in June 2014, according to the IEC (while voter turnout in 2009 was lower, women still constituted 38% of registered voters; and in 2004, they constituted 42% of voters). Voters could select from among 11 male presidential candidates, and of 22 vice-presidential candidates, three were women. During presidential elections, Afghans also elect their provincial representatives, the provincial councilors. In 2014, there were 2,590

candidates of which only 297 were women (UNDP/ELECT II, 2014), a decrease from the 2009 elections when there were 328 provincial council candidates (however, it has also been noted that in 2014, provincial candidates tended to be much younger). Of 485 provincial councilor seats, 96 are reserved for women.

“Together with the older candidates the ambitious young female and male candidates are promising equality, they’re raising the voice of women, calling for accountability of the government, for justice, and want to ensure a better future for all Afghans. The nomination of young female candidates is a great achievement even if it’s only happening largely in major cities. It shows that the country is moving from a traditional

community towards a democratic society and that new ground is being paved for Afghanistan’s younger generations, especially the women, to find platforms and take positions in public office.”

- Abdullah Athayi, Heinrich Boell Foundation, June 20, 2014

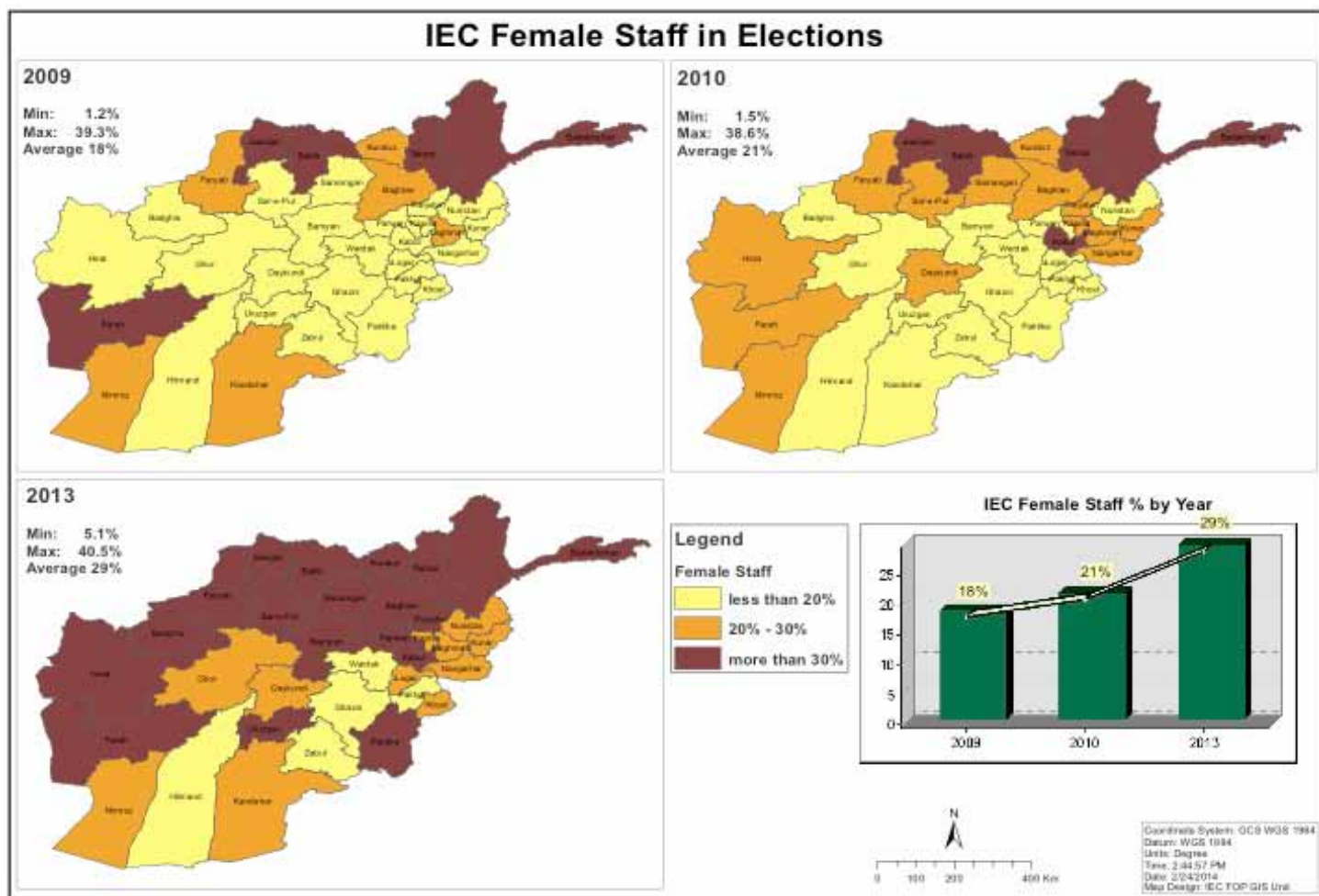
Figures from the 2014 Elections

Female-only polling stations: 8,573 out of 20,795

Female body searchers recruited by the Ministry of Interior: 13,690

Female police officers trained for elections: 581

(UNDP/ELECTII, 2014)



Resource: Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan website – April 2014.

website: www.cw4wafghan.ca

P.O.Box 86016, Calgary, AB T2T 6B7 • Tel: 1 403 244-5625 • email: info@cw4wafghan.ca

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

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, women lodged only 11%. In addition, as a legal institution, the ECC requires complaints and decisions to be in writing. Women's low literacy, especially acute in rural areas, creates a significant barrier to women accessing the complaints process without staff to facilitate and assist with the filing requirements.

Aside from an inadequate forum to express any grievances, women may be hesitant to report election fraud, or threats stemming from their political participation, perhaps out of fear of reprisals for making such reports. It was impossible to tell from ECC data whether male members of women's campaigns filed complaints on their behalf, but based on observer reports, women candidates and voters are generally deterred from reporting electoral violations because they have little experience with a complaints system that protects their interests. For example, a woman candidate in Paktika was kidnapped and held by the Taliban for six days after announcing her candidacy, and once released, declined to file a complaint with any local or international body.

Another barrier to women's political participation is the difficulty faced by the IEC in recruiting women staff for polling locations in conservative and insecure areas – this is critical aspect given that Afghan social norms makes it difficult for women to participate in any aspect of the electoral process if doing so requires their interaction with men outside of their families. If women staff members are unavailable polling stations are either closed or staffed by men – thereby threatening the participation of women as voters.



WOMEN AND THE IEC

To safeguard the fundamental right to vote for all eligible women, the IEC developed a number of gender activities, including: 1) coordination of meetings between the Ministry of Hajj and Ministry of Women's Affairs; 2) consultations with Mullahs to sensitize them on the importance of women's electoral participation; 3) seminars with women on the importance of their participation as voters; 4) information leaflets to increase awareness on voter registration and polling; 5) 'Gender and Elections group' to raise and discuss gender-related electoral issues; 6) gender training for electoral staff; 7) gender and public outreach; 8) external relations to ensure that gender relevant information/presentations are shared with various stakeholders; and 9) separate registration and polling stations staffed by women for women.

Gender and the IEC

- There is a Gender Focal Point in each IEC provincial office
- Gender sensitive training is offered to IEC commissioners and other staff
- The IEC provides sex-disaggregated data on elections
- Meetings on women and elections are held by the IEC for stakeholders
- Lessons Learned in gender workshops were hosted after the 2009 and 2010 elections
- The IEC aims to recruit more women staff. In 2010, there was 31% female civic educators; 19% female district field coordinators; 2 of 7 commissioners are female; and 1 of 5 departmental directors were female.

website: www.cw4wafghan.ca

P.O.Box 86016, Calgary, AB T2T 6B7 • Tel: 1 403 244-5625 • email: info@cw4wafghan.ca