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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report, sponsored by the Center for Gender and Peacebuilding at the U.S. Institute of Peace, is based on data culled from the 2010 parliamentary elections in Afghanistan.

Using these numbers, the authors assess how female candidates and voters fared in the last election and provide recommendations for improving women's participation in future Afghan elections.

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Scott Worden and Nina Sudhakar

Learning from Women's Success in the 2010 Afghan Elections

Summary

- Afghan women made small but significant gains in participation in Afghanistan's September 2010 parliamentary elections. But their status in Afghanistan's electoral system is precarious, and significant effort is needed to preserve gains during the next election cycle in 2013–15.
- In the 2010 parliamentary elections, seventy-eight more female candidates ran than in the 2005 elections, a 24 percent increase. One additional woman was elected to Parliament over the sixty-eight-person quota stated in the constitution, and in four provinces, a woman received the highest number of votes out of all candidates.
- Women continued to face significant obstacles to campaigning, however, with female candidates and their campaign workers receiving a disproportionate number of threats or attacks reported during the elections. In less secure areas, cultural restrictions on women's access to public spaces increased, leaving many female candidates unable to effectively communicate with voters.
- Women made up 40 percent of the electorate in 2010, but women's access to the electoral process as voters often depends on having women hired as election workers by the electoral administration, candidates, and observer groups. Without female counterparts working at the polls, many women will stay home due to cultural concerns over interacting with men in public places.
- A significant finding from the 2010 candidate statistics is that women face less competition for seats than men do, making it attractive for political parties or coalitions to recruit powerful women to run on their platforms.

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JUNE 2012

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After a year-long dispute over the final results of Afghanistan's September 2010 parliamentary election, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) revised its certified results on August 21, 2011, and established the final composition of the second elected Afghan Parliament. Based on these numbers, it is possible to assess how female candidates fared and take stock of women's overall participation in the elections. Women's participation as voters remained constant, with 40 percent of ballots cast in female-only polling stations. Women fared slightly better than in previous elections as candidates, with one additional woman being elected to the lower house of Parliament and several women receiving the most votes in their provinces. More women ran for election in 2010—primarily in more urban and more secure provinces—but in many locations insecurity and cultural restrictions have made it more difficult for women to participate in Afghanistan's nascent democracy.

Women's participation in the Afghan electoral process and their strong presence in Parliament—by law, more than 25 percent of the seats are reserved for women—is arguably one of the most important advances in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Warlords must now mingle with young, educated, and outspoken women on the floor of Parliament and hear their voices as part of the national discourse. But, as both Afghan women's groups such as the Afghan Women's Network and U.S. policymakers such as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton have stated, the gains women have made in political and social life in Afghanistan are fragile and reversible.¹ If women's rights and women's political participation are not a central point of the transition to full Afghan sovereignty in 2014, one can easily imagine their rights being curtailed as part of peace negotiations with the Taliban or other conservative factions.

Securing and even increasing women's roles in Afghan elections are important steps to making women's voices a permanent part of Afghan political life. The 2004 constitution requires that provincial council elections be held in 2013 (although many predict these will be postponed), presidential elections in 2014 (when Karzai is barred from running for a third term), and parliamentary elections in 2015. If women are to have a seat at the decision-making table as elected representatives, then it is important to understand what led to their success at the ballot box in 2010 and apply lessons to the upcoming contests. If women as voters are to have a meaningful say in who governs Afghanistan, they must be better informed about the electoral process—in ways that compensate for exceptionally low literacy—and have counterparts within electoral institutions that can facilitate their access to the process.

Overview of Women's Participation in the 2010 Elections

Improving women's participation in Afghanistan's next elections must come from carefully taking stock of lessons and challenges to women's involvement in the 2010 parliamentary elections. The Afghan constitution and electoral law partly compensate for the obstacles women face in elections by establishing protections for women to help ensure a minimal level of participation and representation. According to Article 83 of the 2004 constitution, an average of two women from each province must be seated in Parliament, equal to sixty-eight seats, or 27 percent of the 249-seat lower house.² By comparison, 17 percent of the members of the U.S. Congress were women in 2011. Although controversial, Afghanistan's quota has proven successful in promoting women's participation in politics.

Women's participation as parliamentary candidates increased significantly in the 2010 election, with the final candidate list including seventy-eight more women than in 2005—an increase of 24 percent.³ The number of male candidates fell 25 percent, from 2,379 to 2,171.⁴ Nearly a quarter of the female candidates—fifty-five of the additional female candidates—ran in Kabul, one of the safest and most progressive areas of the country, illustrating

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that running for office is more attractive for women in safer, more cosmopolitan urban areas. But at least three women ran in each province, including several conservative and insecure areas; smaller increases in the number of women running in Herat, Nangarhar, Sar-i-pul, and Kapisa reinforce the trend. That said, in Zabul and Nuristan provinces, each of which are small and culturally conservative, female candidates made up nearly half of the total field of candidates, indicating that simple categorizations of women's access to politics are not easy in the complex Afghan landscape.

Perhaps most significant is that one more woman was elected to Parliament in 2010 than in 2005—one above the minimum constitutional quota because both of Nimroz province's representatives are women. This is an Afghan first. In four of the more remote provinces—Farah, Nuristan, Nimroz, and Zabul—a woman won more votes than any of the men.

On the other hand, women still only made up about 16 percent of the total number of candidates. Further, fewer women than in 2005 would have won seats without the constitutional quota, which is distributed across the thirty-five provincial and nomad constituencies in proportion to their population. In 2005, nineteen women received enough votes to earn a parliamentary seat regardless of the quota; seventeen met this mark in 2010.⁵ The reasons for the decline are complex and depend on provincial political and security dynamics. But the overall lesson is that without the quota, women would be significantly underrepresented in Parliament.

Vote totals for all candidates are remarkably low in Afghanistan due to the high number of candidates who made it onto the ballot—2,577 candidates competed for 249 seats in 2010—and the relatively low overall voter turnout.⁶ Winning women candidates on average received only 3,257 votes each, whereas winning male candidates on average received 6,973 votes each.⁷ In Kabul, the most popular candidate at the ballot box was Hajji Muhammad Mohaqeq, who received just over sixteen thousand votes in a province of nearly four million people. Two of the most powerful legislators, Younas Qanooni and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, received less than ten thousand votes each in Kabul. As a result, both male and female members of Parliament have extremely narrow electoral bases, and thus not much incentive for broad representation while they are in office.

Also concerning for future elections is that female candidates received a disproportionate number of threats and attacks against candidates reported by the Free and Fair Elections Association (FEFA), the Afghan electoral monitoring organization.⁸ In addition, there were reports in several provinces of local mullahs preaching that it was improper for women to seek election, including in some cases personal attacks about specific female candidates' honor. Cultural, religious, and political opposition to women in political life creates a hostile environment in many communities that has a chilling effect on women's participation as voters and election workers. Despite such threats, the percentage of female voters appeared to remain constant amid an overall decline in total voter turnout for the election. The final number of valid ballots cast in 2010 was just under four million votes, more than one-third fewer than the turnout for the first parliamentary election in 2005. The proportion of ballots cast by women has remained at an average of 40 percent of total votes being cast at specially designated female polling stations since the 2005 elections.⁹

As with previous elections, the IEC had difficulty recruiting female staff for polling locations in conservative and insecure areas. Given Afghan social norms, it is difficult for many women to participate in any aspect of the electoral process if doing so requires interacting with men outside of their families. Thus women use separate polling stations in each polling center and these stations are managed by female staff. However, when female staff are unavailable, the polling stations are either closed or staffed by men. This practice may be threatening to female voters or, more likely, their families, who will prohibit them from voting.

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 thirty-four

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The decline in overall security across Afghanistan disproportionately affects women's ability to participate in public political life.

Provincial Electoral Complaints Commission (PECC) offices.¹⁰ Being required to speak to a male investigator creates a barrier for women to complain about discrimination they may have suffered, which is reflected in a much lower percentage of electoral complaints from women; of about four thousand complaints, women lodged only 11 percent.¹¹ In addition, as a legal institution, the ECC requires complaints and decisions to be in writing. Women's low literacy—as little as 5 percent in rural areas—creates a significant barrier to accessing the complaints process without staff to facilitate and assist with the filing requirements.

Unwillingness to report fraud or threats may be due to fear of reprisals. A female 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.¹² It is impossible to tell from ECC data whether male members of women's campaigns filed complaints on their behalf, but based on observer reports, female candidates and voters are generally deterred from reporting electoral violations because they have little experience with a complaints system that protects their interests.¹³

The decline in overall security across Afghanistan also disproportionately affects women's ability to participate in public political life. The Taliban targets female politicians with specific threats and there are concerns that an eventual reconciliation with insurgent forces may rely on deals to reduce the current access women have to the electoral process. With at least a year until the next scheduled national election—the 2013 provincial council elections—there is a chance to increase public education about the electoral process, particularly focusing on women's rights and opportunities to participate. The IEC and observer organizations should focus particularly on recruiting and training women to participate in the electoral process.

At the same time, political parties should be made aware of the opportunities for their success by recruiting women to represent them on the ballot. One of the subtle lessons of the 2010 elections was that the combination of the high constitutional quota of female seats and relatively low numbers of female candidates meant the odds of a particular woman winning election were significantly greater than for a man in many provinces. On average, 5.6 women ran for each available quota seat, whereas 10.4 men ran for each open gender seat, making men half as likely to win on average. Thus, for political parties or factions, having a woman represent them would be a more reliable way to ensure a seat in Parliament than backing a male candidate, particularly in provinces with few female candidates. In Panjsher, only two female candidates ran for the one allotted seat, whereas ten male candidates ran for the remaining seat. The odds similarly favored women candidates in Baghdis (four female candidates for one seat versus thirty-six male candidates for three remaining seats); Baghlan (twelve female candidates for two allotted seats versus 106 male candidates for six remaining seats); and Kunar (two female candidates for one reserved seat versus twenty-five male candidates for four remaining seats).

Focusing on such electoral math may stimulate better organization of the political process and increase opportunities for women as voters and candidates more than overt appeals to equal gender rights in Afghan politics. Worldwide trends indicate that parties that expand the participation of women at senior levels improve their chances of electoral success over the long term, especially if this presence is maintained.¹⁴ Another important lesson is that illustrated by Nimroz province: For female candidates to win, they must secure not only female votes, but male votes as well. Female candidates themselves recognized the importance of the male vote and focused their 2010 campaigns on trying to win votes from both men and women, sometimes focusing solely on male voters. This strategy is borne out in the numbers, as Nimroz had the highest percentage of male votes cast for female candidates, just about 40 percent. In Nuristan province, where a similarly high number of male votes were cast for female candidates, a female candidate also won the highest number of votes of any other candidate.¹⁵

Progress and Challenges for Women Candidates

Female candidates face significant cultural, educational, and financial obstacles in the electoral process. In particular, in many areas of Afghanistan, women are culturally restricted from campaigning in front of men, threatened for holding leadership positions, and scorned for having their pictures on campaign posters. In a country where photos are used on ballots to identify candidates—given less than 50 percent literacy, and half that among potential female voters—this last obstacle represents a considerable barrier to women candidates. Women have thus resorted to innovative approaches to avoid cultural restrictions, including distributing business cards with their platforms on them rather than using posters, convening campaign events in special women’s centers or women’s gardens, and working through male relatives and supporters to spread the word on their candidacy. Nevertheless, men have a much easier time interacting with the public for their campaigns.

More disturbing are the greater threats that women candidates face compared with male candidates. In the 2010 campaign period these ranged from verbal abuse and the tearing of campaign posters to actual physical violence. During the first six weeks of campaigning, nine of the ten candidate-specific threats reported to FEFA observers were aimed at women.¹⁶ In the campaign period, six of the eleven campaigners killed worked for female candidates; five of these worked for one female candidate from Herat province.¹⁷ In Badakhshan, FEFA observers reported that clerics publicly accused female candidates of being prostitutes and apostates and urged congregations to vote for male candidates. Observers also reported that male candidates paid mullahs to speak out against female rival candidates.¹⁸ Redress for such incidents was often inadequate or unavailable. The ECC sanctioned few male candidates for accusing women candidates of religious infractions, and those who were paid only small fines.¹⁹

Overall, about one-third of female candidates reported interference, intimidation, or violence against them from both male and female opponents.²⁰ But threats against women candidates stemmed from a variety of sources. In the early weeks of campaigning, the Taliban either claimed responsibility or was widely linked to about a third of threats against women candidates, with the remainder attributed to opponent candidates, local community members, or power brokers.²¹ Even male supporters of female candidates were targeted, including family members; the Taliban killed the husband of a female candidate from Helmand.²² Beyond physical threats, the Taliban also actively broadcasted its opposition to female participation in the elections through radio in Kunar.²³ Such messages mirrored those given by imams in mosques in Badghis, Takhar, Badakhshan, and Kunar provinces, saying Islam denies women a role in public life because this role becomes a source of depravity.²⁴ Also in Kunar, a religious scholar serving as a member of Parliament at the time spoke out strongly against women’s roles in the election because he believed women’s votes take away from “men’s seats.”²⁵

Women candidates faced additional obstacles due to their limited access to capital. Revisions to Afghan electoral law in early 2010 raised the deposit fee requirements for parliamentary candidates from 10,000 Afghanis (approximately \$200) to 30,000 Afghanis (approximately \$600). The IEC gender unit acknowledged that this fee increase deterred potential women candidates, who are often not members of political networks and lack independent access to or control over financial resources.²⁶ Observers reported that in one province, a women’s rights activist had to secure secret backing from a warlord to obtain the capital to run.²⁷ Female candidates’ relative lack of resources can also bolster public perceptions of women as ineffective representatives, resulting in failures to take women’s candidacies seriously.²⁸ Though international organizations previously had worked to support free media slots and free poster and card printing for female candidates, these

In many areas of Afghanistan, women are culturally restricted from campaigning in front of men, threatened for holding leadership positions, and scorned for having their pictures on campaign posters.

activities either occurred late in the election cycle or not at all during the 2010 campaign. Afghan electoral law explicitly prohibits foreign funds from being used in political campaigns, so direct support from international NGOs is not an option.

The list of female candidates included a wide variety of sectors of Afghan society, including a former Afghan Star contestant,²⁹ a former Olympic sprinter, schoolteachers, businesswomen, and activists. Given the worsening security situation overall and increased threats by insurgents and religious conservatives against women participating in the democratic process, declaring candidacy can be seen as a significant and brave act of defiance in itself, even though many of the candidates did not win.³⁰

The strength in numbers is slowly translating to results at the polls. Farida Hamidi, former head of the Women's Affairs Department in Nimroz, won the seat reserved for female candidates in the province, and Dr. Fareshta Amini, a former refugee in Iran, won Nimroz's second seat. The IEC chairperson heralded this development as a positive step toward progress for women in Afghanistan.³¹ Nimroz residents also celebrated the win, with a local journalist calling the province the only one to look like a "real democratic province" now.³² Residents were driven to vote for female candidates due to widespread disenchantment with public corruption and the belief that women were less likely to be involved with it than their male counterparts.

Overall, only 30 percent of the Wolesi Jirga—Parliament's lower house—will be made up of returning incumbents; only half the candidates who ran for reelection won. Women incumbents in particular faced tough competition. All female members of Parliament in twenty provinces sought reelection. However, in only seven provinces were all female incumbents reelected. The other twenty-seven provinces will send at least one new female member to Parliament. Many of these new members represent a youthful cohort of women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, a demographic that may better reflect the overall makeup of Afghan society, in which the majority of the population is under twenty-five years of age.

Young female leaders, such as Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, are working to refashion women's political participation. Naderi ran on a platform of women's and human rights, titled her campaign website "Burqa: the Window of Power," and wears a modernized update of the burqa, which she wants to reclaim as a symbol of Afghan womanhood. To underline the point, Naderi restyled burqa fabric into a Western graduation gown with mortarboard and placed it in her campaign headquarters in Kabul, hoping that women would one day wear the newly transformed garment to celebrate their achievements.

Progress and Challenges for Women Voters

As voters, women tend to be more excluded from the electoral process than men because, as mentioned, as a group they have significantly lower literacy, are less informed about the electoral process, and face restrictions in their access to the public aspects of elections, including registering to vote and traveling to the polls. The separate female polling facilities established by the IEC have helped to ensure that women have a minimum level of access to the political process in Afghanistan, but only insofar as enough women can be recruited and trained to work as polling staff, provide security within female polling stations (such as by searching burqa-clad voters upon entry for explosives), and observe the process.

The IEC improved its recruitment of female polling workers in secure areas, but significant obstacles remained in more conservative and less secure areas. The same can be said for recruiting female observers in female polling stations. Unsurprisingly, observers who reported widespread proxy voting in the south and southeast also reported in these same regions an absence of female poll workers, as well as the presence of male staff in female

polling stations.³³ Further, even when female polling staffers were recruited, they were in some cases deterred from working. The deputy police chief in Charbolak observed that there were no female body searchers in the district polling stations because local people told the women it was too dangerous to work on election day.³⁴

Although 40 percent of the votes cast in the election were from female polling stations, women's participation varied according to geographic, cultural, and security factors. One poll found that the most-cited reason women did not vote in the election was because "women are not permitted to vote," followed by security concerns and a lack of voter card. The majority of respondents who thought women were not allowed to vote came from the southeast region of the country.³⁵ A similar number of men and women reported having received "some information" about the parliamentary election, but 45 percent of men versus only 25 percent of women polled said they had received a "lot of information" about the election.³⁶

Women's participation was higher in provinces that tend to have more liberal attitudes toward women's participation in public life and in provinces with better security. Hazara-populated areas in the central region and several of the northern provinces, such as Kapisa, Samangan, Sar-i-pul, and Faryab, had about 45 percent female participation. More conservative and insurgency-affected areas, such as Helmand, Kandahar, Urozgan, and Zabul, had less than 30 percent female turnout.³⁷ The percentage of female votes in these provinces has been increasing since 2004, however.

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Women's Participation and Electoral Violations

Despite positive developments, the elections were marred by widespread irregularities in many provinces, and the IEC ultimately threw out over 1.2 million fraudulent votes. It is difficult to determine how the fraud affected women in particular, but it is safe to say that both male and female candidates in most provinces were hurt by it, either by losing seats that rightfully should have been theirs or from the collective loss of legitimacy that elected leaders suffer from an election perceived to be fraudulent. Emphasizing that engaged participation is one of the hallmarks of democracy, several female candidates loudly voiced their dissatisfaction with the elections.

Yet women were accused of fraud as well. A significant complaint from candidates was the lack of transparency in the ECC's complaint process and the IEC's vote tabulations. After the election the IEC disqualified a female candidate in Herat who won a seat according to preliminary results.³⁸ As electoral law required, the seat then was awarded to another female candidate said to have garnered more votes. However, the ousted candidate fiercely protested against her unseating and for reinstatement through an extended hunger strike outside Parliament.

As mentioned above, electoral complaints data indicate that women complained less about electoral violations than did men. Women appeared more comfortable reporting electoral violations to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, provincial offices of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, local NGOs, international agencies, or observer missions than to the ECC. The IEC also set up a toll-free contact number to answer election-related questions, and reported that 27,000 women contacted this number. The effectiveness of the hotline was limited, however, in both its coverage and its inactivity throughout the entire election cycle.³⁹

Female voting figures must be considered with caution because of defects in the Afghan voter registry and widespread fraud targeted at female polling stations. This has been a problem in all Afghan elections since 2004 and likely inflates the true number of female voters. In some provinces, high female turnout is belied by conservative cultural norms, and large numbers of female votes more likely represent proxy voting, whereby men illegally

cast ballots supposedly on behalf of women, or outright ballot stuffing in female stations that are less thoroughly observed. When male members of families are permitted to cast ballots illegally for female members, it disenfranchises women and diminishes their voice in national political affairs. When unrelated individuals take advantage of the relative lack of scrutiny of female polling stations, it can significantly affect political outcomes for men and women candidates.

Particularly suspicious are provinces such as Paktia and Paktika, where cultural norms and security risks would predict a very low female voter turnout, in many cases confirmed by the few observers that were there. It is highly improbable, then, that 45 percent of the voters in these southeastern provinces were women, as the data suggest—particularly when the adjacent Khost province reported only 36 percent female turnout and one might expect a turnout of under 20 percent. This likelihood is further corroborated by observers' reports that proxy voting was concentrated in the south and southeast of the country, and that some polling stations in this region reported almost no female voters.⁴⁰ The local PECC later told observers that it had invalidated thirty-one female polling stations in Paktika.⁴¹

Irregular distributions of votes within particular polling centers also raise questions about the legitimacy of female polling. In several polling centers in Wardak province, a male candidate earned the vast majority of votes in a female polling station, but very low levels of votes in the adjacent male polling station. In other cases, female polling stations registered a near absence of votes for female candidates.⁴² Such counterintuitive discrepancies may result from specific local support networks, but more likely indicate that the anomalous station was corrupted and artificial votes were either stuffed into the ballot box or somehow added to the tally. Such fraud was more likely to occur in remote or violent districts where independent observers could not go.

Exacerbating the problem of proxy voting is that women are not required to have their photo on their voter identification cards, again due to conservative cultural norms. This makes it much more difficult to verify voter identity at the polls and makes it easier for proxies to cast ballots in multiple locations if other voter checks, such as inking fingers, are not rigidly observed. It is evident from voting patterns and anecdotal accounts that many IEC polling workers are not enforcing basic IEC rules requiring that individuals vote in person at the polls. Instead, a head of a household, or a representative woman, may show up at a polling station with a stack of female voting cards and be given a corresponding number of ballots to vote all at once. These practices are clearly illegal, but a lack of observers at female polling stations, or anywhere that security is poor, enables such gross acts of fraud to occur. The number of female observers working through FEFA's national network slightly declined, from 2,570 in 2009 to 2,450 in 2010, due to security issues. Overall, women made up only 34 percent of short-term observers in 2010.⁴³

Improving the Electoral Environment for Women

In the next election cycle, national and international stakeholders should focus on capitalizing on lessons learned from the 2010 election to increase Afghan women's political participation. Strategies must address challenges to women voters and candidates while sustaining the positive trends that have emerged. A variety of measures can promote this outcome between now and the next national elections:

- **Increase voter and civic education targeting women's access to the electoral process.** The IEC should work with political parties, current members of Parliament, and relevant government ministries to implement a long-term program of voter education and awareness that particularly targets women and informs them of the importance of the electoral process and their rights and opportunities to participate in it. Public information cam-

paings should emphasize the advantages male candidates and voters can gain by allowing female participation and enlisting women voters' support. Information campaigns should also engage with the religious community to emphasize that women's participation in political life is compatible with Islam, pointing to examples in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries with prominent female politicians, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Malaysia.

- **Build women's networks to advocate for equitable electoral reforms.** The IEC should work with Afghan women's organizations to promote network building and lesson sharing among female parliamentarians and potential candidates. Future candidates can benefit from prior candidates' experiences, including hearing stories of how underresourced candidates managed to campaign despite restrictions.⁴⁴ A female caucus in the Parliament and an association of female provincial council members could advocate for improvements to the electoral environment for women regardless of their differences on specific political issues.
- **Build systems to recruit qualified female election workers.** The IEC should focus on recruiting female poll workers and security staff early, so that it can field a sufficient number at female polling stations on election day. This should capitalize on the IEC's already successful efforts to recruit female electoral candidates. Effective outreach has involved sustained campaigns that utilized mass media outlets, face-to-face meetings, personal phone calls and emails, publications, and coordination with several different ministries, religious councils, and civil society networks. Institutional cooperation can help as well. The IEC may reach out to the ministries of women's affairs, health, and education, which each employ significant numbers of educated women, to facilitate hiring temporary staff on polling day, or at least recruit peers who are qualified to supervise or monitor the polls.
- **Enhance security for elections generally, and for women in particular.** One of the biggest obstacles for women in Afghan elections is the same as for men: threats from the Taliban to attack the process in areas they control, and attacks by power brokers in other places to either capture polling stations for their benefit or depress the votes for their opponents. This requires a holistic solution, with security forces working with the IEC to place polling locations in areas that can be secured and to shape the security environment well in advance of campaigns. Women face additional threats, however, which need special measures. Afghan security forces should develop plans and allocate resources for meeting female candidates' requests for additional security in the face of campaign threats, which officials frequently underestimated or ignored in previous elections. Additional guards may also be needed for women's polling stations.
- **The IEC should continue to build its gender unit and to focus on systematic ways to improve women's access to the polls.** The IEC already has noted the need for centralized complaint reporting and better tracking of gender-based threats and attacks on candidates.⁴⁵ The IEC's gender unit should serve as the coordinating body on women's participation in the elections. This unit should focus on working with civil society organizations and other stakeholders to find ways to sustain longer-term projects to increase women's electoral participation, including resource centers for female candidates, public outreach on the electoral process through media outlets, and the organization of a trained pool of volunteers to staff female polling stations on election days.
- **To increase women's access to the electoral process, focus on men.** Improvements in the electoral process must come through engagement with both men and women, who suffer equally from fraudulent practices that undermine effective political participation. In many provinces, suppressed turnout and female proxy voting undoubtedly cost male candidates valuable votes, giving them a practical reason to support women's access to the polls.

- **Utilize media to overcome traditional barriers to women's participation in elections.** The most accessible medium in Afghanistan is the radio, particularly for women, who have much lower levels of literacy. The electoral authorities should make extensive, long-term use of radio programming to educate the public about women-specific voting issues, such as voter education and female staff recruitment. International funds could help support such an information campaign. Female candidates have greater budget constraints for advertising their candidacy over the radio. But women's groups or political parties could sponsor provincial-level radio forums for female candidates to debate issues and media organizations could be encouraged to offer public air time for female-specific electoral issues. Beyond radio, the spread of cell phones can help to convey both public information and campaign-specific messages to targeted audiences without the risks involved in public appearances. More traditionally, women can distribute name cards with their platforms more discreetly than putting up public posters, and can meet in women's centers and women's gardens, established in many cities, to discuss politics in a safe space.
- **Develop programs for political parties to include women in their leadership and as candidates.** Political parties should recognize that having a balanced ticket of men and women that support their platforms increases the chances their members will win seats in Parliament, because strong female candidates have a numerical advantage in running for one of the sixty-eight guaranteed female seats in Parliament. Rather than relying on recognition of equal rights, the math of political advantage may be the most effective incentive of all to drive greater women's participation in Afghan elections.
- **Improve the voter registration system to reduce fake female voting cards and proxy voting.** While the IEC must be sensitive to cultural concerns about women being photographed on identification documents, it should also explore alternative methods for verifying women's identities in the absence of a photograph. As it stands now, there are likely thousands of fake female voting cards in circulation that are essentially interchangeable among any women who obtain them and wish to vote. The IEC should overhaul its entire voter registration system to require additional identification information, such as the Taskera national identity document, for women (and men) to present during the voting process.

Notes

1. See remarks by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton at the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council 10th Anniversary Celebration Luncheon, U.S. Department of State, March 21, 2012; Afghan Women's Network (AWN), "Afghan Women Towards Bonn and Beyond: Position Paper," October 26, 2011.
2. Article 23 of the Afghan Electoral Law applies this as "the female candidates who receive the most votes in each constituency shall be assigned a seat. . . . After meeting the quota requirements, the remaining seats shall be assigned in accordance with Article 20 [governing general allocation of seats by province]." Thus each province has at least one female representative, and the largest province, Kabul, has nine out of thirty-three seats reserved for women. Women with the highest numbers of votes are first allocated to the quota seats. The remaining seats are allocated to the highest vote getters, regardless of gender. In Nimroz, women won both seats allocated to the province because they each received more votes than any male candidate.
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