Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities

Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections

Oliver Lough
with
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AREU

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UN WOMEN
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About the Authors

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About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policymakers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate.

AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU receives core funds from the governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Specific projects in 2011 have been funded by the European Commission (EC), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission (ECHO), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and UN Women.

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Glossary

ailaq	summer pasture
chadari	shawl covering a woman's entire body
nazer	a religious ceremony in which prayers are offered at the start of undertaking a major enterprise
qawm	solidarity group. The term is flexible in scope and can be variously defined in terms of tribe, clan, ethnicity, locality or other characteristics as determined by the group
shura	community council
Wolesi Jirga	"House of the People." Afghanistan's lower house of parliament

Acronyms

AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
AWN	Afghan Women's Network
CSO	civil society organisation
FGD	focus group discussion
IDI	in-depth interview
IEC	Independent Election Commission
JEMB	Joint Electoral Management Body
MoI	Ministry of the Interior
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MP	member of parliament
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	nongovernmental organisation
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
PC	provincial council
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
SNTV	single non-transferrable vote

Executive Summary

The establishment of a democratic system under Afghanistan's 2004 constitution has without doubt led to an unprecedented expansion of political participation for its women. In the years that have followed, millions of women have turned out to vote in successive rounds of presidential, legislative and provincial elections. Thousands more have competed for positions in parliament and the provincial councils, legally assured of winning at least a quarter of seats in both bodies. Electoral participation presents a significant opportunity for women to assert their equal rights as citizens and have their voices heard in determining the future of their communities and the country as a whole. However, in attempting to do so they must also navigate significant challenges that stem from a range of factors, including prevailing cultural norms, continuing insecurity and the way Afghan politics is currently conducted.

Funded by UN Women, this paper sets out to explore some of the dynamics of women's participation as candidates and voters in Afghanistan's 2005 and 2009/10 parliamentary and PC elections, focusing on their personal experiences of taking part and how they compared across different elections, their perceptions on the importance and nature of the process, and the impact their participation had on their personal lives and their communities. Focusing on the relatively secure, less conservative provinces of Balkh, Bamiyan and Kabul, it draws on qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with 25 successful and unsuccessful female candidates, as well as with over 100 men and women spread across one rural and one urban community in each province. Given the study's limited geographic scope and qualitative methodology, it does not seek to challenge or alter existing accounts of women's electoral experiences across the country as a whole. Rather, it hopes to highlight important additional elements that have received less attention.

In exploring the experiences of parliamentary and PC contenders, it finds that there is no one blueprint for a successful female candidacy, and the stories of individuals interviewed for this study were as diverse and complex as the various political environments in which they operated. While the candidates interviewed rarely faced security threats or serious religious or conservative hostility while on the campaign trail, they often struggled in the face of male indifference and the assumption that women could not act as effective representatives or service-providers. For their part, surprisingly few female candidates chose to court female voters, likely based on the calculation that to do so would be a waste of resources given women's lack of influence or ability to mobilise their communities. In almost all cases, successful candidates ultimately secured victory via a combination of good access to financial resources, ties to a powerful family or a political party, and—often most importantly—a strong relationship with a given community or other constituency of voters.

Encouragingly, women voters in the research communities generally had reasonably unhindered access to the ballot box, and understood how to cast their votes once inside. However, while this might represent a victory from a technical standpoint, it only tells half the story. While free to vote as individuals, women's voices were shut out of the community-level discussions and decision-making process so vital to electoral politics in contemporary Afghanistan. Although they were rarely forced to vote for a given candidate, the refusal of their husbands to talk politics with women in their households left many of them struggling to make an informed choice about whom to vote for. And while they understood the technical mechanics of voting, their lack of access to formal training left them with at best a limited understanding of how the country's political system worked and how it might serve their needs. This should not, however, detract from the fact that taking part in elections had a deeply positive personal impact on many of the women in this study. While it did not necessarily afford them more voice or bring much in the way of tangible benefits, voting was for them a vital affirmation of their equal rights in the eyes of the state, boosting their self-confidence and raising hopes for changing the existing status quo.

Elections in general, and women's involvement in them in particular, remain a relatively new phenomenon in Afghanistan, and one that is still very much evolving. Women still face significant barriers to ensuring their voices are heard both nationally and within their communities, and much remains to be done before they can truly engage in politics on anything like a level playing field with men. However, the gains of the past ten years remain significant, though fragile. As peace talks with the Taliban and an increasingly conservative public sphere cast growing doubt over women's role in Afghanistan's political future, it is vital that Afghan and international stakeholders alike continue to focus attention on how best to preserve—and build upon—these achievements.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative AREU field study funded by UN Women that explored women's participation as candidates and voters in Afghanistan's 2005 and 2009-10 parliamentary and provincial council elections in Kabul, Bamiyan and Balkh provinces. It draws on interviews with 25 winning and losing female provincial council (PC) and parliamentary candidates, as well as with over 100 male and female voters spread across six rural and urban communities—one each per province. The study's main objectives were to identify the challenges and opportunities that currently accompany women's political participation in these areas, assess if and how these had changed over time, and explore ways forward for the future. The paper is structured as follows: the remainder of the Introduction details the study's theoretical framework before outlining the current political and enabling environment to women's electoral participation in Afghanistan; Section 2 details the study's methodology, along with provincial and community contexts; Section 3 compares and contrasts the different experiences of the winning and losing candidates before going on to draw out general trends; Section 4 explores the dynamics of women's participation as voters; and Section 5 outlines key findings and recommendations.

1.1   Overview: The status of women in Afghanistan

Contemporary Afghanistan represents perhaps one of the most extreme cases of gender inequality in the world. In 2011, the country was ranked 139 out of 145 in the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index.[1] While growing, women's access to education remains limited: in 2010, Afghanistan was again among the worst performing countries in terms of the ratio of women to men with at least a secondary level of education.[2] And although women play a significant role in the economic life of the country's predominantly rural economy, this is rarely recognised in the form of remuneration that might allow them to accumulate independent resources; according to the 2007-08 Afghanistan National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), they accounted for only 8 percent of the country's entire wage labour force.[3]

In discussing the roots of this inequality, Kabeer et al. draw attention to Afghanistan's generally acknowledged status as a "classic patriarchy."[4] According to Kandiyoti's characterisation, women subject to this system of social control are married, often early, into households headed by their husband's fathers; are subordinate to all men and the more senior women of the household; have no claim on paternal inheritance rights or other assets; have their labour and progeny appropriated by male members of the household; and are sometimes subject to institutionalised seclusion, severe restrictions on movement and strict division of gender roles assigning the public sphere to men and the private sphere to women.[5] It is, however, important to recognise that, at least in theory, this system of control is framed as a mutual set of rights and obligations, whereby Afghan men are expected to provide for the entire family and treat women in an appropriate fashion, and there is scope for women to wield a degree of influence within the domestic sphere.[6]

Islamic tenets continue to be widely cited by both participants and outside observers as the ideological justification for this system.[7] However, other interpretations have argued that many of the practices

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1   "A composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market." See "International Human Development Indicators: Gender Inequality Index" http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/68606.html (accessed 27 January 2011).

2   "International Human Development Indicators: Population with at least secondary education (Ratio of female to male rates)" http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/24806.html (accessed 27 January 2011).

3   "National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/08: A Profile of Afghanistan" (Kabul: EU/Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2009), 32.

4   Naila Kabeer, Ayesha Khan and Naysan Adlparvar, "Afghan Values or Women's Rights? Gendered Narratives about Continuity and Change in Urban Afghanistan" (Brighton: Institute for Development Studies, 2011), 7.

5   Drawn from Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 278-81.

6   Kabeer et al., "Afghan Values or Women's Rights?" 8.

7   "Silence is Violence: End the Abuse of Women in Afghanistan" (Kabul: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan/

outlined above have little basis in the Qur'an or Sharia law and are essentially customary.[8] One important additional element to note in this respect, especially in understanding historical state attempts to further women's rights, is the concept of *namus* (honour). According to Dupree:

> *The insistence on patriarchal control arose in part from the fact that in Afghanistan women symbolize honor—of the nation and of the family. Any deviation on the part of women from honorable behavior as it is defined by any given family or group is seen to besmirch the honor of those in authority and cannot therefore be tolerated. It is this attitude which has perpetuated overly protective institutions and customs such as the veil and seclusion.[9]*

In this context, Edwards goes on to explain how overreaching attempts by the state to influence the lives of women have sometimes produced such strong reactions due to their being interpreted as emasculating violations of the honour of men.[10]

Within this generalised picture of Afghanistan's patriarchal structure, there also exist significant variations governed by, among other things, region, rural/urban location, ethnicity, age, status, education and specific community or household practice. Pashtun communities, for example, are generally (although not always) associated with a greater degree of conservatism than those belonging to other ethnic groups, while women in rural communities may be subject to fewer restrictions on movement than their urban counterparts.[11] As Zand notes, there may also be a gap between how gender relations are presented as an ideological ideal within a given community, and how they work out in practice.[12]

Critically, gender relations in Afghanistan are not static—as documented below, reforms, development, social change and wars have resulted in significant changes in the status of Afghan women over the past hundred years. According to Kandiyoti, the country's prolonged exposure to conflict in recent decades has significantly compounded the burden placed on women by traditional forms of patriarchal control, eroding men's willingness or ability to fulfil their traditionally determined obligations and opening up "novel forms of abuse." She describes how, even after 2001,

> *The gender biases inherent in the kinship practices of various ethnic communities are aggravated by the loss of cushioning effects of family ties and obligations which may be eroded through poverty, displacement and the drug economy. The dynamics of gendered disadvantage, the erosion of local livelihoods, the criminalisation of the economy and insecurity at the hands of local armed groups and factions...combine seamlessly to produce extreme forms of female vulnerability.[13]*

In the face of these extremes, women have nonetheless experienced significant gains in the decade since the 2001 international intervention. While still heavily disadvantaged compared to men, women have experienced a marked improvement in access to services such as education and healthcare compared to before 2001.[14] Widespread and long-term migration to countries like Iran and Pakistan during the country's conflicts have exposed significant numbers of people to alternative, less restrictive

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Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2009).

8   For examinations of these competing positions in the Afghan context, see "Women and Political Leadership: The Problems Facing Women Leaders in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium, 2010), 22-31; and "Silence is Violence," 29. For a more general view of the debate, see "Women in Islam: Between Oppression and (Self-) Empowerment" (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2008).

9   Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women," in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. M. Nazif Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield, 316-45 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

10   David Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 172-73.

11   Kabeer et al., "Afghan Values or Women's Rights?" 8.

12   Sogol Zand, "The Impact of Microfinance Programmes on Women's Lives: A Case Study in Kabul Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2011), 22-24.

13   Deniz Kandiyoti, "Old Dilemmas or New Challenges? The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan" *Development and Change* 38, no. 2 (2007): 181.

14   For data on a range of indicators in this respect, see "National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/08: A Profile of Afghanistan" (Kabul: EU/Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2008).

sets of gender norms, contributing at least in some areas to a slow but notable change in existing perspectives and practices, particularly among the young.[15] The current internationally backed regime has instituted a number of constitutionally and legally constituted safeguards protecting women's equal rights as citizens and as participants in the country's democratic system, while the 2008 National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) sets out an operational framework for furthering women's empowerment and gender equality under the government's overarching Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS).

However, recent years have also witnessed a degree of backlash against women's empowerment. Many of the rights promised to women in the 2004 constitution and elsewhere have yet to be implemented across the country, and recent legislation—such as the infamous Shia Personal Status Law[16] or the 2010 changes to the Election Law (see below)—has even reversed some of these gains. With the country now in the grip of a widespread and Taliban-dominated insurgency, an increasing (although possibly pragmatic) conservative strain in its politics, and an apparent lack of will on the part of both the government and weary international donors to pursue or consolidate a women's rights agenda, there is a sense that the space for women's participation in the public sphere is shrinking.[17] This was vividly illustrated on 2 March 2012, when the country's Ulema council—a body of leading religious scholars—issued a statement asserting that women should not mix with unfamiliar men in education or the workplace, and should only go outside when accompanied by a *mahram* (close male relative).[18] Strongly echoing previous Taliban decrees, the statement would, if applied logically, bar all women from political office. Perhaps most shockingly, it was later endorsed by president Karzai, possibly in a bid to align himself as more sympathetic to Taliban goals in the context of proposed peace negotiations.[19]

This, then, is the dynamic and fluid context against which this study has been conducted. The following section goes on to explore the historical background and current political and enabling context of women's democratic participation in Afghanistan. The remainder of this section examines the historical and contemporary context of women's political participation in Afghanistan.

1.2   Historical background: Women's political participation before 2001

Afghanistan's history of female political participation has been very much a case of one step forward, two steps back. Prior to 2001, efforts at expanding women's access to the political sphere were almost exclusively state-driven, their impact largely limited to a small educated elite in the country's urban centres. In the case of reforms by Amanullah Khan in the 1920s and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978-79, state attempts to impose a women's rights agenda contributed to violent opposition on the part of rural communities and religious elites. However, it is important to emphasise that, while women's rights were an important part of the narrative of rebellion in each case, they formed but one of several points of contention, tying into an overarching historical struggle over the balance between the power of the central state on the one hand, and the autonomy of the

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15   See, for example, Mamiko Saito, "Searching for my Homeland: Dilemmas Between Borders—Experiences of Young Afghans Returning Home from Pakistan and Iran" (Kabul: AREU, 2009); Deborah Smith, "Decisions, Desires and Diversity: Marriage Practices in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2009), 33-34; and Deborah Smith, "Love, Fear and Discipline: Everyday Violence Toward Children in Afghan Families" (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

16   This was also known in the international media as the "rape law" due to its provision that Shia husbands have a right to demand sex from their wives whether it is consensual or not. For more on the law's formation process see Lauryn Oates, "A Closer Look: The Policy and Lawmaking Process Behind the Shiite Personal Status Law" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

17   "Women and Political Leadership," 14-21. See also, for example, "Silence is Violence"; "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Parliamentary Elections, 18 September 2010: Final Report" (Kabul: EU Election Assessment Team, 2011), 37; or Sari Kouvo, "Women and Reconciliation: What are the Concerns?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network,* 28 July 2011, http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1972 (accessed 22 February 2012).

18   Full text available in Dari on the website of the Office of the President: http://president.gov.af/fa/news/7611 (accessed 6 March 2012).

19   Mir Agha Samimi, "President defends scholars' guideline regarding women," *Pajhwok,* 6 March 2012, http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/03/06/president-defends-scholars%E2%80%99-guideline-regarding-women (accessed 6 March 2012).

rural periphery on the other.[20] By contrast, when the state took a more gradualist approach—offering rights that could be voluntarily adopted rather than threatening to impose its will in the realm of the domestic environment or community custom—the negative response was notably more muted.

The question of women's equality was first formally addressed in the 1923 constitution decree by Amanullah Khan, which ascribed generic "personal freedom" to all Afghan "subjects," defined as anyone then living in the country.[21] A moderniser inspired by Mustafa Kemal's contemporary reforms in Turkey, Amanullah also sought to prescribe the wearing of the veil and enforce compulsory education for girls, although these regulations were only enforced among small sections of the urban population.[22] Although initially popular due in part to his successful war against the British in 1919, Amanullah's political base eroded significantly over the course of his reign, and in 1928-9, he was swept from power in a series of tribal rebellions.

There is a significant narrative that argues that Amanullah was driven from power as a result of conservative opposition to his reforms, especially those concerning women.[23] However, Polluda and others have argued that the 1928 rebellion was essentially political in nature, driven by (among other factors) religious leaders threatened by Amanullah's attempts to restrict their social and economic power,[24] and by opportunistic tribal forces seeking to reassert their autonomy from the state.[25] Threatened changes to the status of women were indeed employed as an important political tool in the form of inflammatory rhetoric deployed by religious leaders opposed to Amanullah—likely accounting for why they assumed such a dominant place in some later narratives. However, as Polluda notes, this "was a fanaticism not of religion but of political and economic power,"[26] while for their part the tribes—while certainly hostile to the idea of state intervention in women's lives[27]—were first and foremost pragmatic in their aims: "to enhance the power position of the tribe and get a maximum of material gain for the tribesman."[28]

Nevertheless, when order was restored in 1929 under Amanullah's successor Nadir Shah (ruled 1929-33), his social reforms were rescinded in favour of a focus on "limited and gradual social change accompanied by economic development,"[29] and the state would remain largely silent on the issue of women's rights for the following 30 years. However, women's position did not remain entirely static during this period. Over the years, the state succeeded in quietly marginalising the very clergy who had attempted to use women as a political weapon against Amanullah.[30] From the late 1940s into the 1960s, Zahir Shah (ruled 1933-73)'s administration made a series of cautious moves to expand the role of women in public life, opening increasing numbers of separate schools for women in urban areas,

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20   See Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 183-88, 200-01, 223-25; and Kandiyoti, "Old Dilemmas or New Challenges?" 171-73.

21   *British and foreign state papers. 1923, Part II, Vol. CXVIII* (London: HMSO, 1926), 1-6. Available at http://www.hoelseth.com/royalty/afghanistan/afghcode19230409.html (accessed 10 January 2012).

22   Leon B. Polluda, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-29: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernize a Tribal Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), 146.

23   See Valentine M. Moghadam, "A Tale of Two Countries: State, Society and Gender Politics in Iran and Afghanistan," *The Muslim World* 94, no. 4 (2004): 452, "Afghanistan Profile: A chronology of key events" 12 January 2012, *BBC*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12024253 (accessed 16 February 2012); or "Timeline of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 25 October 2011, *PBS*, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/uncategorized/timeline-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/ (accessed 16 February 2012).

24   Polluda, *Reform and Rebellion*, 121.

25   Polluda frames the revolt as essentially an "aggravated recurrence of tribal separatism" of the kind that Afghan rulers had experienced at multiple points over the previous century, albeit worsened by the reforms and Amanullah's own political naiveté. See *Reform and Rebellion*, 152. For other, similar accounts, see Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 183-91, and Orzala Ashraf Nemat, "Afghan Women at the Crossroads: Agents of Peace—or its Victims?" (New York: Century Foundation, 2011), 6.

26   Polluda, *Reform and Rebellion*, 129.

27   Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 185.

28   Polluda, *Reform and Rebellion*, 196.

29   Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 198.

30   Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 199.

hiring female staff for certain state enterprises, sending a female delegate to the UN and opening Kabul University to female students.

In comparison to Amanullah's more confrontational stance, the next major state action on women's rights came quietly and without fanfare. In 1959, the king tacitly signalled an end to state enforcement of the veil when female members of the royal family began appearing at state events with their faces bared.[31] But it was not until the drafting process of the landmark 1964 constitution that any real attempt was made to allow Afghan women a say in governing their country. In a bid to turn Afghanistan into a democratic, constitutional monarchy, Zahir Shah convened a Loya Jirga (grand council; a "traditional" institution nominally calling together leading representatives of the people) to radically overhaul the constitution. Although the body consisted mainly of appointees friendly to the administration, it was significantly more consultative in nature than many earlier incarnations of the body, which had mostly served as mediums for rubber-stamping a ruler's authority. For the first time in the country's history, six women were appointed to take part.

The resulting document—on which Afghanistan's current constitution is extensively modelled—called for the creation of a bicameral parliamentary system. In this new system, women could both vote and be elected in their capacity as Afghan citizens. Elections were held in 1965 and although women's participation as voters was minimal to non-existent outside of the cities,[32] four female MPs were elected.[33] However, the following set of elections held in 1969 resulted in an all-male parliament; only two women ran for office, and both were defeated.[34]

This experiment came to an abrupt end when former prime minister Mohammad Daoud Khan seized power in a 1973 coup and suspended parliament. In comparison to Zahir Shah's cautiously progressive agenda, Daoud was much more concerned about consolidating his position and the state's coercive power. However, it should be noted that 15 percent of the Loya Jirga that ratified his new constitution establishing a one-party state were women, and that this was the first constitution to *explicitly* lay out equal rights and obligations for women.[35] Daoud was himself killed in a PDPA-orchestrated coup in 1978, and the new government quickly set about aggressively pursuing a series of ambitious, Marxist-informed social reforms, including the abolition of rural debt, land redistribution and attempts to abolish traditional marriage practices.[36]

The early years of the PDPA regime present an important point of comparison to the reforms attempted by Amanullah half a century earlier, especially regarding the involvement of women. While Amanullah's women's rights agenda had been mostly theoretical in nature, a significantly larger proportion of the country's women directly experienced the impact of the PDPA's efforts to recruit women to its cause. In Kabul and across the country, substantial numbers of younger, middle class women became involved in PDPA-organised youth cells (although their involvement was apparently motivated as much by a sense of excitement and opportunity as it was by ideology), while a small number of women such as Dr Anahita Ratebzad were involved in the higher echelons of the regime itself.[37] In the countryside,

31   Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1980), 530-32.

32   Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan 1966: Comments on a Comparatively Calm State of Affairs with Reference to the Turbulence of Late 1965," *AUFS Field Staff Reports: South Asia Series* 10, no. 4 (1966): 3.

33   These were Khadija Ahrari, MP for Herat; Masuma Esmati-Wardak, MP for Kandahar who would go on to serve as Minister of Education in the Najibullah regime; Roqia Abubakr, MP for Kabul, one of the first women in Afghanistan to graduate from high school and a founder in 1946 of the state-sponsored Women's Welfare Association; and, most famously, Anahita Ratebzad, MP for Kabul, a prominent leftist who served as deputy head of state and politburo member under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan regime.

34   Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan Continues its Experiment in Democracy: The Thirteenth Parliament is Elected," *AUFS Field Staff Reports: South Asia Series* 15, no. 5 (1971): 6.

35   Ariane Brunet and Isabelle Solon Helal, "Seizing an Opportunity: Afghan Women and the Constitution-Making Process" (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, 2003), 31.

36   For more details on these reforms, see Edwards, *Before Taliban,* 65-66. Nancy Hatch Dupree also offers an analysis of the proposed marriage reforms in particular, arguing that despite their stated pro-women agenda, they were in fact of much greater benefit to men. See "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 323-24.

37   Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 318-19.

women came face-to-face with PDPA cadres offering, and sometimes forcefully imposing, literacy classes loaded with socialist doctrine.[38]

This second point also highlights another key difference: while Amanullah had generally attempted to use persuasion grounded in Islamic doctrine to further his modernisation drive,[39] the PDPA attempted to assert its reforms on the ground in a forceful and often violent manner using rhetoric that alienated many of the people it was attempting to help.[40] As resistance to the new regime grew, PDPA reprisals grew increasingly brutal—hundreds of influential leaders were imprisoned and "disappeared" as reactionaries, and in some cases entire communities were massacred.[41] As a consequence, government reforms thus became a central component of popular resistance rather than incidental to it.[42] The ensuing descent into chaos eventually drew in the Soviet Union, which invaded the country in an effort to restore stability a year later.

The decade of Soviet occupation was marked by a sharp contrast between the substantial expansion of opportunities for women's participation in public and political life that took place in government-controlled Kabul, and a conservative backlash in mujahiddin-controlled areas and refugee communities in Pakistan. Moghadam recounts how:

> During the 1980s, women were present in the ranks of the PDPA and the government, with the exception of the Council of Ministers. The Loya Jirga (traditional council) included women delegates; and in 1989, Parliament had seven female members...The Central Committee of the PDPA had several women members.[43]

Unfortunately, the PDPA regime's feminist ideals were all too easy for the religious leaders of Afghanistan's religiously conservative and almost exclusively male mujahiddin groups to subvert. Writing in the early 1980s, Dupree argued that the association of a women's rights agenda with the regime and its Soviet backers "seriously jeopardised women. It had so widely polarised conservatives and modernists that fundamentalist reaction threaten[ed] to destroy the previous accomplishments of the women's movement."[44] While some mujahiddin leaders at this time were at least paying lip service to the equal rights of women, more conservative attitudes would dominate the agenda once they took power.[45] In this context, it is often forgotten that the systematic removal of Afghan women's rights during the 1990s began not under the Taliban, but under the factionalised mujahiddin government that preceded it. Following the collapse of the PDPA regime in 1992, the new government led by Jamiat-i Islami leader Burhanuddin Rabbani issued an edict stating that:

> Now that...our Islamic country is free from the bondage of atheist rule, we urge that God's ordinances be carried out immediately, particularly those pertaining to the veiling of women. Women should be banned from working in offices and radio and television stations, and schools for women, that are in effect the hub of debauchery and adulterous practices, must be closed down.[46]

When the Taliban came to power in 1996, they were quick to extend this line of thinking, decreeing that "sisters" would not even be allowed out of the house without a close male relative, and that

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38   Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 321.

39   See, for example, Polluda, *Reform and Rebellion*, 122-23.

40   Edwards, *Before Taliban*, 71, 81.

41   Edwards, *Before Taliban*, 83.

42   For a comparison of public perceptions of Amanullah versus the PDPA regime, see Hugh Beattie, "Effects of the Saur Revolution in Nahrin," in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan*, 205-07.

43   Valentine M. Moghadam, "Revolution, Religion and Gender Politics: Iran and Afghanistan Compared," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no. 4 (1999): 172-95.

44   Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric," 335.

45   Senzil Nawid, "Afghan Women under Marxism," in *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam, 71 (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Moghadam, "Revolution, Religion and Gender Politics," 180-81.

46   Nawid, "Afghan Women under Marxism," 71.

women's professional activities should be limited to service as doctors in all-female hospitals.[47] By September 2001, women had all but disappeared from Afghanistan's public and political life.[48]

1.3   The post-2001 context for women's electoral participation

In addition to its security goals, one of the major stated reasons for the October 2001 international intervention in Afghanistan was improving the status of women in the country. At the Bonn Agreement that December, international actors and the victorious Northern Alliance agreed to implement "a broad-based, gender sensitive government,"[49] and mandated the establishment of a dedicated Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) under the interim administration, housed in the former offices of the welfare-oriented Women's High Association.[50] In March 2003, the new Interim Administration acceded without reservations to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[51]—reportedly in response to substantial international pressure to show immediate and tangible results in the field of women's rights.[52] This placed Afghanistan under obligation to advance gender equality via formal legislation, as well as to modify or abolish existing laws or practices discriminatory to women. These obligations would prove a rallying point for both international and domestic supporters of women's rights when it came to negotiating the 2004 constitution.

The Constitutional Loya Jirga that met in December of 2003 to establish what the new Afghan state would look like featured 114 women out of a total of elected 504 delegates. In the months leading up to the event, MOWA and UN agencies convened several meetings with Afghan civil society organisations (CSOs) with the aim of ensuring the new constitution would adequately reflect women's demands.[53] Over the course of this process, a smaller group of individuals focused around the leadership of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) were reportedly instrumental in forwarding the demand for a guaranteed quota for women in any future representative bodies.[54] Following the November release of the draft constitution, an additional group convened under MOWA and made up of members of national and international women's groups, UNIFEM, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the Afghan Supreme Court and Attorney General's Office and legal experts successfully lobbied to have the proposed size of the women's quota for parliament doubled.[55]

Ratified on 26 January 2004, the constitution guaranteed women the right to vote, and decreed that "at least two females from each province" would occupy the *Wolesi Jirga* ("House of the People"; the

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47   Human Rights Watch, "Humanity Denied: Systematic Violations of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," 29 October 2001, http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3bdeb9ef4.html (accessed 9 January 2012).

48   In Northern Alliance-controlled Badakhshan, by comparison, women were never subject to such dramatic, formalised suppression since the Taliban were never able to establish control over the region. However, even here, women reported experiencing "[not] a sudden change, but rather a gradual deterioration in opportunity brought about by a worsening economic situation, an overall deterioration in the level of services, and an increasingly conservative environment." See "SMU Area Reports: Badakhshan" (Islamabad: Strategic Monitoring Unit, 2001), 13-14, http://areu.org.af/UpdateDownloadHits.aspx?EditionId=563&Pdf=001-SMU%20Area%20Report-Badakhshan.pdf (accessed 5 February 2012).

49   Kandiyoti, "Old Dilemmas or New Challenges?" 182.

50   Sippi Azerbaijani Moghaddam, "Gender in Afghanistan," in *Publication Series on Promoting Democracy under Conditions of State Fragility, Issue 1: Afghanistan* (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2006), 32.

51   A move that took place without prior consultation with MOWA.

52   Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, "CEDAW and Afghanistan," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 136-56.

53   Drude Dahlerup and Anja Taarup Nordlund, "Gender Quotas: A Key to Equality? A Case Study of Iraq and Afghanistan," *European Political Science* 3, no. 3 (2004): 91-98.

54   International NGO worker, Kabul, pers. comm.

55   Kandiyoti, "Old Dilemmas or New Challenges?" 183. In subsequent years, the Supreme Court and Attorney General's Office have been seen as lax or in some cases actively obstructionist in the field of women's rights. See, for example, "A Long Way to Go: Implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law in Afghanistan" (Kabul: UNAMA, 2011); or "Afghanistan: Government Takeover of Shelters Threatens Women's Safety," *Human Rights Watch*, 13 February 2011, http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/13/afghanistan-government-takeover-shelters-threatens-women-s-safety (accessed 5 February 2012).

country's lower house of parliament).[56] In the months that followed, the constitution's stipulations were hurriedly drafted into an Electoral Law in preparation for the 2005 *Wolesi Jirga* and PC elections.[57] This clarified that the 68 seats in parliament reserved for women (out of a total of 249, or 27 percent) would be distributed across the country's provincial-level, multi-member constituencies according to population, ultimately resulting in one out of two seats in a small province like Nimroz, up to nine out of 33 in Kabul. Crucially, it also included a statutory (but not constitutional) requirement that a quarter of all PC seats be occupied by women—an eventual total of 124 out of 420. Over the years, the election law and the single non-transferrable vote system it adopted have intersected with Afghan social and political realities to produce a unique set of electoral dynamics (see Box 1).

Issues with the Electoral Law

Despite the quantum leap that the Electoral Law represented for women's political participation, it was not without its flaws in this regard.

The quota

Although the quotas for women in parliament and the PCs were originally meant to function as a base level for women's participation in these bodies, the law was not completely explicit on how it should be implemented. As a consequence, the quota for each province ended up being filled by the highest female vote-winners—even if some had beaten out enough men to win an open seat. This meant that the only women competing for open seats were those who had secured fewer votes than their counterparts in the quota, effectively turning it into a cap. Wordsworth has also highlighted accusations among some male parliamentarians that the quota is undemocratic since it excludes men in favour of less electorally successful women. As with other arguments against affirmative action, this assertion can be used to undermine the political legitimacy of women in Afghanistan's representative bodies. She also documents the overwhelming assumption born of a lack of access to information among both male and female MPs that the quota represents a set-in-stone demarcation between "men's" and "women's" seats, rather than a minimum baseline for women's presence in parliament.[58]

Despite these issues, however, the quota system has played a vital role in maintaining a significant presence of women in both parliament and PCs. As Table 1 demonstrates, only a handful of women have been able to secure the number of votes that would have been necessary to win a seat if the quota were not in place—and the numbers doing so have declined over successive elections.[59]

The 2010 modification of the Electoral Law

In a potentially worrying development, President Karzai unilaterally modified the Law by decree in the spring of 2010. Among his changes was a stipulation that meant that should a woman's seat be vacated during a parliamentary or provincial term it could be filled by man if there were no female candidates available to take over. This opened up the possibility of powerful male actors intimidating women out of their seats, especially in insecure provinces or those with fewer female candidates. The revised Law also contained other provisions likely to have a disproportionate impact on female candidates. It tripled the non-refundable deposit paid by candidates on registration from 10,000

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56   "Constitution of Afghanistan," Article 83. http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/cms/uploads/images/Constitution/The%20 Constitution.pdf (accessed 10 January 2012).

57   Owing to time constraints, this process was largely conducted by international experts in consultation with the president's office with little in the way of stakeholder input or public debate. See David Ennis, "Analysis of the Electoral Legal Framework of Afghanistan" (Kabul: International Foundation for Electoral Systems), 4.

58   Anna Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interest: Gender and the Politics of Presence in Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga" (Kabul: AREU, 2007), 9-12.

59   A stark example of elected representative bodies without a legally-mandated quota can be found in the district *shuras* under the Independent Directorate of Local Government/USAID Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP). Note that these are separate from the district councils mandated under Article 140 of the constitution, which have not yet been established. As of December 2011, only 282—a mere 3.5 percent—of the 8,052 ASOP *shura* participants were women (See *The A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance 2012* (Kabul: AREU, 2012)).

Box 1: Key electoral dynamics in Afghanistan

Localism: Elections in Afghanistan tend to play out in a highly localised fashion. In general, the paramount importance of solidarity groups (*qawms*) and reciprocal patronage networks in Afghan society means that elections revolve around competing local interests rather than crosscutting issues or ideologies. Prioritisation of local interests is further reinforced by the tendency to see MPs and PC members as direct service providers, since by this calculation a community's support at an election should translate into concrete rewards if its candidate is successful.

Bloc voting: Collective voting is a regular feature of Afghan elections, though the precise size of blocs can vary depending on local conditions. Mobilising a large bloc vote is a way for communities to demonstrate their political clout, as well as extract resources in the aftermath of elections from candidates they claim to have supported. Actors able to mobilise bloc votes include tribal or *qawm* elders, jihadi commanders, community leaders such as *maliks* or *kalantars*, and members of local-level *shuras*—all figures who are almost exclusively male.

The voting system: Bloc voting is also encouraged by Afghanistan's single non-transferrable vote (SNTV) electoral system, where provinces are allocated a given number of MPs who are elected based on the number of direct votes they win. This means that the last few successful candidates in each province can win with a relatively small number of votes—all the more so in the case of women covered by the quota. There is thus a concrete motivation for communities to vote unanimously in order to increase the likelihood of a candidate with which they are connected being elected.

Adapted from Oliver Lough, "Practicing Democracy in Afghanistan: Key Findings on Perceptions, Parliament and Elections" (Kabul: AREU, 2011). This paper is a summary of a three-year study on representative governance in Afghanistan by Anna Larson and Noah Coburn. For more information, see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Voting Together: Why Afghanistan's 2009 Elections were (and were not) a Disaster" (Kabul: AREU, 2009); and Coburn, "Connecting With Kabul: The Importance of the Wolesi Jirga Election and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

Afs to 30,000 Afs (around US$600). This placed a disproportionately greater burden on prospective female nominees given their often limited sources of funding compared to their male counterparts.[60] Furthermore, it also explicitly included teachers in its stipulation that all civil servants should resign from their posts before running for office, and demanded that their resignation be final (rather than getting their position back if they were not elected, as was the case under the 2005 Law). This once again raised the cost of nomination for female candidates in particular, given that government jobs and teaching in general are one of the main sources of paid employment for women.[61] Ultimately, these changes highlight the fact that the gains made in terms of expanding women's participation under the early years of the current administration remain fragile and at constant risk of reversal—even if this takes place via a process of gradual erosion.

1.4   Elections since 2001

This section offers a brief narrative of successive elections, a description of the types of support offered to female candidates and voters, and an examination of the challenges they faced.

The 2004 presidential and 2005 parliamentary/provincial council elections

Afghanistan's first presidential poll in 2004 was a historic event by any measure. For the first time, and in a poll that despite its problems was seen to be broadly representative of popular will, Afghans

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60   "Women and Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Elections" (Kabul: Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan, 2010), 4.

61   "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Parliamentary Elections, 18 September 2010: Final Report" (Kabul: EU Election Assessment Team, 2011), 17.

were able to have a direct say in the selection of their head of state. Among those turning out to vote were some 2.6 million women (see Table 1), a figure that in itself spoke volumes about how much had changed since 2001. Overall participation in the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections dropped—a phenomenon attributed to a combination of growing insecurity, dissatisfaction with Karzai's first year in office and "election fatigue." In addition, the security situation had deteriorated since the previous year, posing an increased challenge, particularly in the South and Southeast, to female candidates and voters in particular.[62] However, the polls were still widely hailed as a success given the challenges involved.[63] Hundreds of parliamentary and PC candidates fought for seats alongside their male counterparts, and women's participation as a proportion of the overall vote theoretically (see below) rose to a high of 41 percent.

Table 1: National-level female turnout and candidate numbers for post-2001 elections in Afghanistan

Election	Total votes	Percentage women voters	Total candidates	Female candidates	Ex-quota female candidates
2004 Presidential	7.3 million	37	18	1	—
2005 PC	6.4 million	41	3025	247	24
2005 Parliamentary	6.4 million	41	2775	335	19
2009 Presidential	5.9 million	39	39	2	—
2009 PC	5.9 million	39	3196	328	20
2010 Parliamentary	4.2 million	39	2577	406	18

Source: "Getting the Grade? Lessons Learnt on Women's Participation in the 2010 Afghan Parliamentary Elections" (Kabul: IEC Gender Unit, 2010). Calculations for the percentage women voters do not include the numbers of female Kuchi voters, since no gender disaggregated data is available for this group.

Run by the Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB)—a collaboration between the UN and the Afghan government—these early elections established the practice of having separate polling booths for male and female voters in recognition of prevailing gender norms discouraging mixing of the sexes. In relation to this, female voters were given the option not to provide a photograph when collecting their voter registration cards, again in recognition of the fact that doing so could effectively bar women from voting in more conservative areas.

Voter education activities were largely conducted by the JEMB, which was supported by the work of national and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Afghanistan Civil Society Forum-organization. Post-election reports indicate that, faced with time constraints, outreach activities focused mainly on the process of voting, and not on how the country's elected bodies would actually function.[64] For similar reasons, they also faced limitations in reaching women in more conservative or remote areas, and were marred by an inability to recruit an adequate number of female civic educators, who accounted for only 35 percent of the 1,800 plus total.[65]

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62   "EU Election Observation Mission Afghanistan 2005: Final Report on the Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections" (Kabul: EU Election Observation Mission, 2005), 2, 18; "The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute, 2006), 6-7.

63   See, for example, "The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections in Afghanistan," 1; and "EU Election Observation Mission Afghanistan 2005," 1.

64   "The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute, 2006), 9.

65   "Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections 18 September 2005: European Union Election Observation Mission Final Report," (Kabul: EU, 2005), 26.

The main organisation involved in training female candidates in 2005 was the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Through campaign schools organised in Kabul and at regional training centres, the organisation focused on helping female candidates compete by offering training on the electoral process and system, as well as on campaign skills such as public speaking and messaging. Combined with its training for other campaign participants during this period, NDI reports reaching over 2,000 women. In addition, the Roqia Center for Women's Rights also offered seminars for female candidates in 14 provinces, reaching just under half of all candidates involved.[66]

Despite perceptions of their relative success, the 2005 elections were beset by a number of challenges and flaws, many of which had a disproportionate impact on women. Without a formal census or voter list, proxy or multiple registration of (real or imaginary) female voters was a major problem, especially in the more conservative South, where election staff reportedly allowed men to register on behalf of hundreds of women.[67] This was mirrored on polling day by significant proxy voting by men for women.[68] The concession that women would not have to show their picture on their voter registration cards, while an enabling lifeline for some, was likely a significant factor in this process. As a consequence—also a feature of the 2009-10 polls—figures on women's voter turnout should be treated with some caution as they likely represent a degree of overstatement.

In the run-up to polling day, security issues and social restrictions reportedly proved major obstacles to the JEMB's efforts to recruit female polling staff. This raised the possibility of men being present in certain female polling stations, effectively disenfranchising women in more conservative areas with strict restrictions on mixing of the sexes.[69] Long and complicated ballot sheets (book-length in the case of Kabul Province) also posed significant challenges for illiterate voters—again, encompassing a disproportionately large number of women—especially since the photographs of candidates appended to the ballot sheet for their benefit were often far from recognisable.[70]

The registration of female candidates also saw a disproportionately high dropout rate compared to men. This was likely related to the fact that candidates working in government positions were (and still are) legally required to leave their jobs in order to run. With the state one of the main sources of employment for professional women, it is possible that many of those dropping out were ultimately unwilling to risk their livelihoods in order to run.[71] On the campaign trail, female candidates reported facing limitations in terms of their access to information about electoral procedures, restrictions on their freedom of movement especially outside of urban areas, a lack of resources compared to male candidates, and feeling disproportionately exposed to security threats as compared to men. In a pattern that would persist across all subsequent elections, they also experienced a substantial degree of hostility to their presence in the public sphere, denounced as "un-Islamic" by conservative mullahs (a potential death sentence in more conservative areas), subjected to gossip and whispering campaigns, and having their posters torn down or defaced.[72]

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66   See Wahidullah Amini, "Teaching Women to Campaign" *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 17 November 2005, http://iwpr.net/report-news/teaching-women-campaign (accessed 13 February 2012). The English version of the guide this organisation produced to help women candidates is still available at http://www.kabultec.org/womensguide.doc (accessed 13 February 2012).

67   "European Election Observation Mission Final Report," 25.

68   "European Union Election Observation Mission Final Report," 25; "The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections" (Washington, DC: NDI, 2005), 17-18. The latter also notes that men too could be vulnerable to proxy voting when tribal or community elders voted on behalf of large numbers of people.

69   "Campaigning Against Fear: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's 2005 Elections" (Kabul: Human Rights Watch, 2005) 14. The EU's observation report also notes that an overly strict interpretation of the literacy requirements for polling staff may have hindered the recruitment of female employees (see "EU Election Observation Mission Final Report," 62). Neither the JEMB's final report nor other election observation missions noted the final number of female polling staff ultimately recruited, or the proportion of female polling booths that used male staff.

70   International NGO worker, Kabul, pers. comm.

71   "Campaigning Against Fear," 11.

72   For a detailed description of these challenges, see "Campaigning Against Fear."

The inter-election period

After the 2005 elections, a number of mainly international organisations went on to provide training and support to female members of the country's newly elected representative bodies. These included (but were not limited to): the UNIFEM-run Women Parliamentarian's Resource Centre; the establishment with the support of NDI, UNIFEM and Global Rights of a women's parliamentary network linking female MPs and civil society representatives;[73] NDI-run orientation sessions for female MPs and PC members (repeated in 2009 and 2010); and work by Women's Campaign International to strengthen the capacity and networking abilities of female PC members in 2006-08, and MPs after the elections in 2010.[74]

Outside of these efforts, however, donor interest in elections waned rapidly. This left the country's newly-formed IEC with little capacity to make preparations for future elections, and other donor-funded institutions such as the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) struggling for their very survival.[75] It also left a significant gulf in terms of long-term civic education activities or capacity-building activities. Substantial numbers of local and international NGOs such as the Afghan Women Services and Education Organization or Friedrich Ebert Stiftung did run programmes aimed at improving public awareness of women's rights and democratic values, or providing training to women interested in entering politics.[76] However, significant though many of these efforts were, they did not amount to the kind of widespread, in-depth civic education effort needed to supplement the somewhat rushed, election-focused efforts of 2004-05. Significantly for a country with a brand new democracy, no attempts were made to offer civics classes in Ministry of Education-run schools—a fact noted with some bemusement by several community informants for this study—and formal political organisations remained banned from government-run university campuses.[77]

The 2009 presidential/provincial council elections

If the country's first round of elections were seen as a limited success, its second were widely portrayed as a disaster (especially in the international press). There is definitely an element of hyperbole in this characterisation, especially given how far from perfect the 2004-05 polls were. However, the perceived chaos surrounding the electoral process in 2009 and 2010 does appear to have fed in to broader popular dissatisfaction at the record of the Karzai government, eroding the legitimacy of the country's elected bodies and trust in the democratic process as a whole.[78]

Preparations for the 2009 polls were hampered significantly by delays in funding. With some question as to whether elections would even take place, international donors were slow to make decisions on how they would pay for them. With the donor pledging conference for the elections delayed until January 2009, efforts to organise the polls—now a formally Afghanised process under the leadership of

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73   For more on the successes, failures and perceptions of this body, see Larson, "A Matter of Interests," 36-37, and Andrea Fleschenberg, "Afghanistan's parliament in the making: Gendered understandings and practices of politics in a transitional country" (Berlin: Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2009), 123-32. Fleschenberg also includes extensive survey data on female MPs' wider attitudes toward the idea of a women's caucus or network in general.

74   For a more general discussion on the motivations behind and the reception of international assistance to women in Afghanistan's parliament, see Larson, "A Matter of Interests," 33-37. Jessica Powell also touches briefly on the limitations of existing attempts to support women in the PCs and on subnational governance more generally in "Afghan Women in Sub National Governance: Trends and Recommendations" (Kabul: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010).

75   Coburn and Larson, *Derailing Democracy* (forthcoming), Chapter 5. This account reports that in the first six months of 2006, IEC staff received no salary from the government until UNDP finally agreed to cover its interim costs.

76   For further examples of some of the organisations involved, the scope of their programmes, and the scale of grants available from international donors for such work, see the National Endowment for Democracy's 2008 Annual Report, http://www.ned.org/publications/annual-reports/2008-annual-report/middle-east-and-northern-africa/2008-grants/afghanistan (accessed 14 February 2012).

77   As Giustozzi points out, this has left university students with "no legitimate space to 'learn politics'." See Antonio Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion: Student Politics in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010), 4.

78   See, for example, Anna Larson, "Deconstructing Democracy in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2011), 12; and Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Undermining Representative Governance: Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Election and its Alienating Impact" (Kabul: AREU, 2011).

the IEC—soon became a scramble, and the date of the elections was pushed back three months from May to August. As security worsened, the Taliban and other armed groups issued public threats against participating, targeting candidates and electoral workers with threats, intimidation and, in some cases, physical violence. With the competing actors involved all too aware of the resources at stake, fraud was widespread and systematic; in the presidential poll, 18 percent of ballots were thrown out before the final tally was announced. The chaos surrounding the polls significantly undermined public trust in the election process itself, and in the legitimacy of the IEC, which was widely accused, whether fairly or unfairly, of being complicit in some of the fraud involved.[79] Although the number of women competing for PC seats rose by 21 percent compared to 2005, the proportion of women voters dropped to an estimated 39 percent (although again, the kind of fraud described above makes the significance of voter figures hard to determine).

In 2009, the JEMB's voter education role was taken over by the IEC. In its ensuing public outreach drive, it recruited around 1,600 staff to provide face-to-face training to communities across the country. These efforts appear to have taken the form of both direct training sessions conducted in mosques or other public places, and of a more indirect approach of "training of trainers." IEC staff interviewed for this study also described specific attempts to engage with mullahs and other influential male figures to convince them of the value of women voting.[80] These efforts were accompanied by public announcements on radio and TV and a poster campaign in major population centres. However, as in previous elections, the IEC faced an uphill battle in recruiting female team members, eventually managing to hire only 400 women.[81] Once again, it also decided to limit the focus of these efforts to teaching the mechanics of the voting process rather than broader descriptions of the system as a whole.

The UN also attempted to complement the IEC's efforts by awarding grants to local CSOs to conduct civic education, but the late arrival of funds meant these efforts had to be severely scaled back[82]— one local CSO's outreach campaign reportedly consisted of simply making payments to a TV company.[83] A month before the election, AWN and IFES launched the "Five Million Women Campaign" in a bold but last-ditch attempt to raise female voter turnout. In addition to this effort, AWN and other national NGOs managed, with the support of UNIFEM, to secure the holding of radio and television debates in which the main presidential candidates discussed issues related to women's rights.[84]

NDI once again reprised its role as the main body training candidates, and reached an estimated 62 percent of all women PC candidates. In addition, the International Republican Institute ran a series of campaign academies that were attended by an unspecified number of women. It also worked with partner organisation Movement of Afghan Sisters (MAS) in an attempt to build a crosscutting network of female PC candidates, ultimately resulting in 27 MAS-affiliated candidates being elected to office.[85] UNIFEM also provided additional support to female candidates by printing free runs of business cards and A4 posters as well as operating a 24-hour information hotline and running a resource centre for women in politics in central Kabul.[86] In an attempt to ensure efforts at supporting women's electoral

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79   See, for example, "The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: NDI, 2010), 37.

80   Interview, IEC public outreach department staff; interview, IEC gender unit staff.

81   While security and social conservatism have all been cited as the main factors in some parts of the country, especially the South, other important issues that hampered the process included the late or limited involvement of MOWA and CSOs in the process, and the fact that many women who were working at the Ministries of Education and Health—major employers for literate women especially outside of Kabul—were forbidden from taking part in any election-related activities by their employers (international NGO affiliated worker, Kabul, pers. comm.).

82   "The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections," 24.

83   International NGO worker, Kabul, pers. comm.

84   "The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections," 33-34.

85   "IRI Partner MAS has success in Afghan elections," 19 November 2009, http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-partner-mas-has-success-afghanistan%E2%80%99s-elections (accessed 13 February 2012). None of the candidates interviewed for this study were MAS-affiliated, while only one key informant in Kabul made a non-committal reference to their work, rendering it hard to assess the ultimate effectiveness of this networking attempt.

86   Several informants at international and national NGOs interviewed for this study highlighted that UNIFEM's activities to
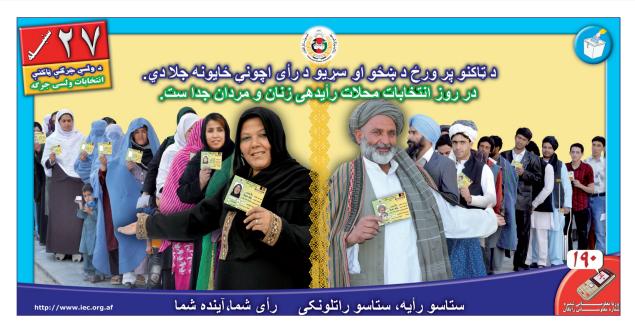
Image 1: An IEC public outreach poster for the 2010 Wolesi Jirga elections explaining that men's and women's polling stations are separate. Note the three women on the left holding voter ID cards without photographs.

participation were as effective as possible and minimise overlap, UNIFEM and the IEC's Gender Unit co-chaired gender coordination meetings with national and international stakeholders over the course of the election period.[87]

Several key informants for this study working at NGOs or international institutions highlighted the fact that the last-minute nature of many of the efforts to support both women's participation and civic education had resulted more generally in relatively few attempts to monitor their impact, especially in cases where partner organisations were involved. This fact was exacerbated by security issues that rendered monitoring and evaluation difficult to carry out in many areas. It should be noted, however, that others felt their organisations had been able to carry out monitoring activities in a satisfactory manner.

Partially as a result of the combination of rising insecurity and the lack of funds or long-term planning in the inter-election period, many of the challenges encountered by women in 2005 re-emerged. Proxy registration and voting on behalf of women was once again a problem, and women's voting cards—still lacking photographs—were reportedly used in the widespread ballot-stuffing that characterised this election in particular.[88] As with the recruitment of female civic outreach workers, finding enough female polling staff was again an issue; men reportedly ended up occupying one-quarter of all positions in female polling stations, while 650 (around five percent of the total, concentrated particularly in insecure, conservative provinces such as Uruzgan) simply did not open at all.[89]

Another problem in this respect was the lack of gender sensitivity in the layout of polling stations, some of which had shared entrances for men and women or required women to walk directly past men's polling stations in order to vote. There were also complaints that many centres were located too far away for women to access given social restrictions on their movement outside the home, and that

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support female candidates were limited by security concerns following the deadly 2009 attack on the UN's Bakhtar guesthouse in Kabul housing election workers, and a desire that the election process appear as Afghan-led as possible.

87   Although these efforts were reportedly hampered by the security fallout from the Bakhtar guesthouse attack (International NGO worker, Kabul, pers. comm.).

88   "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Lessons Learnt on Women's Participation in the 2009 Afghanistan Elections" (Kabul: IEC/UNIFEM: 2009), 6. NDI also noted that the decision to count ballots at individual polling centres rather than centrally in provincial capitals made such activities harder to prevent. See "The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections," 40.

89   "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?" 7.

little attention had been paid to women's needs when Afghan and international forces decided to move or consolidate some centres in the face of security concerns.[90] Combined with the wider background of security fears and dissatisfaction with government performance, these factors likely contributed to the significantly low turnout of women voters as reported by election observers, especially in the South and Southeast.[91]

Intimidation, targeted threats and the overall sense of exposure to insecurity were once again highlighted as major challenges faced by PC candidates; in the South in particular, very few women felt safe enough to even campaign in public.[92] Unlike in previous elections, women were provided with bodyguards by the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) following pressure from the IEC's Gender Unit backed by other national and international actors. However, in practice, this provision was reportedly poorly implemented, as was a US-led effort to recruit female body-checkers for women's polling stations.[93] Unlike in 2005, candidates in both 2009 and 2010 were not allowed to use government-run schools or clinics as campaign venues, ostensibly due to security concerns.[94] This created a significant new barrier for female candidates given that other safe spaces in which women can campaign are relatively sparse, especially in more conservative areas.[95] The decision to count votes at individual polling centres rather than centrally in provincial capitals also left female candidates particularly exposed to fraud, since many of them had fewer resources to spend on polling station observers than their male counterparts. Finally, the timing of the poll just before Ramazan placed a significant burden on women candidates (and, to a lesser degree, voters), who had to balance their campaign activities with the significant, traditionally ascribed amount of household responsibilities associated with the period.[96]

The 2010 parliamentary elections

Many of the dynamics described above would persist into the 2010 polls. Due to security, logistical and funding concerns, the IEC once again delayed the election from May to September.[97] The security situation continued to worsen, with instability in the South and Southeast now accompanied by a deteriorating situation in northern provinces such as Kunduz. This was reflected in the number of reported security incidents on polling day, which, while often smaller-scale in nature, increased by 56 percent compared to 2009. Were it not for earlier and better planning by Afghan and international security forces, the situation would likely have been even worse.[98] Despite some proactive attempts by the IEC to tackle fraud,[99] the problem remained pervasive in 2010, with even more ballots invalidated than in the presidential election.[100] However, it is important to note that there was less evidence of widespread proxy registration of women in the 2010 voter registration update than in previous years.[101]

The recorded number of voters slumped by almost a third compared to 2009. This has been attributed to both rising insecurity, the reduced number of polling booths opened as a consequence (4,691 in

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90   "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?" 9.

91   "The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections," 31.

92   "The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections," 27.

93   "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?" 9.

94   Although one informant for this study speculated that this decision was also in part a politically motivated snub aimed at President Karzai.

95   International NGO worker, Kabul, pers. comm. See also "Afghanistan Parliamentary Election Observation Mission 2010" (Kabul: FEFA, 2010), 68.

96   "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?" 10.

97   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: NDI, 2011), 12.

98   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan," 16.

99   "Getting the Grade? Lessons Learnt on Women's Participation in the 2010 Afghan Parliamentary Elections" (Kabul: IEC, 2010), 16; "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan," 2.

100   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan," 69. Coburn and Larson describe how, by 2010, narratives of fraud and instability were such an assumed part of the electoral process that they were themselves exploited for political gain by many of the protagonists involved. See Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Undermining Representative Governance: Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Election and its Alienating Impact" (Kabul: AREU, 2011).

101   "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Parliamentary Elections, 18 September 2010," 16.

2010 compared to 6,210 in 2009, a drop of almost a quarter), and, as some informants in this study suggested, people's disillusionment with government performance and scepticism of the electoral process.[102] However, it is worth noting that women's turnout as a proportion of the total remained roughly constant, and the number of female candidates increased by 33 percent (even if the bulk of this growth took place in the relative safety of Kabul Province).

IEC voter outreach efforts were once again conducted relatively late in the election cycle and female outreach staff once again accounted for well under half of the total. Security concerns also meant that these efforts were now mainly confined to district and provincial centres, leading to a greater reliance on radio and televised broadcasting.[103] NGOs such as the BBC's Afghan Education Project also helped in the civic education process, as did the Counterpart/IFES Support to the Electoral Process in Afghanistan project—a rare example of a relatively well-funded civic education drive running on an independent timetable to elections.[104]

In terms of support for female candidates, NDI, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and UNIFEM reprised their 2009 roles, while Women's Campaign International ran training-of-trainers seminars focusing on campaign strategy for female parliamentary candidates. MOWA also worked in coordination with AWN to encourage more female candidates to register, and ran networking sessions in Kabul's *Bagh-i Zanana* (women's park) before the elections.[105] Gender coordination meetings were once again held, with the IEC Gender Unit now responsible for convening international stakeholders.

The documented challenges for women candidates and voters in the 2010 polls were largely similar to 2009: public outreach was seen to have taken place too late to make a difference to women voters in particular; inadequate numbers of female polling staff were recruited; campaigning once again took place over Ramazan and counting of votes continued at the local level; proxy voting continued;[106] and security fears remained pervasive (in one of the worst acts of election-related violence that year, five workers on the campaign of Herati candidate Fauzia Gilani were kidnapped and shot dead).[107] MoI efforts to provide women with bodyguards were if anything more chaotic than the previous year,[108] and confused efforts to recruit large numbers of ad hoc female body-checkers for female polling stations were largely unsuccessful.[109]

This chapter has offered an outline of the historical, legal and policy context for women's electoral participation in Afghanistan, along with a descriptive account of some of the general features of elections since 2001. The remainder of this paper goes on to document how these elections were personally experienced and perceived by women candidates and voters interviewed for this study.

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102   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan"; for a general outline of why disillusion might reduce turnout written prior to the 2009 elections, see Andrew Wilder, "A Good National Turnout: between 40 and 45 percent" *ForeignPolicy.com*, 21 August 2009, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/blog/10102 (accessed 7 February 2012).

103   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan," 26.

104   The project ran from 2009 until 2011, focusing on both wider civic education efforts, and capacity-building for women interested in entering politics

105   Significantly, MOWA's efforts to support women in elections appear to have taken place largely on an ad hoc basis over the years. One international NGO worker in Kabul suggested that this may stem from MOWA's reluctance to expose itself to the politicking surrounding elections given its already relatively precarious political position. FEFA recently released a proposal to better clarify MOWA's role in future electoral processes, detailed in "FEFAs Proposal Regarding Ministry of Women Affairs Policy on Election," 1 December 2011, http://fefa.org.af/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=164:fefas-proposal-regarding-ministry-of-women-affairs-policy-on-election-&catid=49:recommendation-on-e-reform&Itemid=116 (accessed 13 February 2012).

106   "Women and Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Elections," 10.

107   For a more detailed description of these challenges, see "Getting the Grade?" which in turn builds on the findings and recommendations of "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?"; and "Women and Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Elections."

108   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan," 18.

109   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan," 85. In its post-election report, the IEC Gender Unit noted that these efforts had attracted a disproportionate amount of international donor attention, describing how "there was no other gender issue on which the international community showed such serious enthusiasm. Other more serious and strategic issues that required international support went largely unheeded by the higher echelons—for example, requests to address the security of female candidates and of elected female provincial councillors saw virtually no high level advocacy." ("Getting the Grade?" 11).

2. Methodology and Study Contexts

2.1 Research methods

Research for this study took place from July through December 2011 in Kabul, Balkh and Bamiyan provinces, including an initial pilot phase in Kabul Province to refine interview questions and techniques. Fieldwork took place from July to the first week of October 2011. In order to build as full a picture as possible of women's electoral participation, data collection proceeded along three parallel lines: interviews with winning and losing female parliamentary and PC candidates; interviews with male and female informants in rural and urban communities within each province; and supplementary discussions with key stakeholders in each provincial capital.

Qualitative in nature, the study relied primarily on semi-structured, individual in-depth interviews (IDIs); in the study communities, these were coupled with focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore community-level perspectives, along with informal conversations and observations by the research team. In the case of both candidate and community informants, questions focused on: informants' personal experiences of electoral **participation**; their personal **perceptions on the importance and nature** of this participation, along with their views on community perceptions; how they **compared** women's participation across successive rounds of elections and against that of men;[110] and their view of the **impact** women's participation had on their personal lives and their communities.[111]

In this particular study, the research team stayed in one rural community and lived with a family, giving the team greater opportunities to interact with the people in the community. Team members were able to give repay the community for its assistance by spending time socialising with young people there, aiding the girls with their studies, and giving time for the community to ask questions of the team members.

Social science research ethics were observed at all points of the research, including gaining the voluntary and informed consent of all research participants, fully explaining the project and its goals, gaining informed permission from provincial, district and community leaders to operate in their areas, and carrying out research in a culturally and gender-sensitive manner. MPs and PC members interviewed for this paper gave consent to have their real names used in this paper since they are public figures and many of them are in any case easily identifiable. However, the names of unsuccessful candidates have been replaced by pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity. The research was conducted by a team of Tajik and Hazara researchers, including three women and two men.

Site Selection and Sampling Criteria

The study provinces were pre-identified at the proposal stage by UN Women. However, within each province, one rural and one urban community were selected in order to draw comparisons between the differing dynamics in play in each case. The communities in Balkh and Kabul were selected largely on the basis of their political, cultural and socioeconomic landscapes as a result

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110   Although efforts were made to probe into the details of individual elections, community informants tended to view and describe Afghan elections to date as taking place in two successive "rounds" occurring in 2004-05 and 2009-10.

111   It should be noted that a "community" can be defined in different ways, in terms of both physical residency, or on social grouping (see Deborah Smith, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution in Nangarhar Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2009), 1. Informants in this study tended to use three terms in this context. Informants within the study communities generally used the word *qeshlak* or *qarya* (village). By contrast, when candidates talked about the "communities" they were from or represented, they tended to use *manteqa*, a more variable unit of social or territorial space that in this case seemed to imply their home "area." Both of these terms have been translated as "community" in the paper. Both candidates and community members also used the word *qawm*, which, while often translated as "clan" or "tribe," is flexible in scope and can be variously defined in terms of tribe, clan, ethnicity, locality or other characteristics as determined by context. Given the potential variability of the term, it has been left untranslated.

of previous research and AREU's existing links and familiarity with these areas. An effort was also made to strike a balance between communities of different ethnic and economic make-ups, as well as between those with strong ties to a female parliamentary or PC candidate (Bamiyan: urban and rural; Kabul: rural) and those without (Balkh: urban and rural; Kabul: urban). Inevitably, security concerns were also a major factor in site selection.

The study encompassed 79 IDIs and 12 FGDs, involving a total of 143 individuals (see Appendix I for demographic breakdown of informants). This included 25 parliamentary and PC candidates, including 15 winners and ten losers. At the community level, informants included powerholders, religious leaders and ordinary voters. Efforts were made to interview equal numbers of men and women in order to contrast gendered perspectives on women's electoral participation. In each given community, informants were identified and selected through a combination of discussions with community elders and random interactions with community members. In terms of key stakeholders, discussions were conducted with staff at central and provincial offices of the IEC, MOWA and the UN, along with those in local and international NGOs working in the fields of democratisation and civic education.

Challenges and Caveats

The following are the limitations and challenges encountered during the course of this study:

- *Time constraints:* The short window for the completion of this study. The fact that a significant portion of the data collection had to take place during the fasting month of Ramazan presented substantial logistical challenges to the research team; it also meant that informants were often tired or unwilling to talk, and in some cases interviews had to be concluded early. The fact that interviews with many MPs were also conducted in the midst of a political crisis[112] also placed limits on the length and quality of some interviews and, in the case of the IEC provincial office in Balkh, prevented one interview from taking place at all. The availability of the losing candidates and limited amount of time available to be spent outside of Kabul City also meant that it was ultimately impossible to reach the number of losing candidates originally planned for in Bamiyan and Balkh. Securing interviews with losing candidates was a particular challenge in this respect since some of them even if contacted refused to be interviewed or remained vague about their availability. This meant that it was ultimately only possible to interview winning candidates in Bamiyan Province.

- *Uneven data:* A lack of available Pashtun researchers combined with time constraints and security concerns meant that no community-level research was conducted in predominantly Pashtun areas, representing a major gap in the data, and an important avenue for further research (although it should be noted that Pashtun informants were interviewed in one mixed study community, along with several Pashtun candidates). The limited number of communities visited also meant that it was impossible to draw direct comparisons between urban and rural communities with and without ties to a candidate within each study province.[113] It also meant that while in some instances, testaments of female candidates themselves could be combined with information from their home communities to build up a three-dimensional picture of their campaigns, in the majority of others, analysis had to rely mainly on the testimony of candidates themselves.

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112   Namely, the proposed (though not implemented) removal from parliament of 61 MPs on charges of electoral fraud by a Special Court convened on an ad hoc basis by President Karzai. For a rundown of these events, see Martine van Bijlert and Gran Hewad, "The slow winding down of the Parliamentary Crisis," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 6 October 2011. http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2116 (accessed 21 December 2011).

113   This would have required four study communities per province: two urban and two rural, one of each with ties to a female candidate.

2.2 Province and community contexts

Balkh Province

Balkh Province forms the political and economic hub of northern Afghanistan, sitting across the main North-South overland route across the Amu Darya to neighbouring Uzbekistan. Its population is composed mainly of Tajiks and Pashtuns followed by Uzbeks and Hazaras with smaller numbers of Turkman, Arabs and Baluch.[114] Over the past ten years, the province has been relatively stable, with its booming capital of Mazar-i-Sharif the focus of rapid economic growth. This has in large part been due to the efforts of its powerful governor, Ustad Atta Mohammad Noor. Affiliated with the Northern Alliance and the Jamiat-i-Islami political party (as well as maintaining connections with the Uzbek Junbesh-i-Milli and Hazara Hizb-i-Wahdat parties), Governor Atta has consolidated a virtual monopoly on economic and political resources in the province. In doing so, he has worked through a network of loyal village elders, district governors, ethnic leaders, commanders and elected representatives who are in turn reliant on his patronage to succeed.

In some respects, this approach has worked well, creating a closed system that minimises outside interference and ethnic tensions. However, many of the province's residents have expressed frustration at the corruption and inequality it has bred. Many informants for this and other AREU studies felt increasingly disenfranchised, pointing out that while a select few were accumulating vast wealth from lucrative construction contracts or other projects, the majority without the right connections to the governor or his inner circle were being left to languish on the sidelines. This sense of inequality is reflected in the fact that despite recent development in its urban centres, Balkh maintains one of the highest poverty rates in the country. There is also evidence to suggest that anti-government elements are gaining an increasingly strong foothold in the districts of Chimtal and Chahar Bolak, long centres of opposition to the state. Despite these potentially troubling trends, however, the province seems set to remain stable relative to the rest of the country, at least in the short term. As with other study provinces, voter turnout dropped off substantially after the 2005 parliamentary and PC elections. However, women's turnout has remained almost constant at around 40 percent.

Urban site: Dehdadi District

Dehdadi is a prosperous suburb of Mazar-i-Sharif with a population of around 64,500. The area is well served by government education and healthcare and has easy access to the city via a well-maintained paved road; it is also the site of a large Afghan National Army base. Many residents are educated, working in government offices or in the nearby Soviet-built fertiliser plant, and some are able to draw on both salaried work and income from their well-irrigated landholdings. The area is relatively ethnically harmonious, mainly composed of Tajiks and Arabs but also including a smaller Hazara community and some Pashtun households. Different parts of the community are represented by different *qaryadars* (community representatives who liaise in a quasi-official capacity between the community and the government)—many of whom are affiliated with various ethnically based political parties such as Jamiat-i-Islami or Hizb-i-Wahdat. This group of representatives meets monthly at the district government office to discuss and act on issues of local importance. However, ties between the area's different ethnicities are generally weak, and there was a sense that these groups were engaged in a competition for resources and political influence. The community is also home to several women's *shuras* which are able to wield a degree of independent decision-making authority on matters perceived to be women's issues.

Despite the area's relative economic prosperity, levels of dissatisfaction with the government are high. Many felt that the government was only working to serve the interests of a small elite, embodied by the shining "poppy palaces" springing up along the road to Mazar. This ambivalence toward the state was also evident when informants discussed elections. Turnout in the district was around 45

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114   "Balkh Provincial Profile," (Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, n.d.), http://foodsecurityatlas.org/afg/country/provincial-Profile/Balkh (Accessed December 21, 2011).

Table 2: Provincial profiles

Province	Population estimate	PC Seats		Wolesi Jirga seats		Governor
		Total	Reserved	Total	Reserved	
Balkh	1.2 million	11	3	19	5	Mohammed Atta Noor
Bamiyan	418,000	4	1	9	3	Habiba Sarabi
Kabul	3.8 million	33	9	29	8	-

Population statistics from "Afghanistan CSO Population Data 1390 (2011-12)" (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2010), http://www.afghaneic.org/Data/CSO%20Population%20Data/Afghanistan%20CSO%20population%20data%201390%20(2011%20-12).pdf (accessed 20 December 2011).

Table 3: Provincial and district turnout rates by election

Province/ district	Percentage turnout			Percentage male			Percentage female		
	2005 (WJ/PC)	2009 (PC)	2010 (WJ)	2005 (WJ/PC)	2009 (PC)	2010 (WJ)	2005 (WJ/PC)	2009 (PC)	2010 (WJ)
Balkh	51	41	44	59.7	No gender disaggregated data available	59	40.3	No gender disaggregated data available	41
Dehdadi	–	–	45	–		57.8	–		42.2
Shortepa	–	–	53	–		63.7	–		36.5
Bamiyan	71	61	62	54.5		51.3	45.5		48.7
Bamiyan District	–	–	52	–		47.6	–		52.4
Yakowlang	–	–	64	–		50.2	–		49.8
Kabul	33	32	25	70.8		67	29.2		33
Kabul City	–	–	24	–		66.3	–		33.7
Guldara	–	–	18	–		61	–		39

Note that the IEC did not provide gender-disaggregated results for the 2009 presidential and PC elections, and that district-level data is only publicly available for the 2010 election. Data Sources: For 2010—NDI and Development Seed, "Afghanistan Election Data," http://2010.afghanistanelectiondata.org/ (accessed 4 December 2011); For 2009—IEC, "Presidential and Provincial Council Elections: Afghanistan 2009 Elections," http://www.iec.org.af/results_2009/Index.html (accessed 4 December 2011); For 2005—Joint Electoral Management Body, "Wolesi Jirga and Provincial Council Elections: Afghanistan 2005 Elections," http://d8680609.u106.forthost.com/home.asp?Language=E (accessed 4 December 2011).

Table 4: Literacy, women's education and poverty rates by province

Province	Total Literacy Rate Age 16+ (%)	Female Literacy Rate Age 16+ (%)	School Enrolment Rate Age 6-12 (%)	Girls to Boys School Enrolment Ratio Age 6-12	Poverty Rate (%)
Balkh	26.8	16.8	53.5	0.86	60.3
Bamiyan	20.2	6.1	57.9	0.85	55.7
Kabul	46.8	30.2	65.2	0.79	23.1
National Average	25	11.4	46.3	0.69	35.8

Unless otherwise stated, information on poverty, literacy rates and other socioeconomic indicators presented in this chapter is drawn from "Afghanistan Provincial Briefs" (Kabul: Government of Afghanistan and The World Bank, 2011).

percent (of which 58 percent were men and 42 percent women) for the 2010 parliamentary elections.[115] However, although most informants reported taking an active part in campaign meetings and the voting process, there was a pervasive sense of disappointment in the failure of representatives to deliver promises and at the corruption that many felt had tainted every aspect of the electoral process. Likely due in part to the level of ethnic fragmentation in the community, it had been unable to rally enough votes behind a single candidate to secure itself a representative in parliament. While theoretically represented by Mahbooba Sadat (see Section 3) in the PC, informants were ambivalent about how great a role she played in the community, with some accusing her of only acting in the interests of her Sayed *qawm*.

Rural site: Shortepa District

The Shortepa community's 200 or so households are clustered on a thin strip of fertile land hugging the Amu Darya River, relying on the irrigation it provides to make a living growing mainly cotton and other cash crops. The area is composed almost entirely of ethnic Turkmans who speak Dari as a second language (if at all, in some cases). Informants here spoke in particular of how residents' sense of ethnic identity had fostered a strong degree of social unity. Despite its close proximity to the busy border town of Hairatan, the community therefore viewed itself as a self-contained unit, isolated in large part from the political currents affecting the rest of the province. The area experienced significant conflict during the Taliban period and many residents sought refuge in Mazar, Kabul and abroad. The community currently has access to NGO-organised training and agricultural extension programmes, and an active male National Solidarity Programme (NSP) *shura*. There is also a stable electricity supply and a reliable water source in the form of the Amu Darya. A mixed primary school lies 40 minutes' walk away and teaches primarily in Turkman; villagers must make a longer journey to Hairatan to access high schools and the nearest clinic.

In general, the community does not see education as a major priority, largely due to the predominance of labour-intensive farming which often requires the involvement of children from a relatively young age. This is particularly the case with women, who are viewed as productive assets because of their carpet-weaving skills and often command high bride prices as a consequence. Coupled with this, prevailing gender norms still frown on women spending much time outside of the home and mixing of the sexes is generally prohibited. A women's NSP *shura* does exist, although it has little decision-making authority and no access to funds. However, participation in this body has triggered a feeling among female residents that they should be able to take a more active role in the community relative to the men there.

Women's generally low standing in the area is reflected in the low women's turnout in Shortepa District for the 2010 parliamentary elections, where women accounted for only 36 percent of votes cast (with overall turnout at 54 percent). Prior to this, the community had maintained close ties with Ruz Guldi, a Turkman MP from the area. However, he failed to win re-election in 2010 despite extensive community consultation aimed at ensuring the area would provide a unified bloc of support for him.[116]

Bamiyan Province

Located in Afghanistan's central highland region, Bamiyan is a mountainous, predominantly rural province with an economy focused overwhelmingly on agriculture, most notably livestock and potato farming. Its population is mainly composed of Shia Hazaras, with smaller numbers of Tajiks and Pashtuns. Historically, the central highlands have been something of a backwater, isolated from the country's political and economic centres. Largely independent until the late-19th century, the area was subjugated by Amir Abdur Rahman, who lent weight to his military campaigns there by branding its Hazara population as infidels. Following their incorporation into the Afghan state, the Hazaras

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115   The only election for which gender-disaggregated is available at the district level. See "Afghanistan Elections Data."

116   For a detailed description of the political dynamics in Shortepa and the neighbouring Turkman district of Kaldar in the run-up to the 2010 parliamentary elections, see Noah Coburn, "Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan: Elections and Instability II" (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

as a group remained subject to considerable ethnic discrimination and remained economically marginalised for much of the 20th century. Although the province largely escaped the worst excesses of the mujahiddin period and the civil war, its fall to the Taliban in 1998 marked a period of widespread and systematic violence against its Hazara population. Targeted both as Shias and as a source of resistance to the Taliban regime, entire communities fled to neighbouring provinces or to Iran and Pakistan, only returning after the regime's fall in 2001.

There was a strong sense among informants that the country's new Western-backed, democratic regime represented a major opportunity to improve their political and economic status relative to other ethnicities, most visibly manifested itself in a strong and widespread commitment to education. This has been accompanied by a liberalisation of social norms regarding women, whose potential role as educators and professionals is increasingly recognised as vital to improving community well-being. Bamiyan is also home to the country's only female provincial governor, Habiba Sarabi. Lingering hostility to the Taliban has meant that the province has remained one of the country's most secure over the past decade. However, there is a strong perception that Bamiyan has largely been excluded from the development bonanza taking place in other parts of the country. As aid flows have concentrated on less stable areas, the province has suffered from a comparative lack of major investment projects, while insurgent activity in the Ghorband Valley in adjacent Parwan Province—which in June 2011 claimed the life of Bamiyan's PC head—and along other routes into the province has left it once again isolated from Kabul.

Politically, the province was once the main support base for the consolidated Shia party Hizb-i-Wahdat. However, a general mistrust of this and other mujahiddin parties borne largely of their failure to protect the province from Taliban incursions has led to an erosion of its legitimacy post-2001. While informants suggested that many Hazaras continued to feel a certain affinity for Wahdat, its waning reputation and failure to coordinate its activities in the province[117] has meant that politics in Bamiyan is mainly conducted along *qawm* and local lines. Reflecting both the province's relative stability and the general Hazara view of the country's current democratic politics as a vehicle for securing greater political power as an ethnicity, percentage voter turnout in Bamiyan Province has historically been among the highest in the country, especially among women.

Urban site: Bamiyan District

The Bamiyan District community is made up of around 200 households and located around forty minutes' drive from the provincial capital at Bamiyan City. A relatively wealthy community with plentiful water resources, its main source of income is derived from potatoes and other cash crops. The area has good access to government and NGO-provided services, including credit and savings services, agricultural extension and vocational training, as well as active men's and women's NSP *shuras*. The community is ethnically homogeneous, made up of Hazara largely drawn from the Toli Reza *qawm*; despite significant displacement during the Taliban time, many families have lived in the area for decades and there has been little in-migration in recent years. As a result, the potential for substantial political divisions within the community remains low.

Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the community established a *shura* to consult and make decisions on local affairs. With an elected head and representing a majority of households, the body is reportedly a powerful force in the community. For example, respondents described how, soon after its formation, the *shura* decided to disarm locally active political parties and banish them from the area. Many respondents spoke of the community as now being free from the influence of parties, whom many felt had betrayed them in their failure to resist the Taliban (although some claim that Hizb-i-Wahdat still maintains a degree of influence in the area). Reportedly, the *shura* was also a critical focus for disseminating information and making collective decisions about which candidates to support at election time. The community is represented by two PC members: a man now serving in the Meshrano Jirga in Kabul and Aqila Hosseini (see Section 3).

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117   Niamatullah Ibrahimi, "The Dissipation of Political Capital Among Afghanistan's Hazaras: 2001-2009" (London: London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre, 2009).

Security in the area is generally good and during the run-up to the 2009/10 PC and parliamentary elections, respondents reported a number of candidates visiting the area to drum up support. Notably, there were no complaints of fraud on polling days, and the only problem respondents highlighted was low levels of education among voters—something that reportedly improved over successive elections.

A strong sense of the importance of education, especially girls' education, pervades the community. This is explained in part by the broader post-2001 trend described above. However, the activism of prominent local figures including Hosseini and the community's mullah has also been influential in this regard. Women in the community have access to a recently built girls' high school—which many claimed was secured as a result of Hosseini's efforts in the PC—as well as NGO-run adult literacy classes. The community's men are also adamant that women should play a full role in politics, although many female respondents reported feeling shut out of local political discussions and do not take part in community *shura* meetings.

Rural Site: Yakowlang District

The Yakowlang community is a village of around 300 households, situated around an hour's drive from the district centre at Nayak. Poorer than the Bamiyan District community but still economically secure, the community is mainly dependent on livestock rearing; it also derives a supplementary source of income from selling winter fuel, collected in the *ailaq* (high pasture used for grazing animals in the summer) by women who live there throughout the summer months. The community has an active men's NSP *shura* which has secured solar batteries for many households in the absence of a permanent electricity supply. However, NGOs are less active here when compared to Bamiyan District. The nearest school is the large Lycee—dating back to the 1920s—about five kilometres away on the opposite side of the valley. Although there is no clinic, healthcare services are available in an adjacent village a similar distance away.

A homogenous Hazara community mainly made up of members of the Miral Khani *qawm* and other small groups, it was also a victim of Taliban violence and suffered significant displacement to neighbouring provinces and countries. Politically, the village is dominated by the powerful Ilkhani family, who have strong ties to government and former mujahiddin networks and own a significant amount of land in the area. The family also effectively represents the community in parliament in the form of female MP Sefora Ilkhani. At the local level, issues of importance to the community were also discussed by the all-male NSP *shura*. Significantly, no form of collective decision-making had existed prior to the arrival of the NSP, and, overall, the community appeared less cohesive and able to achieve political consensus than the urban site. Ilkhani in particular was a divisive figure; while some informants were content with her performance, others felt she had abandoned the community for Kabul, comparing her unfavourably with another Bamiyani MP, Abdur Rahman, whom they felt maintained stronger connections to his constituents. In part, this may reflect a more general dissatisfaction among certain sections of the community with the authority of Sefora Ilkhani's family.

As in the urban site, there was also a substantial belief that the community's fortunes will be improved by the education of its youth. Informants also spoke about how Ilkhani's status as the first woman in the community who was allowed to attend school had had a major impact on community attitudes toward women's education in particular. The reputation she subsequently developed and her work on women's literacy ultimately (along with publication efforts by NGOs) opened the way for increasing levels of school attendance among young girls after 2001.

Kabul Province

Kabul Province is the political and administrative hub of Afghanistan, the seat of parliament and the central government, and the centre of operations for numerous national and international NGOs and development corporations. Kabul City itself has almost tripled in size since 2001 as migrants from across the country's ethnic spectrum have arrived from neighbouring provinces and abroad to take advantage of new economic opportunities and escape rising insecurity. City residents have

relatively good access to education and healthcare, along with stable supplies of electricity and water. Apart from the occasional high profile attack on government or foreign targets, security in the city is relatively good. Comparatively fewer services are available in Kabul's rural areas, and many communities find themselves exposed to low-level but persistent threats of harassment or violence from insurgents or rival political groups. In comparison to the city's ethnic diversity, the province's rural communities are mainly populated by Tajiks and Pashtuns. Overall, the province boasts the highest over-16 literacy rate in the country and a poverty rate significantly below the national average (see Table 4).

Politics in the province are generally highly localised: in rural areas, competition between shifting and sometimes overlapping patronage networks centred on influential individuals such as *maliks* (village headmen) or commanders is often the norm; in urban areas, political parties have comparatively more influence, especially within Hazara communities; and in both rural and urban areas, votes are generally divided clearly along ethnic lines. Significantly, Kabul has experienced some of the lowest turnout rates in the country across all four sets of elections to date, similar to those experienced in conservative, insurgency-hit provinces such as Paktika or Khost. However, it appears likely that in Kabul's case this is a result of its predominantly urban population: voters living in urban areas are likely to face less social pressure to vote than in more cohesive rural communities, while high levels of education may also breed a greater degree of cynicism about the electoral process as a whole.[118] Significantly, women's turnout in Kabul was also significantly lower than in the other two study provinces, though it increased marginally between elections in 2005 and 2010.

Urban site: Dasht-i-Barchi

Dasht-i-Barchi is a southwestern suburb of Kabul City straddling police districts six and 13, inhabited almost exclusively by ethnic Hazaras, with a smaller number of Pashtun residents. Population figures vary widely, ranging from official figures of around 460,000 (for the two districts combined) to local estimates of anywhere between 800,000 up to two million.[119] The area has expanded rapidly since 2001, mostly driven by Hazaras migrating from Wardak and Ghazni Provinces or returning from Pakistan and Iran. This rapid growth was problematic during the 2009-10 elections, with many newer arrivals struggling to secure Kabul City voting cards. Local informants also claimed that the IEC had underestimated the area's population and had consequently opened too few polling booths stocked with too few ballot papers, leaving many people unable to vote (some went on to assert that this represented a deliberate attempt to limit Hazaras' political power). While residents in the area have reasonably good access to education and healthcare, its rapid expansion has left urban infrastructure such as drainage and electricity struggling to keep up.

While a strong sense of collective Hazara identity pervades the area, political divides do exist between people from different areas in their home provinces and from different *qawms*. The Shia parties Hizb-i-Wahdat and Harakat-i-Islami are active in the area and have reportedly been effective in mobilising support for specific candidates, most notably in the 2009 presidential election when Hazara leaders Mohaqqiq and Khalili threw their support behind President Karzai. However, informants claimed that their influence had waned during the 2010 parliamentary election as people grew disaffected with their perceived failure to deliver tangible benefits to the community. Dasht-i-Barchi was also a focus for Hazara candidates' campaigns during the 2009 PC elections—two informants for this study, Anisa Maqsudi and Sharifa Sherzad Allahdad (see Section 2), appeared to draw most of their support from the area. However, local informants made no mention of them and were generally cynical about democratic representatives in general and what they saw as the corrupted, transactional nature of the electoral process.[120]

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118   Wilder, "A good national turnout." In addition, a series of rocket attacks in Kabul City on the morning of the 2009 presidential and PC elections likely contributed to lower turnout as concerned families told their women to stay home.

119   "Afghanistan CSO population data 1390." (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2011). Given high levels of internal migration and the lack of any census data, population statistics in Afghanistan are notoriously unreliable, especially in urban areas. In this context, it should be noted that local population estimates often represent a form of strategic positioning rather than an educated guess since population estimates often determine levels of government or international aid.

120   For more on the political dynamics in Dasht-i-Barchi during the 2009 presidential and PC elections, see Noah Coburn and

Rural site: Guldara District

The rural study community is located in Guldara District, around 20 kilometres northwest of Kabul. Its population of around 1,500 is predominantly Tajik, with smaller numbers of Pashtuns. Most older residents are farmers, deriving their income mainly from the orchards of fruit trees that dot the area; many younger men also work in Kabul City as manual labourers. While the village has a clinic and schools are relatively easily accessible, residents reported no reliable electricity supply and a lack of clean drinking water. Informants explained that while almost all adult women in the community were illiterate, residents are increasingly sending their daughters to school. Several NGOs were reportedly offering training in poultry farming and adult literacy courses. The village was almost completely destroyed during the Taliban period, and residents reported fleeing to the mountains to avoid torture and summary execution.

The main political figures in the community are its female MP Fauzia Nasiryar Guldarayee (see Section 2), certain former Jihadi commanders—whose money and influence were perceived as affecting people's voting decisions during elections—and the influential members of the community's *shura*. Informants were generally content with Guldarayee's performance, citing her continued engagement with the community while in office as the reason for her re-election in 2010. However, they felt that *shura* members had captured aid from NGOs and channelled it to favoured members of their own *qawm*, marginalising those most in need. Another figure often discussed by community members was the 2009 presidential candidate and prominent Northern Alliance figure Dr Abdullah, who was identified as defending the community from Taliban atrocities. PC members were essentially unknown in the community, and no one from the area had run in either set of PC elections.

Anna Larson, "Voting Together: Why Afghanistan's 2009 Elections were (and were not) a Disaster" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

3. Candidates

There is no single model for a successful or unsuccessful female candidate. For the informants in this study, whether they won or lost was attributable to a combination of their individual and family backgrounds, the resources they were able to access, the techniques they employed on the campaign trail, and how these factors related to the specific political and social dynamics at play in their communities and provinces. This chapter consequently begins by providing and comparing in-depth descriptions of the backgrounds and experiences of winning and losing candidates in each study province, before going on to highlight the more general trends emerging from their individual stories. It should be noted that the data used in this section is somewhat uneven as a consequence of the study's methodology. For the majority of candidates, information was derived from their own testimony, a review of existing literature and the personal knowledge of the Afghan researchers involved. For a small number of others, more detailed information was also available as a result of interviews with informants in their home communities. Every effort has been made to keep this explicit in the narratives below.

3.1 Candidates and their campaigns

Table 5: Provincial comparison of female/male candidates by year and election

Province	Candidate Numbers							
	2005 (WJ)		2010 (WJ)		2005 (PC)		2009 (PC)	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
Balkh	116	14	80	14	118	15	138	16
Bamiyan	54	7	43	6	68	9	94	6
Kabul	390	43	663	102	217	33	524	64

Data sources for below tables: For 2010—NDI and Development Seed, "Afghanistan Election Data"; For 2009—IEC, "Presidential and Provincial Council Elections: Afghanistan 2009 Elections," http://www.iec.org.af/results_2009/Index.html (accessed 4 December 2011); For 2005—Joint Electoral Management Body, "Wolesi Jirga and Provincial Council Elections: Afghanistan 2005 Elections," http://d8680609.u106.forthost.com/home.asp?Language=E (accessed 4 December 2011).

Bamiyan Province

The number of female candidates in Bamiyan province actually dropped slightly over successive rounds of elections (see Table 5 for candidate numbers in the study provinces over successive elections), rendering its 2009 PC election the least competitive out of all the study provinces in terms of the number of candidates per seat (see Table 6). However, the 2009/10 elections were in one sense more competitive than in Kabul or Balkh in that winning candidates had to secure a larger proportion of an already high turnout, meaning that candidates could not win by restricting their campaigns to a given community or area.

A total of three successful candidates—one MP and two PC members—were interviewed in the province. All three had long histories of service within their respective home communities as teachers, in two cases conducting lessons despite the presence of the Taliban. However, while one PC member, Razia Iqbalzada, claims to have relied on this reputation alone to rally voters,[121] the other two were strikingly similar in the way that they relied on a combination of their personal track records of community service and professional experience, and powerful kinship and political networks to secure victory.

Before being elected in 2005, Bamiyan's current MP Sefora Ilkhani had spent time pioneering women's literacy classes in her community, something that appears to have earned her a substantial cache of respect there. This, she claimed, had been further bolstered by the broader recognition that she had

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121   Although this was impossible to triangulate.

Table 6: Levels of competition among female candidates by province, 2009-10 elections

Province	Body	Reserved seats for women	Open seats	Candidates per seat (women)	Candidates per seat (men)	Minimum % of turnout required to win (women)	Minimum % of turnout required to win (men)
Balkh	PC	5	14	3.2	8.7	0.7	1.4
	WJ	3	6	4.7	11	1.19	4.2
Bamiyan	PC	3	6	2	14.7	0.8	3
	WJ	1	3	6	12.3	4.6	8.9
Kabul	PC	8	21	8	21.9	0.5	0.6
	WJ	9	24	11.3	23.4	0.25	0.6

For a detailed discussion on the science of measuring electoral competitiveness, see, for example, Steven Reed and Kay Shimizu, "Measuring Competitiveness in Multi-Member Districts," (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University, 2007), http://iis-db. stanford.edu/evnts/4905/Reed-Shimizu.Paper.pdf (accessed 2 January 2012). The approach adopted by the authors of this paper is unfortunately not applicable to Afghanistan due to the absence of a party list system.

earned distributing food across the province while working for an NGO. However, she also maintained a parallel identity as the daughter of a powerful local figure and the sister of a civil war-era commander who now held a senior post in the MoI and was rumoured to maintain strong links to the powerful Hizb-i-Wahdat party.[122] For many members of her community, a vote for her was as much about demonstrating support for her family and the reciprocal rewards this could bring—a couple even talked of the danger of not supporting her given her family's control of land rights in the area—as it was for a potentially capable MP.

Within her own community, Ilkhani's 2010 re-election campaign reportedly focused on fostering a sense of *qawm* solidarity, using rhetoric that stressed the importance of one *qawm* rallying round a single candidate as a demonstration of strength and unity in the face of their rivals. She was also careful to build on her existing reputation among local women by targeting them as a distinct constituency during the campaign process. In a move widely perceived as a successful attempt to undermine the lavish meals laid on by male candidates, she gathered the community's women in the local mosque to hold a *nazer* (a religious ceremony in which prayers are offered at the start of undertaking a major enterprise, accompanied by a simple meal). However, her engagement here does not appear to have involved addressing their interests as women, and the message she delivered was fundamentally the same. According to female community members in Yakowlang District who had attended one of her campaign events, her speech mainly emphasised that it would be shameful for people from the same community not to vote for their own candidate.

Financially, she was largely supported by her brothers, and while she conducted an extensive campaign locally, it is unclear how widely she campaigned in other parts of the province. In either case, it appears likely that the networks open to her family—whether in terms of *qawm* support or her brother's government and party connections—were helpful in securing votes further afield. In 2010, this was apparently also aided by the province-wide reputation she had gained in providing Bamiyanis visiting Kabul, especially students, with lodgings and financial support during her time as an MP there.[123] According to government and NGO workers in the provincial centre, she was

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122   Hizb-i-Wahdat was originally formed in 1989 in attempt to unify Afghanistan's various Shia mujahiddin factions. In recent years, the party has become politically weakened and fragmented, and is currently split into at least four competing factions (Ibrahimi, "The Dissipation of Political Capital Among Afghanistan's Hazaras"). However, at least in Bamiyan Province, voters did not distinguish between these different groups and still appeared to view the party as a powerful, if not necessarily well-liked, political force in the area. Several older informants in the province went so far as to describe Hazaras' affiliation with the party as an almost innate quality. As one woman in the Yakowlang community put it, "All Hazaras are members of Wahdat."

123   A potentially expensive practice that is nonetheless common among MPs and widely expected by their constituents. See

also given a degree of logistical support (in terms of printing and hanging posters) by the small Insejam-i-Milli party. The precise nature of this relationship is unclear since it was not discussed by either the candidate or her community—indeed, as one IEC worker speculated, it is possible that it was deliberately kept quiet for fear of inciting popular hostility toward parties in general. However, its status as a Shia party with historic links to Wahdat suggests that it forms part of the larger web of political relations within which her family is enmeshed.

Within her community, people's views on her effectiveness during her first term as an MP were mixed—women especially were inclined to view her in a positive light, highlighting her successful efforts to secure a newly-built bridge linking the area to the main road running through the valley below. However, male community members were more critical, arguing that she had abandoned the community since her election, been mute in parliament, and that the bridge (ostensibly supplied by an international NGO) had in fact been built by the province's female provincial governor, Habiba Sarabi. Still, this did not stop one male respondent from observing that despite her track record as an MP, people still had "no choice" but to vote for her because of the power her family enjoyed.

In many respects, Sefora Ilkhani's background was mirrored by that of PC member Aqila Hosseini. A teacher and social worker in her community with experience working for the UN, she also had a well-known former commander as a brother who was able to bring his substantial financial and political resources to bear on her campaign. However, for Hosseini, family seems to have been one weapon in a larger arsenal, as opposed to the defining feature of her candidacy.

Hosseini first ran unsuccessfully for election to the PC in 2005. Within her own community, her defeat then was almost universally ascribed to low levels of awareness and literacy among her supporters, combined with a quirk of fate that confusingly put a different Aqila on the first page of the ballot. She responded in 2009 by running what she portrayed as a much more systematic, targeted campaign. In speeches to voters, she worked to address the apparent cause of her defeat, demonstrating how to vote properly and explaining how exactly to find her on the ballot sheet. She also reported building a network of female teachers and doctors to build support among women voters. This is supported by the testimony of female informants in her community, who reported how one such teacher had facilitated a women-only meeting at which discussion focused on the need for women to vote for a female candidates as a way to claw back power from men (see Box 2 for more details). Critically, she also argued her case with community elders and was able to secure the support of the local *shura*. This body in turn tried to ensure that she would be the only candidate her community supported and thus lower her exposure to vote-splitting on polling day.[124]

However, despite her apparent popularity in the community and hands-on approach to campaigning, she was still ultimately dependent on her brother's financial support. This was channelled via both him and his party Hizb-i Paiwand-i Milli, a small and predominantly Ismaili former mujahiddin group with roots in Baghlan Province. In contrast to Sefora Ilkhani's involvement with Insejam, this relationship does not appear to have been a secret and did not yield a hostile response from community informants. This was likely due to the fact that they almost universally saw her as an effective representative who was answerable first and foremost to her constituents, in comparison to Ilkhani's more divided reputation in the Yakowlang District community.[125] Members of a female FGD in her community described how her brother had also paid to serve traditional meals of rice and meat to the community. This would suggest an attempt to link Hosseini's own potential as a politician with her brother's ability to provide services in a more traditional role as community patron.

Noah Coburn, "Political Economy in the Wolesi Jirga: Sources of Finance and their Impact on Representation in Afghanistan's Parliament" (Kabul: AREU, 2011), 3.

124   While her election victory would suggest that they were reasonably successful in their efforts, evidence suggests that mobilising a unified community vote can often be an uphill struggle. See Coburn and Larson, "Voting Together."

125   Why exactly is unclear, especially given the specific hostility expressed by male informants in this community to political parties in general.

Hosseini's brother also proved invaluable in her attempts to muster support outside of her local area—crucial since high turnout in the province meant that securing solid support from a single area would not necessarily guarantee an election victory as it would in Kabul, for example. With a well-connected male chaperone, she was thus able to travel to certain areas that were considered out of bounds for other candidates, as she explained:

> When I was campaigning, I went to Shibar District. There were no posters for other candidates there and the Taliban dominated parts of it, especially Randak. When I was going to Gandak, Taliban on motorcycles barred my way. Then my brother got out of the car and the Taliban asked him what he was doing. My brother said, "I am the brother of Aqila Hosseini, who is a PC candidate campaigning in this area." The Taliban said, "Well done for having the courage to campaign in this area. In Bamiyan, there are a lot of candidates but they do not come here." From that area, I got 500 votes.[126]

Despite this incident, however, security was not generally seen as a major obstruction in Bamiyan by either candidates or community members. This was also true for electoral fraud, with both voters and government workers in the province proudly comparing its law-abiding citizenry and sound electoral management to the perceived chaos of other provinces. Without these two problems so often cited in the other study provinces and in other research, the province might seem to represent an environment atypically favourable to women candidates. However, as the example of the above two candidates[127] demonstrates—neither of whom would have won without the quota system—demonstrate, access to money and powerful male connections could still prove critical in the scramble for the few women's seats available.

One unanswered question in Bamiyan is why there were so few female candidates campaigning for each seat. It is possible that the resources and connections Sefora Ilkhani could bring to bear, combined with her innate advantage as an incumbent, may have dissuaded rivals from risking the resources and effort needed to challenge her for the single available parliamentary seat in 2010. However, the same does not appear to apply in the case of the PC elections. Unsuccessful candidates from Bamiyan might have been able to shed light on this issue, and the failure to incorporate any into this study thus represents an important gap in the data.

Kabul Province

Resource-rich, ethnically diverse and politically vibrant, Kabul presented a much more complex campaign environment for women candidates. Its expanding and relatively stable urban centre, large pool of professional, educated women and high number of available quota seats attracted a significant number of female candidates in both parliamentary and PC elections. This was all the more the case in the 2009-10 elections, where in both instances the numbers of women involved roughly doubled when compared to 2005. With so many candidates competing for relatively few seats, the percentage turnout needed to secure a seat was low, and margins between winners and losers were tight. This set of circumstances combined to produce a particularly diverse variety of candidates.

Winning Candidates

While recognising that PC and parliamentary elections were characterised by quite different sets of dynamics, it is worth examining successful candidates from both of these elections as a single group in order to draw out the similarities and differences between the types of campaign involved. Significantly, the majority of winning candidates kept their efforts largely confined to securing a critical mass of votes within a given community, *qawm*, or other support network.

Two PC members focused their attention largely on mobilising networks centred in the politically vibrant Hazara community of Dasht-i-Barchi in western Kabul. A returning incumbent, Anisa Maqsudi came from a well-known and politically active family, a factor that helped facilitate her entry into

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126   This story was impossible to triangulate. While security in Bamiyan Province as a whole is good, the predominantly Tajik Gandak Valley has become a pocket of insurgent activity, although it is unclear whether or not the Taliban are involved.

127   The third provided very little information about her campaign and focused her interview on her activities while in office.

politics in 2005 shortly after her return from Iran. Before her first run for office, she had with the support of her influential father been elected by heads of their *qawm* to run as their representative; on running again in 2009, she again negotiated with *qawm* leaders to ensure that she would remain the group's sole candidate and that no vote-splitting would occur.

She was also open about being supported financially by Hizb-i Wahdat-i Islami (the branch of the party headed by Vice President Khalili), especially in her 2009 run. While she admitted that their support had been conditional on her running for the PC rather than for parliament, she maintained that she did not have to answer to them, adding that they had not even given her enough money to prevent her from going into debt due to campaign expenses. Beyond the money it offered, however, running on a Wahdat ticket is also likely to have given her an additional boost in allowing her to access to the party's organisational machinery and symbolic cache within the Hazara community.

Maqsudi also attributed her success in the last round of elections to her proven track record of delivering services to Dasht-i-Barchi residents while in office. Although she apparently did not campaign specifically among or for women, she noted that these services had a gendered impact which was proportionally greater for women, and as a consequence may have boosted her support among this constituency.[128]

> *I always try to act for everyone, not just for women. But the things I've done have been mostly for women. For example, I've provided electricity for many areas, and this has an impact on women more than men, because they are in the house more than men, they use it for washing, for cooking etc. My actions themselves have affected women, they really like me when I go to visit them, they are very welcoming.*

Sharifa Sherzad Allahdad, another winner from Dasht-i-Barchi, reported becoming involved in community politics after making a name for herself working as a teacher and running an organisation to support women in her area. In contrast to Maqsudi, she explained how this political awakening had been more imposed on her family than driven by it:

> *The leader of our area asked me to join their shura and talk about some issues. When I started speaking among all the elders, the hope became alive in me, and I realised that I had the capacity to speak among the people...The interesting thing was that my father-in-law was also there. When the election came, people asked me to be a candidate and they asked my father-in-law for permission. It was very difficult for me, but I was happy that I could win and I feel very comfortable in my activities.*

In describing her campaign, she claimed it had been limited to conducting a series of sessions with this same set of elders, who had then mobilised support among the wider community during the elections. This, she added, had made for a cheap campaign that had allowed her to avoid dependence on political parties for support. However, while it appears that her family were not particularly influential, it has been impossible to triangulate the deeper dynamics and interests at work in her community and *qawm* that set her apart from other, less successful candidates who also claimed to have relied exclusively on local support without access to other resources.

Another candidate who focused on representing a given area was two-term MP Fauzia Nasiryar Guldarayee. As a candidate in the rural district of Guldara, her path to victory in some respects mirrors that of Sefora Ilkhani and Aqila Hosseini in Bamiyan. The child of a locally influential father, she was also the widow of a former community elder and member of Jamiat-i-Islami—although again, she herself was keen to draw a clear line between her own activities as an independent candidate and those of his party. Funded by her family, her campaign appears largely to have focused on playing to voters' desire for a locally recognised candidate from their own *qawm*. Her reliance on these factors was if anything stronger than that of the Bamiyan candidates since prior to 2005 she had run her own business and had not, as they had done, built up an independent reputation as a service provider or educator within her own community. This was reflected in the opinions of women voters in Guldara, who, while extremely happy to have the opportunity to vote for a female representative,

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128   For more information on this candidate, see Coburn and Larson, "Voting Together?" 6.

fundamentally framed their support for her in terms of *qawm*, ethnicity and family connections. As one Pashtun elder in Guldara noted, voters for whom having a strong, familiar representative was a priority essentially had "no option" but to support her because nobody else from the area was running.[129]

In general, community members in Guldara expressed satisfaction with her record of service while in office, commenting most frequently on her perceived honesty compared to other candidates (she had apparently been successful in managing expectations about what she could realistically do for them as an MP). In making herself accessible to resolve disputes and showing up at weddings, religious ceremonies and other important life-cycle events, she had also cemented her image as a more traditional community representative in the mould of *maliks* and other figures. Armed with this record, she was able to persuade community elders to coordinate support for her in 2010, as one of them explained:

> I remember that Fauzia came here and called all the elders together. Before we met her, all the elders gathered together and talked. We went through all of her four years of activities in the parliament, and we found that she did a good job for the people. We said that she had good experience and it would not be fair to replace her with a new person. That is why we decided together that we would all vote for her.

In this community at least, Guldarayee's successful track record in office seems to have debunked the notion expressed in other study areas that women could not act as effective service providers simply because of their sex.

In contrast to the regional and *qawm* focus described above, two more candidates appear to have been helped to victory, at least in part, by cultivating support within a self-contained network of their own creation that had allowed them to keep costs down and their activities outside of the familiar confines of Kabul City to a minimum. These networks were also more crosscutting in nature, although they still remained centred around the actions of an individual rather than commitment to a given set of beliefs.

For Hazara MP Roboba Parwani, this took the form of followers gained while working as a religious leader. Although other female candidates reported being able to campaign in mosques around election time, Parwani was unique in that she actually had a regular preaching slot, attracting by her own estimate around 500 people, three times a week. Coupled with this, she was also able to draw on the help of students at a religious institute that she had founded who had provided support as candidate agents during her campaign, along with other religious teachers who had in turn called on their own networks to support her. This had, she claimed, allowed her to run as an independent candidate at a cost of only 100,000 Afs (around US$2,220).

The PC member Guljan Bakhshi described employing a similar strategy, only this time among high school students. Coming from a family of teachers, she had taught at two elite, long-established boys' schools in Kabul before running for election in 2009. This had been critical, she said, in giving her not only a network of dynamic young activists to campaign through, but also a set of powerful contacts among former students who were now working in senior positions in various government ministries. As a consequence, she explained that she had barely had to go through any of the normal motions of campaigning or employing polling booth observers. However, while she attributed this network as the main cause of her election victory, there may be more to the story: According to her testimony, it also appears that her family was able to mobilise support among members of her Panjshiri *qawm* now residing in Kabul. This may also have allowed her to create a perceived connection between herself and the Northern Alliance presidential candidate Dr Abdullah, whom she claimed had helped finance the printing of her campaign posters.[130]

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129   He had not voted for her since she was a woman and a Tajik. Significantly, he went on to note how elections were unfairly benefitting Tajiks, arguing that Tajik candidates were able to command significantly more votes since Tajik families allowed their women to vote and Pashtuns did not.

130   Again, it has not been possible to triangulate this evidence, which was provided by the candidate herself.

Of the two remaining winning candidates in Kabul, one, Torpekay Nawaby, gave only very vague information on her campaign and it is thus unclear what kind of resources she had access to or the kind of campaign techniques she applied. However, it is worth noting that she attributed her success not to her experiences teaching or working at an NGO, but to the trust she had built among people while working as a member of Kabul's communist-educated, technocratic elite before the civil war. Speaking fondly of her experiences under the PDPA regime, she also claimed that it was largely the network of friends and colleagues she had developed during that period who had helped her—a widow—mount a successful campaign.[131]

The other, Shinkay Karokhel, was a prominent member of Afghan civil society and the small, elite group of women who rose to prominence through their involvement with AWN and other women's NGOs. She appears to have combined her status as a public figure and the close ties she maintains within her home district to secure victory as an MP with more votes than several successful male candidates in both 2005 and 2010. Although she ran as an independent both times, she is one of the few candidates in this study who appears to have run an ostensibly issues-based campaign. In 2005, this apparently revolved around emphasising the importance of women participating in politics to claim their rights. In 2010, she described shifting tack to an anti-corruption platform that focused on explaining to voters what parliament could realistically do for them—apparently in response to voters' high expectations and consequent disappointment after the 2004-05 elections.

However, like so many other candidates, she was also still heavily reliant on support from members of her *qawm* and local community. So important was this support, in fact, that she risked a highly unstable security situation in order to campaign in her home district of Surobi. In contrast to Aqila Hosseini's reported experiences with the Taliban, however, the threat involved was the elaborate and violent bluffing of a political rival:

> One day, these people gave guns to other people to pretend to be Talibs. But I know they aren't Talibs, they just distributed guns to the locals...I was present there and didn't pay any notice... In [another place], they staged a fight with each other and burned a school and a clinic, they even used rockets. But I got a lot of votes from that place too.

This echoes the experiences of winning MP Gulalai Noorsafi in Balkh (see below), and points to the widespread use of instability and—especially resonant for female candidates—the spectre of the "Taliban" as a cover for local political actors to secure an edge over their rivals.[132]

Losing Candidates

A total of seven losing candidates were interviewed in Kabul—five who had run for parliament, one who had run for the PC, and another who had run for both. Of these, one parliamentary and one PC candidate managed to secure between 60 and 70 percent of the votes needed to beat the lowest-placed winning candidate and might therefore be considered "competitive" candidates. By comparison, the remainder received well under 50 percent of the required tally, in most cases scoring little more than a couple of hundred votes.

The first competitive loser was parliamentary candidate Anarkili Honaryar, a representative of the country's Hindu and Sikh community. Originally from Baghlan Province, she had previously worked for a human rights organisation and had served as one of the female representatives of the Emergency Loya Jirga that had appointed the country's interim government in 2002. She reported focusing her campaign mainly within the Hindu community in Kabul, in Afghanistan often the subject of similar social restrictions on movement and mixing with men as their Muslim counterparts. Outside of Kabul City, she mainly reported relying on friends and colleagues to spread her message, although she did report holding one meeting in the volatile Surobi District at their suggestion. However, she freely

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131   While the rest of the country languished in the throes of war, the communist period was something of a heyday for women in Kabul City since the regime offered them a then-unprecedented degree of access to education and roles in professional and public life. See Moghadam, "Revolution, Religion and Gender Politics."

132   For more on the strategic uses of instability, see Coburn and Larson, "Undermining Representative Governance," 11-14.

admitted that she was unfamiliar with the rest of the province as her work and studies had limited her to the city itself. Ultimately it appears that she was not able to make much headway outside the capital's Hindu and Sikh community, suggesting that her prominence as a minority representative and civil society member were not sufficient to compete against the kinds of community, *qawm* and family ties that other candidates were able to draw on to secure resources and mobilise support.

The case of Zarghona, a competitive loser in the 2009 PC election, is intriguing for entirely different reasons. Apparently campaigning without any specific constituency in mind, no *qawm* or party ties to draw on and with only her immediate family—including her nine children—behind her, she secured a substantial number of votes by spending of her own money and conducting a campaign that attempted to project an image of power despite these drawbacks. She reported deciding to run on a whim after watching candidates lining up at the IEC office on television, only informing her police officer husband of her intentions after she had formally enrolled herself. Her motivation appears to have been that if other women had the right to serve in high positions, then so did she. This was coupled by the lure of being able to "work in an office and earn big money" (she reported her husband agreeing that running for office would be worth attempting since the financial rewards of successfully doing so could be substantial).

Although she reported that one of her grandfathers had been a *shura* head, she did not describe her family as having enough of a reputation to attract voters. Instead, she felt that people would be familiar with her because of outreach she had done working for a government ministry. The 500,000 Afs (US$10,400) she spent on her campaign apparently came from a bank loan (she had originally planned to use it as a deposit on a house). According to her:

> The money was spent on transportation, food, snacks, printing pictures and new clothes for myself, my husband and my children. Every time I travelled around Kabul or outside, I rented different coloured cars. Because he was a police officer, my husband brought guns and my children used them and looked like bodyguards...When I went to campaign, I did not appear like the local people...I looked like a female politician, I really looked like a very strong woman...my husband prepared the places I went with tea and biscuits.

In openly adopting this approach, Zarghona set herself apart from candidates like Sefora Ilkhani in Bamiyan, who had chosen to emphasise perceived feminine traits of honesty or modesty as a way to undermine better-resourced or more powerful rivals. Instead, she attempted to compete by adopting all of the trappings of a more traditional or mainstream campaign, attempting to display her ability to act as protector or service-provider through an overt display of force and wealth.[133] However, while this approach was effective enough to make her a reasonably competitive candidate, it was not enough to secure victory. While she may have been able to affect an air of political authority, her status as an unfamiliar woman with no obvious family connections is likely to have left many voters unconvinced. She did suggest that previous work conducting vaccinations for the Ministry of Public Health ought to have endeared her to voters. However, she did not describe incorporating this part of her history into her campaign speeches, and it is unclear whether, spread across an entire city rather than a single village or area, this work was enough to give her the kind of reputation for altruism that had given candidates like Sefora Ilkhani an additional boost.

Unsurprisingly, the five Kabul candidates who suffered heaviest losses were not able to draw on nearly the same amounts of financial resources, political capital or community connections as their more successful counterparts. Two—Anisgul and Parween Sadat—had spent the majority of their careers as teachers, although the latter had also spent time working in the administrative offices of the Meshrano Jirga. A further two—Shamsiya and Fahima—had worked with NGOs, while one more—Makaijan—ran a construction company with her husband.

Financially, most of this group were supported by their husbands or brothers; Fahima reported receiving a limited amount of money from a small, independent political party, while Makaijan appears to have

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133   For more on community expectations that MPs and PC members act in the mould of more traditional service-providing figures, see Noah Coburn, "Connecting with Kabul: The Importance of the *Wolesi Jirga* Election and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010), 3-4; and Coburn, "Political Economy in the Wolesi Jirga," 5-6.

been independently wealthy as a result of business and family connections. Makaijan and Parween Sadat also reported having influential or politically active fathers, but in both cases these had died some time ago, leaving them deprived of a potentially valuable source of voter mobilisation.

Significantly, three of this group appear to have lacked any ties to a distinct community or constituency. Fahima, who ran for parliament in 2005, reported that she had still been in Peshawar working for a women's charity when the elections were announced and had thus not had time to build a reputation in-country. Makaijan had also run unsuccessfully in 2005 in her home province, largely on the basis of her family's influence in her home community there. However, her family's reputation apparently did not extend as far as Kabul, where she ran again in 2010. Unfamiliar and with no source of *qawm* or community support, she was only able to secure a small fraction of her 2005 vote tally. In this respect, Shamsiya was faced with a similar situation. Having spent most of her life in education and working for NGOs and the municipal authorities in Kabul, she ran for the PC in 2009, largely relying on her friends and colleagues to campaign. Failing to secure a seat, she decided to return to her home province in an attempt to make a more active, grass-roots-focused run for parliament in 2010. However, after so long away, she was ridiculed as an outsider on her return, and reported battling the indifference and sometimes open hostility of local commanders and community leaders once on the campaign trail. Again, when results were announced, her total votes were significantly down from the figure she had managed to achieve in Kabul, where she had arguably been a more "familiar" figure with a more solid network of supporters.

By contrast, Anisgul and Parwasha reported largely limiting their campaigns to within their home communities and relying on friends and relatives to work as their proxies in other parts of the province. However, neither these two nor any other losing Kabul candidates (including the two competitive cases discussed above) reported any success in engaging with community elites or prominent members of their *qawms*. Although Makaijan and Shamsiya did describe attempting to recruit support among mullahs and religious leaders when campaigning in their home provinces, this could backfire when working in unfamiliar areas as the latter described:

> During my campaign, one of the mullahs promised that he would campaign for me. After that, I became happy and I told him I was proud that he was working with me and I appreciated it a lot. Then I bought him a prayer mat and some rosary beads...Then he talked a lot about me with the people. He said that I was a very honest and hard-working woman and in the future I would take care of poor people. He encouraged a lot of people to vote for me. But after a few days he came back and said that since he had worked so hard for me I should pay him US$300 for it. I told him that I didn't have any money to give him and he went away. Then, he went out and said to local people, "she is not a good woman and she does not care about poor people. If she wins the election she will cheat and betray people."

This exchange points to the possibility that in between the mullahs or religious leaders "for" or "against" women's electoral participation on ideological grounds, there may be many others who are prepared to make more pragmatic use of their positions as moral gatekeepers to bargain for personal gain.[134] Significantly, none of the Kabul losing candidates except Anarkili Honaryar described making any effort to engage specifically with women voters.

Finally, it is worth noting that while the majority of winning and losing candidates in Kabul and Balkh raised questions about the integrity of the IEC, the most visceral condemnations came from the Kabul candidates whose vote tallies were lowest. As previous research has suggested, claiming fraud as a cause of defeat has become common practice in Afghanistan and can serve as a way to repair damaged political capital or extract concessions from the authorities despite being denied formal access to power.[135] There is also no doubt that fraud also has a genuine and disproportional impact on female candidates without the resources to employ large numbers of observers—or commit it

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134   FEFA also noted that in several instances, female candidates who had been the subject of negative speeches by local mullahs suspected that they were in the pay of their male political opponents. See "Women and Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Elections," 5.

135   Noah Coburn and Anna Larson: "Undermining Representative Governance."

themselves. However, in the case of candidates who had scored only a couple of hundred votes, it is likely that a degree of denial was also involved:

> I was sure that I would win. But unfortunately when the results were announced it was something different. Something happened behind the scenes and I lost.
>
> — Anisgul, unsuccessful 2010 parliamentary candidate, Kabul Province

> When I went to the IEC office [to complain about corruption] they said they needed documentary evidence. But you can judge, obviously if they do this kind of thing they will do it out of sight, so I could not find any evidence.
>
> — Makaijan, unsuccessful 2010 parliamentary candidate, Kabul Province

> The IEC office cheats candidates, ignoring their votes and selling them to other candidates. On the election day I got [what she implies should have been a competitive number of votes] and I did not spend much money during the PC election. It was the IEC's fault, they created the problem, they cheated and betrayed most of the candidates.
>
> — Shamsiya, unsuccessful 2009 PC candidate, Kabul Province

This kind of complaint should not, however, detract from the fact that better-resourced or connected female candidates are themselves perfectly capable of committing fraud—as several winning and losing candidates alleged their female rivals to have done.[136]

Balkh Province

In comparison with Kabul, the numbers of parliamentary and PC candidates in Balkh remained relatively stable across both rounds of elections. However, this did not necessarily produce similar results. In 2010, margins between the lowest-scoring winner and the highest loser were in the hundreds of votes instead of dozens, while in 2005 the lowest scoring female MP beat her nearest rival by a mere three votes.

Overall, political life in Balkh is a much more closed space in many respects than it is in other provinces. In the eyes of many informants in this and other AREU studies, Governor Atta has played the role of gatekeeper to political power in the province—even in the case of supposedly democratic elections. He has done this by monopolising both the political networks through which voters could be mobilised—via, for example, his appointment of district governors or his patronage ties with community leaders—and the commercial interests that could provide vital financial backing, via his reported control over awarding contracts in Mazar and elsewhere. While this did not mean that getting elected without his support was impossible, voters and candidates alike saw doing so a great deal easier for people who were part of his favoured clique.[137]

Winning Candidates

In total, seven out of Balkh's 11 serving MPs have been linked in some way with Atta's Jamiat-i-Islami party.[138] This total included Brishna Rabie and Sefora Niyazi—two out of the province's three female MPs. Both had spent long careers as high school and university teachers in Mazar City before coming to office. Rabie offered only vague information about either her party ties or how she had run her campaign, and informants in Dehdadi who spoke about her were divided on whether she had succeeded through her popularity as a teacher or because of her famous and well-connected family.[139] In contrast, Niyazi was much more open, explaining how her connection

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136 Writing in 2007, Larson also documented the accusations of several female MPs that other women in parliament were involved in corrupt practices. See "A Matter of Interests," 32.

137 Coburn, "Parliamentarians and Local Politics"; Larson, "Deconstructing Democracy."

138 "Guide to Afghan Politics" (Kabul: National Democratic Institute, 2011).

139 It should be noted that these comments were generally made in passing; since she was not from Dehdadi herself, the informants there did not consider her to be "their" representative.

to Jamiat dated back to the Soviet invasion and acknowledging the important role the party and Governor Atta's support had been to securing her electoral success. Neither of these two candidates described facing any challenges, whether in terms of security or resource availability (although one did discuss receiving persistent abuse from another female MP after her election); they also did not report placing any particular focus on a home constituency, and made no mention of targeting women during their campaigns.

Accompanying the two Jamiat MPs was Gulalai Noorsafi. Although she described herself as an independent candidate, she has been associated with the Pashtun-dominated mujahiddin party Mahaz-i-Milli.[140] The daughter of an MP for Balkh during Zahir Shah's regime, she had joined the PDPA while a student before going on to work as a gynaecologist and spending a number of years in Germany (her time abroad was denounced by one losing parliamentary candidate as an indication that she did not understand or care about the interests of people in Balkh). In discussing her two electoral successes, she felt that her reputation as a doctor combined with the wider support of her Pashtun *qawm* had carried her to victory. Contrasting with the generally positive attitude of her Jamiat counterparts, however, she was openly critical of the business and political interests she believed had hijacked the democratic process in her province. In particular, she explained that she had been forced to conduct a wide-ranging campaign because her home district where support from her *qawm* should have been strongest had become mysteriously insecure just before the election—a phenomenon she put down to interference by her political opponents.[141]

Data for this study is less clear on how female PC candidates interacted with Governor Atta's political infrastructure; both two-term PC members interviewed were keen to distance themselves from parties, and neither chose to delve into their political connections. One, Mahbooba Sadat, was from the study community of Dehdadi, where she had worked as a teacher. A Sayed,[142] she reported being elected to run in 2005 by elders of her *qawm* along with another male candidate, who subsequently lost. Although she reported campaigning across the province and attracting votes even in insecure districts, she clearly felt that Dehdadi was the community she had been elected to represent. However, in comparison to other study communities with links to candidates, informants in Dehdadi had relatively little to say about her. One male respondent was extremely positive, explaining how close her relationship to the community was; another female respondent dismissed her as a puppet of her powerful family and her *qawm* who had simply disappeared after the elections; and the remainder made no mention of her at all. This likely reflects the socially fragmented nature of Dehdadi, a sprawling suburban area where different ethnic groups operated as largely distinct units and eyed each other with mutual suspicion. In this context, it appears that Sadat had not been able to develop the kind of community-wide reputation and support base of candidates from more homogeneous rural communities, as took place in Bamiyan, for example.[143]

Significantly, the other PC member, Shekiba Shekib, was the only candidate in this study apart from Shinkay Karokhel in Kabul who described campaigning specifically among women on an ostensibly feminist platform. A former teacher and a prominent businesswoman with substantial reserves of family money, she ran and lost in 2005, initially having to fight against the wishes of her male relatives. In describing her successful 2009 election bid, she explained how she had reduced her expenses by campaigning largely among women voters, thereby avoiding the large gatherings and elaborate meals generally expected of other candidates in the province. She was the only candidate who described attempting to foster a sense of gender solidarity among women, emphasising their collective interest as a group in opposition to men.[144] In doing so, she also

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140   Jamiat-i-Islami is, by contrast, a largely Tajik party.

141   It is unclear how far this ultimately affected her campaign since her vote tally actually increased between 2005 and 2010.

142   A group tracing its lineage back to the Prophet Mohammed. Wilder has discussed Sayed candidates' strategic deployment of this identity as a way to boost their legitimacy during their campaigns. See Andrew Wilder, "A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections" (Kabul: AREU, 2005), 18.

143   For more on the fragmented political dynamics of Dehdadi, see Coburn, "Parliamentarians and Local Politics," 16-18.

144   For more on the concept of gender interests, see Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests," 3 (drawing on Kabeer, Molyneux

appeared to be making an attempt to transcend divisions of community or ethnicity, describing an extensive campaign without mention of a home base:

> When there was a woman washing clothes, I went down to help to show solidarity. When women were cooking bread, I cooked bread with them as well. In this way I attracted their attention. Once, I went to campaign in a Turkman area. A woman had a 40-day-old baby and she was providing tea for us while her husband was sitting there in the house. When she offered us tea, I said, "No, why isn't your husband helping? You have a 40-day-old child. If he helps, I will have tea with you."

> Whenever I was campaigning, I told women in the community that they should vote for other women as it was a really good opportunity for women to improve their own development. I was telling them, "If the kalantar or malik [both types of community leader] tells you to vote for a man, you should agree. But when you get to the polling booth, you should vote for women because this is a great chance for you."

Without further research, it is impossible to say how far her victory was the result of this approach, and how far it was down to other, undiscussed factors. However, despite the extensive polemics delivered by multiple candidates in this study on the importance of women's political participation, she remained by far the most explicit and systematic in her description of how she had translated this intent into concrete action, and was also the only one who articulated her success in terms of appealing specifically to women's interests.

Losing Candidates

Two out of the three losing candidates interviewed in Balkh originated from similar backgrounds and followed similar trajectories. A parliamentary and a PC candidate, both were teachers with previous NGO experience; both had few resources to draw on beyond their own salaries and their husbands' limited assets; both described being supported only by their immediate families and friends; both secured only marginal vote tallies in comparison to winning candidates in their respective elections; and both were highly critical of electoral fraud and the IEC's role in it.

The PC candidate, Mina, explained that running for election had in part been motivated by the desire to live up to the memory of her late father, whom she described as a powerful military commander. She went on to explain how she had attempted to attract voters' attention by channelling his persona in her campaign slogan, "I should win or I should die." In practice, however, she lacked the resources and connections to back up this presentation of herself—with barely enough money to pay taxi fares, she had mostly campaigned by proxy through friends and relatives, and had been unable to afford the kind of public demonstrations of strength necessary to prop up a reputation as a commander-like figure in the eyes of voters.

For the losing parliamentary candidate Kawaka, family also played a role in motivating her to run. In this instance, however, she was in part persuaded into it by her in-laws after initially being sceptical about how she would compete. Given that one of her husband's female relatives had run and lost (equally heavily) in the 2009 PC election, this may have been an attempt by her father-in-law to impose his own political ambitions as opposed to a sign of open-minded liberalism and a desire to see more women on the ballot. Added to this somewhat murky dynamic was the fact that the same in-laws had apparently stopped her from taking a job at an NGO over concerns that she would stop wearing the *chadari*, and that her brothers-in-law had threatened to kill her during her campaign.

Without much financial support from her family, Kawaka was also one of the only candidates to describe securing support from businessmen. However, she was ultimately unsure that the benefits of this support outweighed the risks it had posed for her, as a woman, in accepting it:

> Looking back, I think [this kind of] support is not particularly important for women candidates. Because our people are poor and they have many expectations of female candidates. If a man wants to support a female candidate, people will gossip about her. They say, "Why is he supporting her? What kind of relationship do they have?"

and Moser).

As discussed further in Section 3.2, female candidates' mere presence in the public sphere could lead to damaging rumours regarding their loose sexual morals. As Kuovo points out, "rumors of sexual misconduct, however unlikely or unsubstantiated, travel quickly and, for women who lack important patrons or family ties...can mean the end of a career."[145]

The case of the final losing candidate in Balkh, Sediqa, is unique in this study as it represents the only example of a woman explaining how she was willingly co-opted into serving the ends of a major political party. As documented in previous research, Afghanistan's political parties have in some cases made concerted efforts to field more female candidates as a way to exploit the comparatively low levels of competition for women's quota seats and secure more influence in the country's elected bodies;[146] the dynamics of this candidate's campaign appear to represent a clear example of this.

Married to an illiterate, unemployed husband and having worked predominantly in other parts of the country as an NGO staffer, she had no independent base of resources or support to tap. However, she had spent eight years as a loyal party supporter and activist.[147] When nominations opened for the 2009 PC election, she reported receiving a personal phone call from the party's leadership and being asked to run as their candidate. After receiving a US$2,000 payment to cover expenses—she claimed she had been promised more, but that party administrators had kept part for themselves— she reported spending the next few weeks being shuttled around the province as part of a group of party candidates, speaking together at organised lunch meetings and protected by armed security. However, beyond simply putting a female face on the party ticket, her handlers had apparently not devoted any time to explaining the electoral process or developing any campaign strategies with her:

> Unfortunately I never had any information about [the elections], because I never really thought about my nomination, the party just suddenly asked me to be a candidate. That is why I was not ready to campaign properly and I was confused about how I should talk to people. This was probably one of the reasons why I couldn't win, because I was really in a hurry.

While she had been able to attend an NDI training session in Kabul shortly before the election, it appears that her party's appraisal of her as a strategic tool was not matched by any realistic attempt to understand how best to deploy her.

3.2 General trends

Gender dynamics: responding to hostility and indifference

Both winning and losing candidates had to face and adapt to the challenges that perhaps inevitably accompanied women campaigning in a religiously conservative and male-dominated public sphere. For women in Balkh and Kabul—but not in more liberal Bamiyan—putting themselves in the public eye meant facing down an atmosphere of public hostility. Most commonly, this manifested itself in the defacing of candidates' campaign posters (although it should be noted that four candidates blamed this on specific male opponents as opposed to the public at large). Other candidates talked of the background noise of gossip and abuse they had to contend with throughout their campaigns. In addition to being emotionally draining, this kind of public censure could end up having serious tangible implications, as Kawaka in Balkh explained: "[another candidate] was beautiful and young, so people were gossiping about her. Someone said that even after she lost the election and wanted to continue her studies at university, they would not let her. This is the kind of abuse that female candidates face."

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145   Sari Kouvo, "Women's Day in Afghanistan: Where the 'Personal is still Political,'" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 8 March 2012, http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2580 (accessed 8 March 2012).

146   See Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests," 21.

147   Why exactly is unclear. She was not a member of the ethnicity that has traditionally formed this party's support base and appeared to view her party and parties in general as a potential unifying force that could bring Afghans together after decades of conflict—a view sharply at odds with almost all other informants in this study.

This level of distaste for women in public life is may in part be rooted at least in part in the persistent notion that women's political participation is somehow "un-Islamic." However, only Shamsiya reported being explicitly being attacked by chauvinist mullahs, and this took place when she was campaigning in her home province, and not in Kabul. In addition, while a few community informants discussed the continued existence of such opinions, only two went as far as to subscribe to them in an interview.[148] Although no concrete conclusions can be drawn here given the limited scope of its data, this may suggest that explicitly religious opposition to women candidates is on the decline in the provinces covered by this study.

Perhaps more pervasive and damaging on a practical level than social conservatism was the apparently widespread scepticism of male voters toward female candidates and their campaigns. This appeared to be driven in part by a perception that because female candidates lacked resources, they would be unable to be as effective service-providers as their male counterparts, and in part by the assumption that women would make ineffective representatives in the "man's world" of national-level politics. Men's reluctance to take women candidates seriously was widely discussed by voters across all study provinces, who spoke of the trouble they had in attracting often incredulous men to campaign events:

> *In their campaign meetings, women gathered a maximum of five or six households, they could not gather 2,000 or 3,000 people in their speeches. They were limited.*
>
> — Older illiterate man, Guldara District, Kabul

> *During the campaign, men did not attend women's campaign meetings, but it was good that women took part in men's campaigns.*
>
> — Younger educated woman, Bamiyan District, Bamiyan

> *A lot of people were making jokes about women's campaign photos when they saw them in the city. Some people said that because women showed their picture in the street, they were inviting people over to spend the night with them.*
>
> — Younger educated woman, Dasht-i Barchi, Bamiyan

> *Our people still don't accept that women can participate in elections [as candidates].*
>
> — Younger educated man, Shortepa District, Balkh

More generally, AREU's research team noted in the course of informal observations across study areas that across study areas, certain male community members felt that, while women should have the right to vote, elections were part of a zero-sum "competition between men and women."

According to three candidates, this problem was exacerbated by the fact that it extended to educated male elites who should have known better. "I think the big problem is that our educated men also don't like to see women improve or participate in the election," explained one PC member in Kabul. "They say to our people 'we have a democracy and women can participate,' but in private they say 'it is not good to give women these opportunities—if we give them authority, we will never hear the end of it.'" One international NGO worker went on to explain that while many well-educated men paid lip service to women's political participation, this was not always accompanied by much thought about the practical considerations involved. This could result in late-night meetings of MPs which no female parliamentarians could attend given the social restrictions on women's movement after dark, or in elections scheduled over the Eid al-Fitr festival, when most women would be occupied with the demanding task of organising household festivities.

This set of challenges appears to have resulted in two discernible lines of response among female candidates. The first involved attempting to undermine religious or cultural bigotry against them by themselves adopting a religious or traditionalist stance during campaigning. Five winning candidates (Aqila Hosseini and Sefora Ilkhani in Bamiyan and Fauzia Nasiryar Guldarayee, Anisa Maqsudi and

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148   The fact that informants were told about AREU's status as an NGO prior to being interviewed could also have affected people's responses in this regard.

Roboba Parwani in Kabul) and two losers (Fahima and Makaijan in Kabul) reported making a concerted attempt to recruit mullahs and religious leaders to their cause, in some cases also bolstering their religious credentials by conducting campaign sessions in mosques. Shinkay Karokhel also described how (despite being a Kabul-based women's rights advocate) she had deliberately dressed in more conservative clothing when leaving Kabul City to campaign in the districts, while Shekiba Shekib in Balkh also spoke admiringly of how one MP in Kabul Province had attempted to counter fears that women's political participation would erode conservative gender morals by employing the slogan, "The *chadari* is the window to power." It is important to recognise that such approaches may signify different things when adopted by different women. For some, such as Karokhel, they may be a pragmatic strategy; for others, they could represent a deeply-held belief; and in some cases even a combination of the two.

The second approach involved attempting to close the perceived resource and power gap that existed between female and male candidates by strategically cultivating an honest image and attempting to manage the expectations of voters. Across all provinces, ten winning candidates and one loser spoke specifically of how they had not made the kind of "false promises" they felt had caused such widespread public disaffection with candidates and the electoral process following the 2004-05 elections. Several of these candidates also explained how they had gone into some detail with voters about the roles of parliament and the PCs to combat the perception that elections were about choosing powerful and resource-rich service-providers. For Shinkay Karokhel and Sefora Ilkhani, this approach also involved conducting deliberately low-key campaign meetings as an implicit criticism of men's more elaborate food-filled rallies as wasteful and transactional in nature. Evidence from the study communities, most notably Yakowlang and Guldara, suggests that this was tapping into a vein of voter sentiment that viewed women as more honest and less open to corruption (see Section 4.2).

In this context, it is striking how few informants discussed specifically appealing to female voters. While several candidates including Sefora Ilkhani in Bamiyan and Fauzia Nasiryar Guldarayee in Kabul did hold meetings exclusively for women in their communities, only Aqila Hosseini in Bamiyan, Shinkay Karokhel in Kabul and Shekiba Shekib in Balkh described attempting to engage with them as a distinct interest group. Part of the explanation for this may be linked to the fact that that women's rights agendas are linked in the eyes of many Afghans with both the PDPA and the current international intervention, often seen as embodiments of outside attempts to damage the country's cultural and religious integrity.[149] This connection was drawn implicitly by one older Pashtun man in Guldara, who explained that:

> *Women cannot be masters of men, but men can be masters of women. For example, I do different work in my village and I am so busy I can hardly deal with it all. But women cannot do this. The educated destroyed our country. Most of them were communists.*

It is therefore possible that female candidates were generally reluctant to stand on too overtly feminist a platform for fear of alienating potential constituents (of both sexes), or being deligitimised as extremists or foreign stooges by their political opponents.

However, data from the study communities also suggests another obstacle: In addition to discounting women as candidates, many men seemed unable to view the female members of their households as political actors. Although very few female informants for this study reported being actively blocked from voting or being told how to vote by their men, this masks the fact that to all intents and purposes they remained systematically excluded from political life. Women often spoke of how men refused to discuss politics or events in the community when at home, or of how they had been forbidden— or were simply too overwhelmed with housework—to attend candidate campaign events or IEC-run public awareness workshops. In addition, very few female informants reported participating in the *shura* deliberations or ad hoc village meetings male informants described as being convened to work out which candidate the community would collectively support. As a consequence, working primarily

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149   Moghadam, "Revolution, Religion and Gender Politics," 179; "From Resolution to Reality: Lessons Learned from Afghanistan, Nepal and Uganda on women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict governance" (London: CARE International, 2011), 11.

to gain the support of male community leaders and the blocs of votes they could bring to bear—as was the case with Fauzia Nasiryar Guldarayee and Sharifa Sherzad Allahdad in Kabul, for example—may well have been a more realistic path to election success than engaging on a grass-roots level with female voters.

Role of political parties

The fact that seven out of 15 winning candidates were in some way linked or affiliated with political parties (as opposed to only two out of ten losers) suggests that their support could be an important contributing factor. Winning PC candidates in particular acknowledged that the financial support parties could offer had been important in helping them to run an adequately sized campaign, while in Balkh an affiliation with large, ethnically based parties had clearly given its female MPs an edge in negotiating (or fighting) the politically orchestrated balance of power in the province. However, informants for this study were largely reticent regarding the relationships they had with these groups. While Sefora Niyazi in Balkh was open about her relationship to Jamiat and Sediqa described her party's inept attempt to use her as a strategic pawn, the remainder were either silent on their party ties, or at pains to downplay them:

> I am a member of the Democratic Party of Afghanistan, but I was not introduced into that party to enter politics; I am an independent candidate.

> — Torpekay Nawaby, PC member, Kabul Province

> I am a Wahdat Party candidate, but this doesn't mean that I am working for them, it's just that we all know these conditions make us dependent and you have to have someone's support.

> — Anisa Maqsudi, PC member, Kabul Province

> My husband was a member of Jamiat Party...but I was an independent candidate [although on the ballot she was listed as belonging to a smaller political party].

> — Fauzia Nasiryar Guldarayee, MP, Kabul Province

> I was a member of Insejam-i-Milli, but I was not a candidate for the party, I was an independent candidate.

> — Sefora Ilkhani, MP, Bamiyan Province

This tendency is understandable given the hostility many Afghans display toward political parties, to whom they attribute significant blame for both the worst excesses of the communist period, and the chaos of the civil war that followed.[150] However, it also obscures the precise nature of the relationship between female candidates and their party supporters in terms of what they were expected to give in return for such support, and more focused research on the subject is clearly required.[151]

Security: reality versus perceptions

Out of all the candidates interviewed for this study, only Aqila Hosseini in Bamiyan and Shinkay Karokhel in Kabul reported coming face-to-face with a potentially life-threatening security situation, and in both cases, they appeared to feel the risk was worth it since it had secured them extra votes at the expense of candidates who had not put themselves in this position. Shamsiya and Parwasha respectively described being harassed by the armed supporters of a rival and receiving night letters, while Gulalai Noorsafi was prevented from campaigning by a specific worsening of the security situation

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150   This enmity has also been strategically cultivated by President Karzai after 2001 in a bid to preemptively neutralize future sources of opposition. Reflecting the reluctance of King Zahir Shah to expand the role of parties in the democratically elected Wolesi Jirga of the late 60s and early 70s, Karzai's administration has consistently sought to undermine the role played by parties, whether through choosing a voting system that put them at an innate disadvantage, crafting a Political Party Law that left them with no formalised political role, or even in Karzai's symbolic decision not to found or join his own political party. See Wilder, "A House Divided," 44, and Coburn and Larson, *Derailing Democracy*, Chapter 3.

151   For existing work on the issue, see Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests," and "Political Parties in Afghanistan: A Review of the State of Political Parties after the 2009 and 2010 Elections" (Kabul: NDI, 2011).

in her home district. However, none of the other informants described personally facing any specific security problems. Given that the three study provinces are comparatively stable, this is perhaps unsurprising. However, when asked what they felt the major challenge facing female candidates was, many candidates were still keen to highlight security as a problem in more general terms, even when qualifying that this had not been a problem for them personally. In the case of two losing parliamentary candidates in Kabul, a lack of "security" appeared to represent not so much the threat of violence as a more general sense of uncertainty that came with travelling in unfamiliar areas. It is thus important to note that while in many parts of the country, security represents a serious and disproportionate threat to female candidates,[152] there appeared to be a gap between the perceptions and personal experiences of the issue among many informants for this study. As mentioned above, the *threat* of insecurity can also be used by individuals or groups not actually connected to the insurgency as a political tool to intimidate potential opponents, especially women.

Training and networking

Twenty of the candidates interviewed for this study received some form of training in the run-up to the elections (the five who did not included only two losers). In the case of 16 informants, this was organised by the NDI, with a few also citing help from the IEC, MOWA, and a handful of other international or multilateral organisations. A large majority of informants who had taken part in NDI's training felt that it had been positive, in some cases giving them the tools to go out and engage properly with voters. As one PC member from Balkh explained, "They said that hanging pictures wasn't very effective—we had to go and talk to people face-to-face. That's why I went to different areas and even got votes from Chahar Bolak and Sholgara [two particularly insecure districts]."

The small number of complaints focused on the timing of the training—three informants felt it should have been held much earlier to give them more time to implement the lessons they learned there— and whether it was appropriate to the Afghan environment. Three informants argued that the training was not properly attuned to Afghan culture (although two of these had not actually attended any sessions and were speaking from hearsay). One losing parliamentary candidate from Kabul went on to explain that the main problem was the assumption that an Afghan election would function as planned: "They used the same methods as they would in a foreign country...In Afghanistan, we have lots of tricks and cheating and non-transparency. The elections don't operate transparently."

Training workshops were also virtually the only situation in which informants described developing ties with other female candidates. Outside of these forums, interactions between female candidates appear to have been minimal. At best, informants described how they kept themselves aloof from other candidates in their own province lest they give away a vital advantage by sharing anything with them. At worst, relations could descend into bitter rivalries. However, for two informants, attending training sessions offered valuable opportunities to forge ties with other candidates and share experiences. For one PC member in Kabul, they also offered a rare opportunity to interact with more seasoned MPs who were happy to impart some of the wisdom they had learned on the campaign trail in the previous election. This suggests that developing cross-provincial networks of women in politics could be a potentially valuable move in the years leading up to the next set of elections, since they would offer a way for candidates to forge potentially productive ties without feeling threatened by one another.

The makings of a successful female candidate

In contemporary Afghan politics, support at the polls is still mainly secured not by appealing to crosscutting ideologies (or horizontal linkages), but by the ability to effectively mobilise networks or blocs of support that tend to be based around ties of locality, patronage, lineage or ethnicity (vertical linkages). Regardless of the legally prescribed roles of MPs and PC members, securing the support of these networks and the influential individuals or groups at their centres still largely depends on

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152   In the 2010 elections, for example, a female candidate from Paktika was kidnapped and held for six days by the Taliban; five workers on Herati MP Fauzia Gilani's campaign were abducted and murdered; and the husband of one female candidate in Helmand was murdered. For more, see "Getting the Grade?" 13.

demonstrating an ability to provide them with services, and further their interests in relation to other, rival groups.

For the vast majority of female candidates interviewed in this study, success or failure therefore depended on being both able to access these networks and prove they could meet their expectations. Fundamentally, doing so depended on access to resources; ties to a powerful family or political party; and a track record of interaction with a given community or group. While dynamics varied from province to province—the influence of political parties loomed particularly large in Balkh, while in Kabul the politically fragmented landscape meant that candidates tended to focus on smaller, more self-contained communities or networks—winning candidates almost universally relied on an often mutually reinforcing combination of at least two of these three core attributes. The records of the losing candidates possessing only one or other of these attributes are illustrative in this regard: Fahima and Anarkili Honaryar in Kabul were unable to translate their considerable education, professional experience and reputation within civil society into enough votes without influential families or connections to (large enough) communities; the same applies for Zarghona and her wealth; and losing candidates that had attempted to campaign within a given area or community found that their lack of resources or active family ties—powerful, prior relatives did not appear to count for much—had left them unable to convince either elders or the community at large that they could fulfil the role expected of them as a representative.

Impact of participation on candidates' lives

Relatively few candidates interviewed for the study felt participating in the elections had resulted in a severe negative impact on their lives. One losing MP in Kabul (Parwasha) claimed that the death threats and hostility she had experienced over the course of the elections, which she blamed on political opponents trying to steal her votes, had left her so afraid for her life that she was considering applying for asylum in the United States. Another losing MP in Balkh described the detrimental impact that campaigning for election had had on her life since the polls:

> Before, I had much more freedom, I could go to other districts easily, but now I'm limited. I had a development programme for people in Chimtal District, but now I can't go. I was so disappointed when people there said, "You shouldn't come because it is dangerous for you, and you might get killed." ...Sometimes my friends joke with me, "If the Taliban take control of Afghanistan again, they'll kill you first." It all affects me. I have had threatening phone calls. I haven't referred them to anyone or any organisation because I know they cannot protect me. I just withdrew my children from public schools and registered them in private schools.

Beyond these two more extreme cases, three other candidates (all in Kabul: one PC member, one losing PC candidate and one losing parliamentary candidate) reported struggling with the heavy financial impact of running for office—two of them were still in debt as a result. A minority of winning candidates across all provinces, including two out of three winning MPs for Balkh, also talked about feeling overwhelmed with their responsibilities in office, which they felt had cut them off from families and friends, along with feeling a sense of frustration at their inability to achieve their ambitions there. As this telling comment from Shinkay Karokhel illustrates, adopting the public responsibilities of an MP or PC has for some women inevitably involved a trade-off against their private role as wives, mothers, sisters and friends—a bargain that Afghan men do not generally have to strike:

> Since I participated in the elections and in parliament, I have not seen my close friends. I haven't even had any personal meetings with them, to visit each other. Sometimes my sister says, "You have become like a man! We don't see you in parties or meetings or visits anymore."

The relatively light mark taking part in elections had left on the lives of informants for this study is likely due in part to the fact that they were generally campaigning in less conservative or more cosmopolitan areas where women's participation in public life is, at least up to a point, broadly tolerated. By contrast, staff at NGOs in Kabul cited examples of women in other provinces for whom running for office in more hostile areas had been devastating. One reported an instance where the husband of a failed candidate had divorced her, taken her children and sued her to reclaim the money he had given her to campaign. Another spoke of a candidate who had been gang-raped by a group of

men (including her husband) after nominating herself to run. It is also important to note that since discussion of family problems is still largely taboo in Afghanistan, the fact that none of the candidates interviewed for this study raised issues of domestic violence as a result of their candidacies does not preclude the possibility that it may have been taking place. As one international NGO worker in Kabul explained:

> *For some of the women who ran for parliament and some government ministers, the violence [they got from their husbands] is a big deal. But even the men [at organisations working with them] are in complete denial about it. It's an open secret that [one prominent female politician] was being beaten by her husband, even when she was in office. It definitely impacts, and I think it's important to bring attention to it.[153]*

On balance, however, most candidates in this study felt their election experiences had been positive ones. Seven winners and three losing candidates felt that taking part in the elections had earned them increased respect among their families and communities. Another six winners and three losers explained how taking part in elections had significantly expanded their horizons. Several recounted how their limited universe inside the home or in the confines of a single workplace such as a school had been blown wide open by their experiences on the campaign trail and in office, linking them in with new networks and opening up access to new knowledge and skills. In relation to this, several losing candidates spoke of how their experiences had built their confidence and, in three cases, inspired them to become much more active in public life:

> *Actually, when they asked me to nominate myself I found that this was the only way I could do something for people. I wanted to raise women's voices to the government and claim poor women's and widow's rights for them. Because I have found that no one pays attention to poor people's rights. I was a poor person, and I could understand them intimately.*
>
> — Sediqa, unsuccessful 2009 PC candidate, Balkh

> *I am happy that I participated in the election. Because before, I was a teacher and my world was very limited, just my school, my house and other places where women were working. After my participation, I was encouraged by conducting my campaign in different areas. I felt that I should extend my activities and build more relationships inside the communities because relationships are really important to become more well known. Before the election, I just interacted with my students and colleagues. Now, I have lots of relations with candidates and people in places where I conducted my campaign.*
>
> — Mina, unsuccessful 2009 PC candidate, Kabul

> *This election had effects on my personal life—in serving the people, I became very strong. I decided I should work all over the country and in a better position, and I gained confidence. I also accepted the defeat graciously and I know my deficiencies and shortcomings—I recognise them and I can address them. I should have campaigned harder.*
>
> — Fahima, unsuccessful 2005 parliamentary candidate, Kabul

However, this newly-discovered sense of drive did not necessarily translate into a desire to compete in the next elections. While Fahima felt no need to run again because she was already making a good contribution in her current job at MOWA, Mina reflected the views of four other losing candidates in saying that her disgust at the systemic corruption of the electoral process had put her off entering politics for good. Ultimately, only three out of ten losing candidates specifically expressed a desire to return to active politics in the next electoral cycle.

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153   See also Moghaddam, "Gender in Afghanistan," 31.

4. Voters

Up to a point, focus on women voters in Afghanistan has revolved around their position as victims. Countless articles have documented their trials and tribulations in their struggle to vote,[154] and as mentioned in Chapter 2, even certain donors have ended up fixating on the notion that above all else, women voters need to be protected. But while this narrative—in which women's presence at the polling booth represents a triumph over great adversity[155]—highlights some important truths, it only tells half the story.

In this study—admittedly conducted in some of Afghanistan's most stable and cosmopolitan provinces—female voters were largely viewed positively by their male counterparts, had little trouble getting to the ballot box in terms of either security or gender restrictions, and were by and large able to vote according to their preference once inside. However, this apparently rosy picture was marred by problems far more subtly insidious than the threat of Taliban attack or the preaching of a chauvinist mullah. While women were technically allowed to vote, their voices were shut out of the community-level discussions and decision-making process that are vital components of electoral politics in contemporary Afghanistan. Although they were rarely forced to vote for a given candidate, the refusal of their husbands to talk politics at home left many of them struggling to make an informed choice about whom to vote for. And while they understood the technical mechanics of voting, their lack of access to formal training left them with at best a limited understanding of how the country's political system worked and how it might serve their needs. Fundamentally, in other words, women were simply not taken seriously as political actors.

This should not, however, detract from the fact that taking part in elections had a deeply positive personal impact on many of the women in this study. While it did not necessarily afford them more voice or bring much in the way of tangible benefits, voting was for them a vital affirmation of their equal rights in the eyes of the state, boosting their self-confidence and raising hopes for changing the existing status quo. In the sections that follow, this chapter explores how women were perceived as candidates and voters; why men and women voted and for whom; how this decision was made; how women accessed information; what their levels of awareness were; their physical access to the ballot box; and the impact electoral participation had on their lives.

4.1   Perceptions of women as candidates and voters

On the surface at least, a significant majority of male and female informants across study communities expressed a positive opinion about women taking part in elections as voters and candidates. Male support for women voters was generally expressed in generic phrases about women "holding up half the sky," with a couple of informants attempting to frame the issue more precisely in terms of either social justice or Quranic interpretations of equal rights. By contrast, there was significantly more depth and variation in why people thought having women in positions of power was a good idea. The most widely-held view (12 women and three men) was that women's track record in public office over the past decade was evidence enough that they could perform just as well in these roles as men could. In elaborating on this view, informants in both rural and urban areas regularly cited well-known female figures such as MPs Shukria Barakzai and Fauzia Kofi or Bamiyan's female provincial governor Habiba Sarabi to make their point. Smaller numbers of informants also dwelt on the fact that being mothers and managing a household left women with political skills that they could transfer to public life (three women and one man); that women were kinder and more honest than men (three men and one woman); and that women such as Indira Ghandi and even Margaret Thatcher had proven themselves in leadership positions in other countries (one woman and three men).

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154   See, for example, Amy Waldman, "Fearful Choice for Afghan Women: To Vote or Not to Vote," *New York Times*, 5 October 2004; Mona Sarika, "They came, they voted, but did they conquer?" *Foreign Policy.com*, 3 September 2009; "Women voter turnout sinks in Afghanistan," *Agence France-Presse,* 22 August 2009; "Voting by Afghan Women Ripe for Fraud," *Associated Press*, 30 October 2009.

155   In a similar vein, Moghaddam has noted the tendency for studies on women's issues in Afghanistan to veer between "misery research" and "dignity research." (Moghaddam, "Women in Afghanistan," 26).

Negative views on women taking part in elections seemed to be strongest in Dehdadi and, to a lesser degree, Dasht-i Barchi. While only three informants explicitly felt that women should not be taking part in elections at all from a religious or cultural perspective, several other men and women in these communities made indirect reference to instances where women had been prevented from voting by their families. A larger number of informants (five men and three women) felt that women should not be in positions of power—the men because it was un-Islamic or because they felt women were intrinsically weaker or less intelligent than men, the women because they felt women would always be politically weaker than their male counterparts. It is worth noting that the majority of these informants did not express any complaints about women as voters.

Simply dividing these perceptions into positive and negative does not, however, tell the entire story. For a start, it is quite possible that some male informants in particular may have been moderating their responses for the benefit of researchers known to be working for an internationally-funded organisation. More than this, though, attempting to draw a clear line between those in favour of women's participation and those against obscures the fact that there is a significant difference between accepting or tolerating such participation, and actively supporting it or understanding what it might mean. Telling in this regard were cases such as the two men in Shortepa who stated no opposition to women taking part as voters but could not understand why it was important for them to do so; the *shura* head in Yakowlang who felt that women could be good leaders but adamantly declared he would never vote for one; the several individuals who laboured the point that only educated women should be allowed into positions of power, and the man in Dasht-i Barchi who explained:

> *Islam says a woman can go outside; she can even be a president or an MP. Islam gives women an important role, but they should work according to religious rules: she should put on the hijab, she should not dress inappropriately...now we have freedom, and so do women. But I am afraid about that. Some women want more freedom. They don't observe certain issues. If the Talban were here, they could not do that. I hope they cannot get too much freedom.*

This comment may in one respect represent the informant shifting from what he may have felt compelled to say in the presence of an NGO-linked research team to something more in line with his actual feelings on the issue. However, it also points to the gulf that may in many cases exist between men tolerating women's electoral participation in theory on the one hand, and accepting the notion that this should necessarily be accompanied by any practical increase in their agency on the other.[156]

4.2 Motivation to vote

For many female voters, simply being allowed to participate in elections was motivation enough to do so. After years of being both formally excluded from politics by the state and shut out of male-dominated decision-making in their communities, many women saw elections as an important symbolic opportunity to claim their "right to participate and demonstrate their involvement," as one older woman in Guldara put it. In general, informants of both sexes often led into questions of why they had voted with an almost word-for-word stock response about being good Afghans. However, for women in particular, there was also a keener edge to this seemingly standard rhetoric. In casting their votes, women were not simply doing their duty as Afghans, but claiming their place as citizens in a state structure that had specifically acknowledged their equal status by giving their votes the same weight as men's. This is vividly illustrated in this extract from an FGD with illiterate, mostly older women in Shortepa in Balkh:

> 1:   *We are happy that we participated in the election in the same way as men. We are happy that we went together to the polling station.*
>
> 2:   *It has had a real effect on peoples' lives; if the government did not allow women to participate, then only men would participate and this would show that men are more powerful than women. It shows that we are equal and we can all participate together.*

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156   For more on the worry expressed by both Afghan men and women that "democracy" could lead to too much freedom, and their desire to see it take place within an Islamic framework, see Larson, "Deconstructing Democracy," 21-28.

3: I am really happy that both women and men participated. There was no difference between male and female voters.

4: I think all the people are happy that women participated in the election. I never thought I would live to have the same rights as men, but this happened when we voted with the men.

Across study communities, women also displayed a palpable sense of enjoyment and pride at having voted, even if in several cases in Bamiyan and Balkh, they ultimately had no idea who they had voted for.

More broadly, women spoke about voting out of a sense of duty to improve the country, and to secure representation for their communities. While men and women in Dehdadi and both Kabul study communities also discussed women in particular voting simply for material rewards from candidates, none of the study's female informants directly reported this as a motivation. There was a sense among both male and female informants across all study communities that this practice was becoming less effective with each successive election, and, as discussed below, several women talked about accepting favours from one candidate, only to vote for another.

Beyond their own motivations, women also discussed several other sources of encouragement to participate. In both Bamiyan research sites, informants commented on how men—husbands, fathers, community elders and even the local mullah—had specifically encouraged women to get out and vote. Male informants in these communities discussed how enthusiasm for women's participation derived from a wider relaxation of restrictive gender norms and a realisation that educating and empowering women could result in benefits for the community as a whole. One male informant in Bamiyan District described this line of reasoning, implicitly linking women's greater political participation with their greater role in economic life:

Most of the time women have been ignored by society, and there have been no opportunities for them to impose themselves. I [voted for a woman] to give her an opportunity to do something with the country...If you look at foreign countries, [women] have equal rights, and that is why they are improving so quickly...[take] Iran as an example. Although I have not been there, I have heard a lot about it. Most women there are active, they have businesses, they do a lot of work, that is why Iran is a self-sufficient country. But unfortunately even last year, I know some of the women here had not seen Bamiyan City, they were just working up here. But I thought to myself, "what should we do for a better life?" So I registered my wife in a literacy course, and now she is busy with writing and studying. I also gave her responsibilities as well. She is responsible to buy everything in the bazaar and bring it home, and she manages the household.

It is possible that there may also have been a strategic dimension to this shift in attitudes, in that mustering as many voters as possible would give a community a greater chance of having a locally familiar candidate elected under SNTV.

In Shortepa, Yakowlang and to a lesser degree in Guldara, the sense of collective experience that voting provided also helped attract women to the polling booths. In Shortepa, women described how they had gone to vote together, several likening the festive atmosphere on election day to that of a wedding party—critical in that such events offer rare spaces for women to interact outside of their immediate circles:

During the voting we all went together to the polling station. That time, you might have thought we were attending a wedding party. All the women went together to the polling station.

— Older illiterate woman, Shortepa District, Balkh Province

Overall, it felt like a ceremony and most people went with a lot of hope and happiness.

— Younger educated woman, Bamiyan District, Bamiyan Province

In Yakowlang, the sense that the entire community was coming out to vote—"in droves," as one older woman put it—drew in even more voters. As one older female informant from the community explained, under such circumstances it would have been difficult *not* to participate:

Elections are a big deal in our community. The government announced that it is our right to vote for someone. I thought that if I did not participate and go to the polling station, it would show my weakness and be embarrassing. In our community, even old and sick people go to vote; if I had not, it would really have been shameful.

4.3   Deciding how to vote

For the majority of voters, these broader motivations to participate were intertwined with a desire to vote for a given candidate. As individuals across study communities considered what qualities were most important in a potential representative, gender often played a critical role: Male and female voters often had different sets of priorities when assessing whom to vote for, while the sex of candidates themselves could have a significant impact on how voters of both sexes saw them.

One set of mostly male voters [seven men, two women] in Balkh and Kabul were self-avowedly uninterested in whether candidates were male or female. As one *shura* head in Shortepa insisted, whether or not a candidate could work effectively for their community was the only important thing: "I think [candidates' sex] was not important for the people, they just looked at their capacity and education because now is not the time to think about such things." However, for a much greater number of respondents, the sex of candidates was far from an irrelevant issue.

Perhaps predictably, six male respondents from across the study provinces discussed a general or personal aversion to voting for women, one former *shura* head in Yakowlang bluntly explaining that "It is my belief and my decision: as long as I am alive, I will not vote for a woman." In most cases, their justifications focused on the fact that women candidates would not amount to effective representatives once in office since they would be unable to wield the same clout as their male counterparts. This was also echoed by one younger woman in Dasht-i Barchi who explained that she had chosen to vote for an ex-mujahiddin candidate instead of a woman because she felt he would be able to provide stronger leadership. By contrast, another six men—again, across all provinces—specifically stated that they had chosen to vote for women over men, at least in the 2009/10 elections.[157] While in some cases factors other than the candidate's sex were also important in determining this decision (discussed below), men also spoke of how they saw female candidates as more honest, harder-working and less power-hungry than their male counterparts. In Bamiyan District, one middle-aged man explained that he had voted for a female PC candidate from the area because he felt it was time for a change:

Most of the time women have been ignored by society, and there have been no opportunities for them to impose themselves. I think I made the decision to give her an opportunity to do something with the country.

This was echoed, if somewhat bitterly, by a young man in Shortepa, who said that he would vote for a female candidate in any upcoming elections because the province's male incumbents had been so hopeless.

Among female informants in both Bamiyan research sites and in Guldara in Kabul, there was a widespread belief that it was in their interest to vote for female candidates. In almost all cases, this was based in a sense that female representatives would be more sympathetic and responsive to women's problems. Specifically, they felt that they would feel much more comfortable taking up issues with a female representative in office than they would with a man (a fact also acknowledged by a handful of male informants). "Most women have problems with their families," explained one older woman in Guldara, "How can they say this to male candidates? We recognised this and voted for Fauzia [Nasiryar Guldarayee] because we think she can solve our problems." In all three communities, women also cited the prior track record of female candidates in providing support to women in the area as a key reason for supporting them. However, especially in Bamiyan District, these positive reasons were also underpinned by a sense that women were so thoroughly shut out of the decision-making process in their communities that they needed to find an alternative way to make their voices heard (see Box 2).

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157   This is not necessarily a definitive figure since many informants declined to go into specifics about whom they had voted for.

> ### *Box 2: Marginalised and defiant: Women in Bamiyan District*
>
> **1:** In this area...women are trying to have a female representative in the government because they have suffered a lot in the past and they don't want to be blind anymore. They want to have an educated candidate to help the rest of the women in society be educated in the future. Because men don't focus on women's problems, we know that whenever they are at home, they don't worry about women's problems. It is very hard for male candidates to think about these things. That is why we are trying to have a female representative. For example, whenever a man comes and asks women what they did in the house that day, the women will respond very kindly. But whenever women ask men what they did outside the house, men will say, "It is none of your business, you are just a woman, you have to stay at home and do your own stuff. Don't ask this kind of question again."
>
> **5:** I agree with [1], I have seen that most men work in NGOs, in government offices and somewhere else, and they participate in different meetings, and they are engaged with society, and they have a lot of information and experiences. But unfortunately they never share these kinds of issues with us...
>
> **2:** That is the reality in this community. For example, whenever we participate in elections, we decide to discuss with our husbands about who we should vote for. But unfortunately our husbands and families don't like this, they never share their experiences outside with us.
>
> **7:** When we ask our husbands what is going on in the community, they insult us and say, "It is none of your business, focus on your housework." In our community, women cannot impose themselves and show their abilities. When we talk with our husbands they say, "Please stop, stop talking like a mullah and trying to analyse the situation for me." That is the main reason that most of the women came together and decided to have a female representative.
>
> Extracted from an FGD with three younger, two middle-aged and two older women in Bamiyan District

All of these instances are potentially significant in that they suggest the potential presence (and self-awareness) of women as a distinct constituency with needs that may sometimes diverge from their wider communities. However, it should be noted that this sense of women voting for women was much stronger in smaller communities that had fielded a well-known female candidate. While female candidates from both Dehdadi in Balkh and Dasht-i Barchi in Kabul had run for election, the sprawling, suburban nature of these communities meant that community relations were not as tight-knit, meaning that informants did not have the same sense that "their" candidate was in the running. In Shortepa, by contrast, no local women ran, and campaigning in the area by other female candidates was extremely limited. As a consequence, women there voted along with the rest of their community for a "familiar" male candidate.[158]

Familiarity is one of several qualities that often trumped the question of a candidates' sex in the eyes of voters. For female candidates, voters looking beyond their gender had the potential to cut both ways. In Guldara and Yakowlang, a small number of men implied that people had been forced to look beyond the sex of a female candidate because she was local. "She was from our area so we had to vote for her," said one older man in Guldara. "It would have been really shameful if people had given their votes to others." In Shortepa, by contrast, women expressed a desire to vote for a female candidate, but felt unable to do so because the only local candidates were men and no women had campaigned there. Perhaps significantly, the study ultimately yielded no instances of women voters picking female candidates from outside their areas, even in places like Bamiyan District where candidates from across the province had run active campaigns. This is perhaps significant when viewed in the light of the fact that in most provinces, between 70 and 90 percent of women voted for men in the 2010 parliamentary elections,[159] seeming to suggest that even for women, factors such as familiarity played a much greater role in determining their choices than what sex candidates were.

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158   Coburn and Larson emphasise the importance of *ashnai* (familiarity), describing how voters felt it was critical in allowing them to hold their representatives to account. See "Voting Together?" 10.

159   "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan," 64.

Several male informants also felt that female candidates' family backgrounds had carried them into office in spite of their sex. In Yakowlang, one male informant who argued that the community's female MP had been ineffective because she was a woman tacitly suggested that she had won the election fraudulently with the support of her powerful male relatives; another spoke of voting for her because he feared losing grazing rights on her family's land if he failed to do so. In Dehdadi and Dasht-i-Barchi, male informants also mentioned instances where female candidates they did not perceive as particularly popular had won because they were from large and powerful *qawms*.

Decision-making processes

As described above, the interplay of gender concerns and other priorities was crucial in shaping how individuals felt about prospective candidates. In Afghanistan, however, the process of deciding whom to vote for is not always the preserve of the individual alone. As described in Box 1, there is a tendency for Afghan voters to come together in blocs ranging in size from family units to communities right up to entire *qawms* when picking candidates. As a consequence, achieving a consensus on whom to vote for is viewed as critical to ensuring a community's vote is not split and it is left entirely without representation. However, the overwhelming dominance of men in communities' political lives means that a major question mark hangs over how active a role women are able to take in this kind of collective decision-making.

At the family level, there was some divergence in how voting was discussed. A small number of men and women in Balkh and Bamiyan explained how everyone in their families had been left to make their own choices since it was felt that voting was a private subject. As one younger woman in Dehdadi explained, "We didn't discuss the matter. We can't say in front of other people who we voted for because it is shameful. If you say you voted for someone, what happens if they lose the election?" Other men spoke of how they had attempted to reach consensus within their own households via collective discussion. However, in the case of five informants the decision was simply imposed. Three men in Dasht-i-Barchi openly explained that they had simply told women in their households how to vote. In Shortepa, one younger female informant reported that it was her mother-in-law who had taken charge, ordering the other women in the house to vote in a certain way.

In all research sites except Yakowlang, male informants discussed how members of their communities had decided whom to vote for after a series of public discussions. However, in no instance did female voters report taking any part in these meetings.[160] While it is quite possible that other women did take part, it is not unreasonable to suggest that they were unlikely to have been the dominant voices in such debates given Afghanistan's prevailing gender dynamics.[161] As a consequence, the decisions emerging from such processes are unlikely to reflect the priorities and needs of women,[162] even in cases where they result in the selection of a female candidate, as took place in Bamiyan District and Guldara.

It is ultimately true that individuals can vote for whomever they wish once inside the ballot box, as reflected in the seven female informants were adamant that this decision was theirs and theirs alone.

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160   Several AREU studies over the past decade point to the fact that women's access to and influence in local-level decision-making remains at best limited. In addition, new, NSP-mandated women's CDCs tend to be effectively cordoned off from their male counterparts and their influence over community affairs often remains minimal. See, for example, Shawna Wakefield with Brandy Bauer, "A Place at the Table: Afghan Women, Men and Decision-Making Authority" (Kabul: AREU, 2005); Deborah J. Smith with Shelly Manalan, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution Processes in Bamiyan Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2009); Deborah J. Smith, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution Processes in Nangarhar Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2009); Rebecca Gang, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution Processes in Balkh Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2010); Rebecca Gang, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution Processes in Kabul City" (Kabul: AREU, 2011); and Chona E. Echavez, "Does Women's Participation in the National Solidarity Programme Make a Difference in their Lives? A Case Study in Parwan Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

161   As argued in Section 3.2 above, it is also possible that any exclusion or marginalisation of women from such processes could represent a deliberate choice by men to avoid losing influence to women.

162   It is also important to note that while women may face the highest barriers to entry for such decision-making processes, they are by no means the only marginalised group in this regard. Kantor and Pain have demonstrated that *shuras* can be subject to wholesale elite capture. In the context of the NSP in particular, they assert that "an assumption that community bodies must be the most impartial because they are closest to 'the people' may be leading to an over-reliance on systems that are in reality little more than proxies for the rich and powerful." See Paula Kantor and Adam Pain, "Running out of Options: Tracing Rural Afghan Livelihoods" (Kabul: AREU, 2011), 38.

However, in a political reality where communities with ties to winning candidates are often much better placed to access government resources than those without, anyone considering voting against a collectively agreed candidate must weigh their decision against what their community stands to lose if the vote is split.

In only one case in Bamiyan District did women appear to make a collective decision on whom to vote for, apparently acting independently of the community's male-dominated *shura*. There, women reported coming together (albeit in a meeting facilitated by a campaign worker of the local female PC candidate Aqila Hosseini) and making a collective decision to vote specifically for a woman after feeling shut out of wider decision-making within the community (see Box 2).

4.4   Access to information

In total, just over three-quarters of the women voters interviewed for this study were illiterate, with no education. By contrast, the same proportion of men had at least a basic level of literacy. Across research sites, there were variations in how intense the problem was and who it affected: Women's literacy rates in Shortepa were effectively zero; there was a generational divide in both Bamiyan sites between uneducated older women and their high-school-graduate daughters; and the problem was less widely discussed in the suburban areas of Dehdadi and Dasht-i-Barchi where educational opportunities were more widely available.

Training and support from institutions

Strikingly, only eight women reported exposure to any kind of public outreach programmes organised by the IEC or NGOs. Four were trained in Shortepa by the local women's CDC *shura* head in 2004 (no informants there could remember any form of public outreach taking place there in the 2009/10 elections), one woman in Yakowlang spoke vaguely of "someone" coming to explain the voting process to women there, and two additional women in Guldara and Bamiyan District recalled seeing posters from the IEC explaining the voting process. Only one younger teacher in Bamiyan District clearly remembered attending an IEC-organised training session and what went on in it.[163] By contrast, 14 male informants across all provinces spoke in relative detail getting training directly from the IEC, the UN and other unspecified organisations, and from mullahs in mosques. This seems to suggest that while formalised public outreach was indeed available in study communities, the exposure of women to it, especially uneducated women, was minimal.

Gender norms restricting women's movement were likely the main culprits for the low levels of training women received—several women described being unable to get out of the house to attend training, while in Guldara women explained that training had been for men only—likely reflecting the IEC's practice in some areas of conducting training exclusively with men on the assumption that they would then share this information with the women in their families. In Bamiyan District, this also seems to have been compounded by the limited reach of the training available; participants in a men's FGD there explained how while they had been able to attend training in Bamiyan City, women had generally not been able to make it there because it was too far for them to travel.[164]

In Shortepa, the inadequacies of the training women did receive also highlight the potential pitfalls of the practice currently employed by Afghan and international NGOs, and to a certain extent by the IEC, of conducting ad hoc training of trainers in the run-up to elections as opposed to conducting longer-term, permanently-staffed public outreach. There, both the trainer and the trainees felt that

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163   It should be noted that five more women—four of them teachers—did receive direct training from the IEC, but this was in their capacity as polling staff rather than voters.

164   In Bamiyan, the various postering campaigns that accompanied the 2009/10 elections also seemed to be confined to the main population centres. In Bamiyan City and the Yakowlang district centre of Nayak, for example, the streets were full of posters printed by the IEC, Afghan NGOs and foreign embassies encouraging people, especially women, to get out and vote, even a year after the most recent election. By contrast, these were entirely absent in the study communities, both of which were located at least an hour's drive from the district centre. Given that women in these communities rarely if ever ventured outside the confines of their own village, such displays were therefore of little help.

the training had been inadequate for the needs of uneducated people, who had been left confused by it. This example may highlight the need for more effective monitoring of trainers themselves, since without it there is no way to gauge how effective the help they provide actually is.

Especially in Bamiyan, informants also outlined the challenges IEC staff at polling booths faced when trying to help confused voters on election day itself. As one woman who had worked with the IEC in Yakowlang explained, the threat of fraud and general atmosphere of suspicion on polling day meant that in practice there was sometimes little that they could do to help voters:

> We cannot guide voters on voting day. This is because a lot of observers were in attendance who were the representatives of various candidates. If we as IEC staff showed the people how to vote, the observers would blame us...[they] would have said that we were serving a particular candidate. I remember that...voters did not allow us to guide them. People said "It is our own right to choose who we should vote for."

Given the widespread mistrust of the IEC expressed by both voters and candidates across study provinces as well as in other recent studies, it is possible that this issue may represent a significant challenge in any future elections.

Media

Eleven women described public information announcements and IEC-supported drama programmes in the media as a major source of information (as well as inspiration, as discussed in Section 4.2 above). These were mainly viewed on television; only two informants spoke in passing about using the radio, and none reported reading anything in newspapers. Respondents were generally very positive about what they had seen or heard. In both Balkh communities, women recalled watching IEC-organised dramas on elections and their significance. The rare window this offered into the kinds of opportunities that Afghan women could ideally enjoy prompted one older woman in Shortepa to remark, "Now, Turkman women are living in hell, but we have obtained some freedom because we have learned how other people live." Two female informants in Bamiyan and one in Kabul also related how TV coverage of elections in other countries, especially Iran, had impressed on them the link between holding successful elections and having an organised, prosperous country.

However, access to a TV set was generally restricted to a few richer households. With electricity often restricted to a couple of hours a day, sets could end up being monopolised by male household members, and current events were not necessarily a priority. As one woman in Bamiyan District explained:

> We just have power during the night, and most of the people use satellite TV, they are not very interested in the news, because we don't have enough electricity to be focusing on the news in Afghanistan. Mostly people watch drama and movies.

A number of men felt that individual access to media was not a major problem since it formed part of a wider "buzz" about elections in the community, where information was transferred rapidly from household to household and in public discussions. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given women's comparatively small spheres of social interaction and men's tendency to withhold information from them, this was a phenomenon rarely mentioned by female respondents.

The fact that so few informants reported receiving their information via radio is significant since radio broadcasting has in the past formed a major component of public outreach around elections on the part of both the IEC and other institutions such as the BBC's Afghan Education Project.[165] Given the qualitative nature of this study, it impossible to make any further extrapolations about radio use in the country as a whole. However, this finding does highlight an urgent need for more quantitative research into how many women actually have access to a radio in order to ensure that future public outreach efforts are not based on flawed assumptions.[166]

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165   International NGO worker in Kabul, pers. comm.

166   The most recent comprehensive and publically available study of Afghanistan's media was conducted by Altai Consulting in 2010. While it estimated that radio had penetrated to 63 percent of Afghan households (compared to 48 percent for TV),

Access to information within the community

Within their communities, women's relatively limited social circles—normally restricted to at best their female friends and often to their immediate families—often cut them off from informal social interactions and discussions about how elections worked, which candidates were running and so on. In several instances, questions put to female informants were met with a despondent "How should I know? I just stay and work at home." In both Balkh study communities and in Dasht-i-Barchi in Kabul, women also spoke of being barred from attending candidate campaign meetings because it was frowned on in their communities for men and women to mix in public. Several women also described how male family members were reluctant to discuss the elections with them, most notably in Bamiyan District. At a much broader level, a handful of women also explained that elections in general were simply not a priority since their prescribed gender roles—raising children, cooking meals and managing the household, for example—left them with very little time for other activities.

While educated female informants generally felt less exposed to these kinds of gender restriction—sometimes contrasting the liberal atmosphere in their households with the perceived miseries of illiterate voters—they were not necessarily immune from them. In particular, one female schoolteacher in Dehdadi described how she was prevented from attending campaign meetings by her conservative brothers, later going on to reflect on her ignorance about both the technicalities of the electoral process and the discussions surrounding it in her community:

> I did not attend any of the campaigning, because it is not part of our customs or culture that women should go out of the house to participate. I only heard [about it from my brothers]...we are very strict people. In other places, women are free, they can do anything they want. But here it is really shameful for women to go out without their men. If women leave their houses, people insult their men, they say that they are unmanly because they have allowed their women out.

However, for those able to access them, family discussions and campaign meetings remained a critical source of information, especially in the absence of formal public outreach or media coverage. In particular, the practice of school students educating their parents was widely discussed, especially in the Bamiyan study sites. In Yakowlang, two older illiterate women who had spoiled their ballots in the 2004-05 elections reported being given practical demonstrations of how to vote by their children in the run-up to the parliamentary polls in 2010. One of them described how:

> In the last election my son taught me how I should vote and look for the name of the candidate. He brought a sample ballot to the house. He pointed out where the pictures of the candidates were and the space where I should write my choice. In the last election when I went to the polling station, I opened the ballot, looked for the candidate that I wanted to vote for and filled in the blank space. I reviewed what I wrote and asked myself if I had done it right.

Respondents in Dehdadi and across Bamiyan also described how candidates had latched onto this phenomenon, explaining how female candidates were cultivating relations with schoolchildren—for example, by distributing free headscarves—in the hope that they would then go and broadcast their message to their families at home. While not an ideal scenario given the potential for bias it involves, this may nonetheless represent a valuable lifeline to women in areas where they are barred from directly attending campaign events by their male family members. In the Bamiyan communities, especially Yakowlang, it is hard to overstate the importance schools had as both a physical and intellectual focus of election activities (see Box 3).

4.5 Levels of awareness

There was an almost universal feeling among both men and women across all study communities that, regardless of the quantity of women taking part, the quality of their participation had

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it noted that radio penetration rates were dropping as TV became more popular. While the study provided data on women's listening habits, rural women in particular were underrepresented in their sample, and it did not explore the dynamics of whether women actually had access to the radios in their households. For more information, see "Afghan Media in 2010: Synthesis Report" (Kabul: Altai Consulting, 2010), 98, 106. http://www.altaiconsulting.com/docs/media/2010/Afghan%20 Media%20in%202010.pdf (accessed 25 January 2011).

> ## Box 3: The educated generation
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> Sitting across the valley from the study community in Yakowlang, the area's Lycee was reportedly founded over 80 years ago during the reign of King Amanullah. A mixed high school of around 1,800 students, it has educated dozens of boys and girls from the study community over the past decade. As in other parts of Bamiyan, Hazara refugees returning to Yakowlang after 2001 placed a particularly high premium on educating their children, seeing the relative peace of the Karzai era as a perfect opportunity to improve their position after years of suffering at the bottom of the country's ethnic pile. However, while many communities had to wait some years for education to become reasonably accessible, especially for girls, residents of the Yakowlang community had almost immediate access to a well-established high school. As a consequence, by 2011, the village was home to almost an entire generation of educated young people, a phenomenon with significant consequences for women's political participation.
>
> Girls' experiences in school fostered both an awareness of the practicalities of the electoral process, and an often genuine sense of responsibility to serve their country by participating in it. Around election times, the Lycee itself became a significant focus of campaign activities as candidates looked for a way to reach as many people as possible. "That way," explained a female schoolteacher, "both adults and young people would hear their messages. When the children in school went home, they would inform the rest of the family members what transpired during the campaign." While campaigning in schools took place in other study communities, the way it was discussed in Yakowlang suggests that it played a far more prominent role there. In addition to providing a gender-neutral space appropriate for both male and female candidates to campaign in, informant responses suggested that its status as a campaign venue may have reduced the significance of other, male-dominated forms of campaigning such as the provision of lavish meals to curry voter favour. Candidates' use of students as a strategic resource thus put them—and young girls especially—at the centre of political discussions about the community's future, offering them access to a realm normally restricted to older men alone.
>
> For the community at large, educated children also offered a far more effective means of voter education than anything the IEC or international organisations could provide. Numerous informants talked of how students had explained the physical process of voting and the value of doing so to their parents (this was more pronounced in the run-up to the 2009/10 elections as the number of children attending or graduating from school increased). Especially for older women, who were usually illiterate and sometimes had relatively few interactions with the community outside their own families, this was critical in ensuring their votes were effective.

improved significantly over successive elections. Several women in Bamiyan especially spoke of encountering severe difficulties during the 2005 PC and parliamentary elections, struggling to find the right candidate on the long and complex ballot papers, failing to drop their papers in the ballot box, and, in the case of one or two older women, being afraid to even touch the ballot paper. By contrast, very few women reported struggling to vote properly in the 2009/10 elections. Women in Shortepa and Yakowlang especially were at pains to point out that even for illiterate people, what happened inside the ballot box really was not all that complicated. As one older illiterate woman in Yakowlang pointed out, "Voting is easy! You do not need much education, you just point to who you want."

There was no single dominant answer among informants as to why this improvement had taken place. It was generally felt in all communities, and especially in Bamiyan, that rising education levels had led to women in general being better aware of how to use their votes. In addition, men in particular felt that women had become more aware of the potential value of their votes over the years and had thus worked to become better informed, while a handful of informants of both sexes felt that a more permissive environment in which men were more willing to allow their daughters to go to school and their wives access to information was responsible.

Image 2: Women vote in the 2010 Wolesi Jirga election (credit: IEC)

However, despite clear improvements in women's awareness of the voting process itself, limits on their ability to access information still placed substantial restrictions on their ability to take part in elections as informed political actors. For many female informants in rural communities especially, knowing how to vote did not necessarily entail knowing whom to vote for. This problem was especially pronounced in Shortepa, where women were most thoroughly excluded from the community's political life. Elsewhere, women's level of engagement also varied with the perceived importance of each election, and whether or not a local candidate was running. While many female informants across study communities were keen to discuss whom they had voted for in the presidential elections, women's discussion of parliamentary and PC candidates was largely limited to known figures from their areas. This problem was more pronounced where the PC elections were concerned given the proportionally lower influence of the candidates involved. As one older woman in Yakowlang explained, "I do not know about [the PC elections], nor do I care. I only voted for Sefora [Ilkhani]. I just wanted to participate in the election and I wanted other people to know that I participated."

More broadly, relatively few female informants possessed a basic grasp of what the roles of parliament and the PCs were. While educated women tended to have at least some understanding of the issue, 15 of the 17 illiterate female informants questioned on it openly confessed their complete ignorance, a very few venturing that they had a generalised responsibility to serve the people. This said, male informants fared little better. Both educated or uneducated male informants were much more vocal in highlighting what they thought their representatives should be (or were not) doing—spending time in the community, building bridges, securing water rights and so on. However, only nine out of 31 men questioned on the topic actually went into any detail about representatives' formal responsibilities, a handful expressly pointing out that MPs and PC members were not technically the service-providers they were widely perceived to be. This state of affairs is also likely a consequence of the fact that most public outreach activities are still conducted in the months immediately before each election and hence have little time to delve beyond the specific dynamics of voting (for example, the IEC's Public Outreach department deliberately limits the focus of its trainings to explaining how to vote).[167]

Significantly, beyond a few educated women, almost no informants of either sex were aware of the presence of reserved seats for women in parliament and the PCs, often dismissing the issue as "a matter for the government."

Counternarratives: Political literacy and agency

While women's (and men's) ignorance about formal democratic procedures is certainly problematic, it is worth sounding a note of caution about using this to extrapolate broader conclusions about their political awareness, at least in Afghanistan. Ultimately, a large proportion of Afghan voters and many representatives still see MPs and PC members as service providers linked to individual communities

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167   International NGO worker, Kabul, pers. comm.

rather than lawmakers and government observers representing entire provinces. In this respect, individuals' understanding of local-level political dynamics may be more relevant to the political reality they inhabit than knowing how "the system" as established in the constitution and the Electoral Law is supposed to work. It is therefore important to focus the attention of future interventions aimed at improving women's political participation not just on improving their understanding of how the system theoretically works, but on expanding their access to and influence on the community-level politics around which it more often revolves in practice.

Perhaps more significant was voters' lack of knowledge about the reserved seat system. This is important because women elected to quota seats generally make it into office with significantly fewer votes than their male counterparts.[168] Since this means that a vote cast for a female candidate technically has more chance of success than a vote for a man, greater knowledge of this system could increase the incentive among communities anxious to secure "familiar" representatives to put forward and vote for female candidates; it would also give under-resourced female candidates a potentially powerful bargaining chip—"vote for me or waste your vote on a man much less likely to get elected"—to use against their male adversaries.

It is also important to note that there was a tendency among educated informants, certain candidates, and even a few NGO staff and government employees, to view illiterate women especially as helpless, passive agents, vulnerable to manipulation by powerful actors and even a barrier to the smooth functioning of the electoral process:

> Speaking honestly, most people took part because of the assistance and services that the candidates provided. People felt they needed the candidates so they came to vote for them. It was not because of the value of the election itself. I saw that on election day most women came and asked about the logos and names of the candidates that weren't from this area. I knew that most of those candidates had come here and given things to people.

> — Younger female teacher, Dehdadi District, Balkh Province

> In other countries, parties are acceptable to people and they support them, but in Afghanistan, people are like the parties' servants. Our people are like blank paper, they do not know what is right or wrong.

> — Female NGO worker, Bamiyan Province

> I think some of the candidates made promises to poor and illiterate women. For example, they promised them money or other thing when they won the election. It was like a business transaction.

> — Female PC member, Kabul Province

> Illiterate women voted blindly, hoping that the candidates would assist them somehow.

> — Female MP, Balkh Province

> Overall, it is very difficult to deal with illiterate people.

> — Middle-aged educated male informant, Dehdadi District, Balkh Province

As the numerous examples of fraud and intimidation documented by various agencies monitoring the 2009/10 polls show,[169] these perceptions are clearly based on a substantial grain of truth. However, the responses of many illiterate female informants for this study do provide an important counternarrative to the tendency to equate illiteracy with a complete lack of agency. Illiterate women were often viscerally and bitterly aware of the limitations their condition placed on them, as summed up in their oft-repeated refrain that "illiterate people are like the blind." However, they were often equally aware of the value of their votes, speaking forcefully about the need to

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168   For easy comparison of women's and men's vote tallies in the 2010 elections, see "Afghanistan Election Data."

169   For 2010 alone, see "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Parliamentary Elections, 18 September 2010"; "Afghanistan Election Observation Mission 2010: Final Report"; "Afghanistan parliamentary observation mission 2010 Final Report"; and "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan."

select "real" candidates for their community and their country. As the Bamiyan IEC worker quoted above explained, some were so sensitive to being taken advantage of as to refuse genuine offers of help at the polling booth. Despite the assumption, widespread in Dehdadi but echoed in all study communities, that women were only taking part in elections in exchange for gifts from candidates, not a single female informant for this study mentioned this as a motivation for voting. As several illiterate female informants explained, they were quite capable of themselves manipulating those who were out to steal their votes:

> *Someone told us to vote for [a candidate]...we said yes, but in reality we just voted for ourselves.*
>
> — Illiterate middle-aged woman, Yakowlang District, Bamiyan Province

> *One male candidate came here to campaign and gave out his business card, which had a very nice picture, and provided a very expensive meal as well. But although people took his business card and ate his meal, they did not vote for him.*
>
> — Illiterate middle-aged woman, Bamiyan District, Bamiyan Province

This point is obviously made in recognition of the limited scope of this study and the fact that women in other more conservative or insecure areas are probably a great deal more vulnerable than the respondents described here. That said, it is important to note that others' assumptions about illiterate women's lack of agency often contrasts sharply with their own understanding and belief of what they can achieve.[170]

4.6   Access to the ballot box

While most of the discussion focused on issues surrounding women's access to information, informants also cited various instances where women were unable to actually make it to the polls in order to cast their votes. In both Balkh study communities and to a lesser degree in Dasht-i-Barchi, both male and female informants discussed instances where women had been barred from voting by their families. This was variously explained as families protecting their women's honour by keeping women indoors; protecting their women's physical safety by keeping them away from potentially insecure polling centres; or, as women in a Dasht-i-Barchi FGD explained, keeping them at home because political participation didn't fall inside their remit of doing housework and taking care of children.

In general, informants across study areas believed that the numbers of women voters in their communities had risen or fallen more or less in line with the numbers of male voters. They also felt that the reasons driving this, whether greater enthusiasm in the Bamiyan communities or growing disillusionment in Dehdadi, were largely the same for both sexes. However, small number of informants also went on to suggest that whether or not women voted was dependent on whether their men did:

> *People are not very interested in women's participation, because we have not seen any assistance from the candidates. It is also very hard for men to accept their women participating. If the candidates cannot satisfy men, then there is no reason to allow women to participate.*
>
> — Younger educated male informant, Dehdadi District, Balkh Province

> *Everyone knew and saw who worked and who did not work. Some friends were MPs, but even they did not work for us. I said to my women, "You should not vote." I said to them, "You voted for [a candidate] last time, but unfortunately he lost."*
>
> — Younger educated male informant, Dasht-i-Barchi, Kabul Province

As the case of one younger woman in Dehdadi illustrates, male family members were not always the only ones trying to keep their women at home:

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170   This gap between elitist perceptions of illiterate people ruining elections and how elections actually play out in practice is also forcefully underlined in Larson, "Deconstructing Democracy," 44-45.

My mother-in-law is not a good woman, she is very old but she has no shame. On election day, I told her to take care of my children while I went to vote, but she said no. She said, "It is your own job. It's not important for you young women to take part in the election, maybe you will see some men [at the polling booth]!" I can barely go out of the house because my husband is a police officer and he only comes home once every couple of weeks. On election day, only my mother-in-law went and voted.

This example reflects evidence in other studies that, as well as men, women, especially older ones, can play a role in imposing restrictions on other women.[171]

Significantly, however, this informant was the only woman in the entire study who directly reported being prevented from voting by her family. This is likely due in part to the selection bias inherent in the study's methodology, but it may also point to a wider erosion of certain social restrictions on women in the communities involved, at least where elections are concerned. In Bamiyan, for example, increasingly liberal attitudes combined with a broader strategic attempt to maximise the Hazara vote meant that there was almost no question of women not being allowed out to vote. By contrast, in Shortepa, the specific social dynamics of election day meant that several women felt comfortable enough to defy their husbands' instruction not to vote (and, by implication, that their husbands did not feel strongly enough about the issue to enforce their wishes):

All the women were happy that they participated in the election and that they voted. Also, some of the women went to the polling station without their men's permission and they kept their participation from their husbands. And I think till today their husbands still do not know about their participation.

— Older illiterate woman, Shortepa District, Balkh Province

As discussed above, however, allowing women to vote and taking them seriously as political actors are two very different things.

Another problem was when the polling station itself was inaccessible. In both Bamiyan study communities, informants mentioned that some women had been unable to vote in the 2009/10 elections because they were held when many women were still up in the *ailaq* (summer pasture) looking after their families' herds (a practice that in this community at least appeared to involve more women than men). More generally, UN and NGO informants discussed how polling booths in the province as a whole had been well beyond walking distance for many communities. However, in contrast to this, a number of informants, most notably in Shortepa, described being driven to vote by both community elders and candidates themselves. Already documented in other research,[172] the widespread practice of candidates ferrying their (supposed) supporters to the polling station may be of particular benefit to women voters since it offers a way to bypass both their lack of access to transport and the social censure that comes with walking around in public.

Of the five female informants who reported being unable to vote, four were unable to do so because they did not have voting cards. In one instance, a woman had not realised that her voting card could be used across different elections; the remainder had lost their cards and did not replace them, either because they were busy or had felt there was no point in wasting time on an election they saw as undermined by fraud and elite manipulation. Two informants in Dasht-i-Barchi also described how many people in their community had been unable to get voting cards because they were recent migrants from other parts of Afghanistan or Pakistan. While this did not directly affect any female informants in the area, this problem is likely to have a disproportionate impact on women since navigating the bureaucracy of getting a new card would likely be much more confusing for anyone without a reasonable level of education—assuming they were allowed out of the house to do so in the first place. It is worth noting that while informants in Shortepa and both Kabul communities

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171   See, for example, "A Place at the Table?" 8. The phenomenon of older women imposing control on their younger counterparts as a component of patriarchal structures is also discussed in Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy."

172   See, for example, Noah Coburn, "Patronage, Posturing, Duty, Demographics: Why Afghans Voted in 2009" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

did mention that women had been reluctant to acquire voting cards in the past over fears of having their photo on it, these concerns were felt to be declining as people grew more familiar with the electoral process.

Many women who did have voting cards were at pains to point out how valuable they felt they were. Reflecting the fact that many women in Afghanistan have no access to formal identity papers, female informants viewed voting cards as tangible symbols of their status as citizens of the Afghan state, entitled to the same rights as men. Especially in both Bamiyan sites and in Guldara, female informants also pointed out how the cards could themselves be used as a form of identification, for example, when getting assistance from NGOs. Especially in instances where men felt it was unimportant for women to have formal ID cards, having voting cards could give women an extra degree of independence, as one middle-aged woman in Bamiyan District explained:

> Voting cards are very important, especially for women because women don't have ID cards, so they use their voting cards instead when they need to. Men say it's not useful to have ID cards [but] we women look after our voting cards very carefully.

Underage Voting

Underage voting appeared to be endemic across all study communities. Informants generally felt that young girls were the worst offenders in this respect because they could exploit the *chadari* to both acquire voting cards and vote multiple times. In Kabul and Balkh, this was mainly held up as an example of the IEC's ineptitude and a symptom of the general chaos and fraud that had marred recent elections. In Bamiyan, however, the situation appeared to be more complex. Living in communities where education and political engagement were viewed as interconnected parts of a larger blueprint for improving people's lives, attending schools where visiting candidates generated excitement about the elections and lectured students on claiming their rights, it would be difficult to imagine children in Yakowlang and Bamiyan District waiting quietly until legal age before attempting to vote. When informants in these communities discussed underage voting, they tended to talk in neutral or positive terms—one father in Bamiyan District even described how he had paid for his underage daughter, now a teacher, and her friends to hire a taxi to the polling station in the 2005 elections. Some of these sentiments were also echoed by an educated older Hazara man in Dasht-i-Barchi, who mused:

> I know that every Afghan over 18 years old can vote and use their ballot for the candidates they want. But this 18 years old is not good. Why not 15- or 16-year-olds? Are they not from this country? Are they not adults? Why they are not qualified?

According to the 2007-08 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, 49 percent of the population is under 15 years of age.[173] Coupled with this is the fact that in many rural areas, adulthood still effectively begins in individuals' early teens.[174] In addition to examining the issue as an electoral irregularity,[175] there is therefore an urgent need for more research into the causes and dynamics of underage voting across Afghanistan.

4.7   Impact of the elections

In this study, only women in communities that had elected female representatives felt that elections were of tangible benefit to their interests, for example, in terms of improving access to services. In Guldara, MP Fauzia Nasiryar Guldarayee was widely reported to have secured a girls' school for the community and ensured it was staffed by qualified teachers. The same was also true in Bamiyan District; female informants there also added that by fixing the area's roads, Aqila Hosseini had done a great service to women by cutting journey times to the nearest clinic, leaving them less likely to

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173   NRVA, 68.

174   Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 194-96.

175   Extensively documented, for example, in "2009 Presidential Council Elections: Final Observation Report" (Kabul: Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan, 2009), 40-42, 79.

die in childbirth. By contrast, women in Yakowlang felt their MP Sefora Ilkhani had actually done much more to help women during her time as a teacher, noting that she had barely returned to her community after being elected. And while both Dehdadi and Dasht-i-Barchi theoretically had female PC members representing them, informants of both sexes in these areas felt they had seen few changes as a result of elections—possibly reflecting both higher expectations and the more diffuse nature of political relationships in urban areas.

Significantly, there were virtually no women who felt that participating in the elections had improved their voice or decision-making power within their communities. While several women in communities with female MPs or PC members reflected that having a female representative would give them an unprecedented way to air their grievances and needs with someone in power, none of them described actually doing so in practice. By contrast, elections seemed to have a much more noticeable positive effect on people's perceptions, both in terms of how women saw themselves and the world around them, and in terms of how communities viewed women's role in public life. It is important to note here that neither of these effects was in any way dependent on more technically-focused hallmarks of "successful" female electoral participation, such as knowing how to vote or whom to vote for.

For a substantial number of female informants across study communities, participating in elections was a personally empowering experience. Illiterate women especially recounted how taking part in the elections had boosted their sense of self-confidence and self-worth. As mentioned in Section 5.2, many women saw elections as a concrete signal that, at least in theory, they now had the same rights as men. Several older informants in particular spoke of how this had led them to question the current position of women in their communities, and to a belief that a change in the status quo was possible, as these two very different quotes illustrate:

> *During the election period, I spoke with my husband. I said "Look, the government is paving the way for women as well, they can participate in the election like men and they will work together. There is no difference between their roles. If I were an educated woman, I would take part in the election and I would be an MP in parliament. Then, I would put out your eyes, because you are always ordering us around, and without your permission we cannot do anything." I hope that in the future we will have a woman president. Also, I want my girls to become soldiers and commanders. They should have some bodyguards or guns, and everyone will be afraid of them.*

> — Older illiterate woman, Dehdadi, Balkh Province

> *Most of the women participated in the election, and many women nominated themselves as candidates. Although I mentioned that we don't have good conditions at home and are mostly being insulted by men, now we have found out how to live and the problems that we faced in the past really motivated us to find our way. That is why most of the women are trying to have better positions and to work outside the house.*

> — Older illiterate woman, Bamiyan District, Bamiyan Province

A handful of other participants also spoke of how elections had broadened their horizons by exposing them to new experiences outside of the home. This was especially true in Shortepa, where the head of the local women's NSP *shura* had negotiated with the IEC to ensure that local women were employed as polling booth staff in the 2010 elections. For the women involved, this represented a first exposure to paid employment. Several spoke of the validating effect of this experience, which had showed them that it was perfectly possible for uneducated women like themselves to work for money and do a competent job in the process.

There was also a feeling among smaller but relatively equal numbers of both men and women across study communities that elections had triggered changes in community perceptions about women. In Dehdadi in Balkh and in both Bamiyan communities, six informants (including two men) spoke of how seeing women functioning effectively in positions of high office had convinced at least some people that women were just as capable of occupying leadership roles as men. Eight people (including four men) in all communities also explained that seeing women in office had inspired more people to send their daughters to school. This opinion was most prevalent in Yakowlang and Guldara, both places where the reputation of their female MP loomed large in community life.

5. Key Findings and Recommendations

Living in less conservative or more cosmopolitan provinces which have by and large enjoyed a period of relative stability over the past ten years, women candidates and voters in this study faced few of the problems normally associated with female electoral participation in Afghanistan. Candidates experienced few direct security threats and were able to campaign in an environment relatively free from religious or conservative hostility or bigotry. Voters were almost universally able to access the polling booth, rarely voted on the instructions of male family members, and generally understood how to vote properly. However, both groups still faced a challenge that was less obvious and potentially much harder to combat in the form of men's pervasive failure to view women as political actors, a fact that had serious implications for both the quality and impact of their participation. The remainder of this section outlines this and other key issues highlighted by this study, going on to suggest some tentative ways forward for the future. It is important to note that these findings are not representative of Afghanistan as a whole, but merely reflect some of the diversity of opinions and experiences in the three study provinces.

5.1 Key findings for candidates

There was no one blueprint for a successful female candidate, and the stories of individuals interviewed for this study were as diverse and complex as the various political environments in which they operated. However, in almost all cases, candidates succeeded via a combination, usually at least two, of these qualities: 1) access to resources; 2) ties to a powerful family or a political party; and 3) a strong relationship with a given community or other constituency of voters. While precise dynamics varied between provinces, it appeared that having a specific constituency or community to appeal to was the most critical of these three.

Training and networking

A substantial majority of candidates were exposed to some kind of formal training on how to run a campaign, in most cases attending sessions organised by NDI. Most candidates were satisfied with how these workshops were run, and their main complaint focused on the fact that they were scheduled too late in the campaign to make much of a difference. Significantly, very few informants reported being involved in any kind of networking or coordination activities with other female candidates, female public figures, or women's CSOs.

Challenges

- **Discourses of insecurity:** Insecurity was almost universally discussed as a challenge facing female candidates in general. However, very few candidates reported insecurity being a specific challenge in their own campaigns. While this reflects the relative stability of the provinces involved in this study, it also raises the question of whether some candidates view insecurity as a rather vague "given" without much consideration of how it might affect them in practice. Significantly, the minority of candidates who had braved insecure areas felt that doing so had given them a significant advantage—in terms of additional votes—over those who had stayed away.

- **Male indifference:** Relatively few candidates in the study provinces reported encountering serious direct hostility from voters or influential actors rooted in conservative or religious objection to women's political participation. Instead, the main challenge they appeared to face as reported by both candidates and voters was a pervasive sense of male indifference to female candidate's campaigns, rooted in the assumption that women could not be effective as service-providers or representatives as their male counterparts.

Campaign strategies

- **Cultivating a constituency:** Almost all successful candidates and the majority of losers attempted to cultivate a specific constituency. In most cases, this took the form of a specific community/

area, or a specific network such as a given *qawm*, or ethnicity. In a small number of cases, candidates were able to build their own constituencies that largely bypassed such notions of place or lineage in the form of networks of students or religious followers. However, it was still fundamentally the personality of the candidates involved that bound these groups together, and not any crosscutting ideology or platform.

- **Working within traditions:** Several candidates attempted to undermine religious or cultural bigotry against them by adopting a religious or traditionalist stance during campaigning, working specifically to co-opt mullahs and male elders, campaigning in mosques, and using traditionalist imagery on campaign materials and in speeches.

- **Appealing to voter's perceptions of women as honest:** Other candidates focused on strategically deploying an image of themselves as honest straight-talkers against a background of growing corruption and disillusion. This could involve hosting deliberately low-key campaign events to undermine the lavish parties of their male counterparts as wasteful, and focusing campaign speeches on managing expectations and explaining what the political system could do for voters, as opposed to elaborate grandstanding.

- **Few attempts to appeal to women as a distinct interest group:** Strikingly few candidates sought to cultivate women as a distinct constituency, and even fewer did so by appealing directly to their specific gender interests. This may in part be due to a fear of being tarred as communists or foreign agents by hostile conservatives. However, it is also likely because women have limited power as vote-mobilisers in their communities or *qawms*, and it is therefore more efficient for female candidates to spend more time courting powerful male leaders or male-dominated *shuras* which can bring larger blocs of support to bear.

- **Unclear relationship with political parties:** The fact that around half of the winning candidates in this study were supported by political parties suggests that they play a potentially important role in supporting and coordinating female candidates' campaigns. However, those who were supported by parties were almost universally eager to downplay this relationship, if they discussed it at all. The precise nature of the interactions and expectations involved when parties support female candidates thus remains murky and is an issue in need of more research in the run-up to the next electoral cycle.

Impact of participation

Overall, candidates felt that taking part in elections had had a positive impact on their lives. While a small minority of mostly unsuccessful candidates explained that campaigning had led to financial troubles or put themselves and their families at risk, the remainder felt the experience had helped broaden their access to new skills, knowledge and networks, build self-confidence, and take a more active role in their communities. However, it is important to note that relatively few losing candidates expressed a desire to run again, with many being put off by what they saw as the corruption and impotence of the current electoral system.

5.2   Key findings for voters

In general, women had little trouble accessing the ballot box and knowing how to vote. Men's perceptions of them taking part in elections were generally positive, and it was felt that the quality of women's participation had shown steady improvement over the years. However, shut out of community discussions about elections, unable to access formal training and barred from discussing politics at home, many women were left with little means to make an informed decision about how to vote, or to make their voices heard in the community-level politics that forms such a vital part of elections in Afghanistan.

Perceptions

- **Generally positive perceptions of women in elections:** A substantial majority of men and women in the study accepted the idea of women taking part in elections as candidates and

voters. However, it is important to realise that tolerating women's participation in theory does not necessarily translate into doing anything to actively enable it in practice.

Why women voted and for whom

- **Voting as a symbol of equal rights:** In addition to providing women with an option to choose their representatives for the first time, being able to vote was a powerful symbol of their equal rights as citizens of the current Afghan state. Taking an active part in elections was thus a way for them to claim these rights, irrespective of what they knew about the mechanics of the process or whether they voted effectively.

- **Voting as a collective experience:** Especially in rural communities, voting offered a rare and much-appreciated opportunity for social interaction among women normally confined to the household, and was often likened to a marriage party.

- **Voting for women:** A majority of women across study communities felt it was in their interests to vote for a woman because female representatives would better understand their needs and be accessible to them in a way that men could not. In addition, a minority of men expressed a willingness to vote for women instead of men because they saw them as more honest and hard-working. However, both men and women appeared to prioritise having a local candidate who was familiar with their communities over questions of sex, meaning that in areas without a local female candidate, everybody voted for men.

- **Decision-making processes:** Very few women reported being ordered or instructed to vote for a given candidate by their male relatives, and many were adamant that their votes were theirs and theirs alone. However, in no cases were women able to attend *shuras* and other public forums where the issue of which candidate a community would collectively support was discussed. This means that women were effectively denied a say in determining what their communities' interests were, and which candidate would best represent them.

Access to information and levels of awareness

- **Lack of formal training:** Compared to their male counterparts, very few women were able to access any formal public outreach activities, whether run by the IEC or other international and national organisations.

- **Access to the media:** For a significant minority of women, television provided an important source of information about the elections, with several speaking favourably about IEC-organised television dramas on the subject. However, very few women cited radio as an information source.

- **Access to information within the community:** In Bamiyan especially, educated young people and candidates themselves were vital in filling the information gap left by the absence of formal training. However, in other communities women were generally barred from attending candidate campaign meetings as doing so was considered culturally inappropriate. Across all communities, there was also a feeling that men were failing to share information or discuss politics with their wives. Since many of the women in this study were still fairly limited in their mobility and social interactions, this often left them feeling deprived of the tools to make an informed choice when considering whom to vote for.

- **Improvement in the quality of women's participation:** Almost all women understood how voting worked and had been able to vote successfully in the most recent election. In all communities, it was felt that the quality of women's participation had increased steadily over the years. However, the majority of both women and men displayed little broader understanding of how the country's political system functioned. Significantly, very few informants were aware of the existence of reserved seats for women in either parliament or the PCs.

- **Stigmatisation of illiterate voters:** There was a tendency among educated voters, as well as some candidates and NGO or government employees, to see illiterate voters and especially illiterate women as passive agents who were vulnerable to manipulation. While this may be true up to a point, it contrasted with the way illiterate voters saw themselves. While well aware of

the disadvantages they faced, many illiterate women were fiercely protective of their votes and spoke about both the importance of choosing the right candidate, and the strategies they used to avoid being manipulated.

Access to the ballot box

- **Few restrictions on women voting:** Only a single female informant described being barred from voting by her family; while women not being allowed to vote was still highlighted as an issue in urban communities in Balkh and Kabul, it was generally felt to be on the decline. In Bamiyan, the long distance to the nearest polling booth was cited as a problem in both communities, but did not appear to have stopped the majority of women from voting. Instead, it was the timing of elections, which had in recent years fallen while women were working in high up in remote summer pastureland, that had prevented some women from taking part.

- **Underage voting endemic:** Underage voting appeared to be widespread in all study communities, and it was often felt that girls were the primary culprits. However, in Bamiyan especially this did not appear to be an upshot of systematic fraud or manipulation by others; rather, it appeared to result from a more general enthusiasm for elections percolating through their communities, as well as the dynamic role played by schools in particular as a focus for election activities.

Impact of participation

- **Some tangible benefits for women, but their "voice" remains limited:** Women in areas with female representatives felt elections had benefitted their interests since their representatives had successfully secured girls' schools for their communities along with better road access. However, there was little evidence of female constituents being able to access their representatives, and in almost no cases did women feel elections had given them much of a say in the political lives of their communities.

- **Positive personal impact:** Many women felt that simply taking part in elections—and being on the same level as men in doing so—had provided a significant boost to their sense of self-confidence and self-worth. In addition, it had led some to seriously question their current position in society and to a belief that change was at least possible.

5.3   Recommendations

The recommendations presented below arise directly from the key findings of this study and are aimed at improving women's participation within the system as it currently exists. It should be noted that major changes to the electoral framework that might expand and improve women's role are not only beyond the scope of this paper, but could also pose a serious threat to the perpetually fragile progress that has already been made in this regard given the growing vein of conservatism in Afghan politics and the current atmosphere of indifference or outright hostility to women's empowerment agendas.

Candidates

- **Secure and clarify the quota system:** As this research has demonstrated, even female candidates with good access to resources and powerful political backers would struggle to be elected without the aid of the quota. As a consequence, it is vital that the system is preserved in the course of any future electoral reform efforts or an eventual political settlement with the Taliban. The methodology for calculating the quota is also in need of urgent revision so that women who win enough votes to be elected to open seats are not instead awarded quota seats. This will ensure that the quota represents a baseline, not a cap, on women's presence in elected bodies.

- **Conduct training earlier:** Organisations involved in training candidates—primarily NDI—should work to ensure that candidate training workshops take place early enough in the campaign season to make a difference to candidates' campaigns. Donors should also consider continuing or expanding funding to longer-term programmes to build the capacity of women interested in entering politics as a way to supplement this.

- **Explore ways to expand networking opportunities among women in politics:** In conjunction with MOWA and the UN, national and international CSOs should explore ways to foster ties between both winning and losing parliamentary and PC candidates across different provinces. Doing so could provide an opportunity for candidates to share knowledge and experience without feeling threatened by each other; facilitate mentoring activities between successful candidates and new arrivals or MPs and PC members looking to break into parliament; allow MPs and PC members to better coordinate their activities once in office; and potentially improve coordination and minimise negative competition between female candidates during election periods.

- **Explore ways to strengthen ties between female candidates and female voters:** Evidence in this study suggests that a sense of women's collective interest is present, if largely untapped, in some sections of Afghanistan's female electorate. Standing on at least a limited gender platform—for example, championing maternal health or female education—could therefore help candidates mobilise the support of women voters. In this regard, national CSOs could also explore incentives to persuade female candidates to engage more proactively with female voters. Following the example of other women's movements in South Asia, this could involve coordinating members or beneficiaries into offering support, either financial or in terms of actual voting blocs, to candidates pledging to represent women's interests, and attempting to hold them to account once in office. Due to the political sensitivity of supporting individual candidates, such efforts may be better focused on Afghanistan's admittedly weak political parties. Another option could involve attempting to foster ties between NSP women's *shuras* and prospective or sitting female candidates to create more formalised channels through which female constituents' voices might be heard.

- **Ensure information about women's reserved seats is included in civic education activities:** Given that at present, women can win seats with a much smaller number of votes than men, reserved seats may represent an important bargaining tool for female candidates. Given the desire among many communities to elect a "familiar" representative, female candidates can reasonably argue that a vote for them is more likely to fulfil this desire than a vote for their male counterparts. However, in order to make this argument, voters must first know what the reserved seats system is and how it works—knowledge which this study suggests is minimal to non-existent.

Voters

- **Begin preparation for elections much earlier:** Evidence from this and other studies suggests that rushed preparations for elections have had a disproportionately negative impact on women. Planning and funding elections well ahead of time would help increase women's levels of awareness by improving the availability and quality of civic education, and improve their access to the ballot box by ensuring adequate numbers of female polling staff.

- **Improve monitoring and evaluation of civic education:** Starting earlier would also provide an opportunity to institute much more rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Doing so would help establish whether or not programming is actually reaching its intended beneficiaries, especially women, and is functioning as intended. Findings from this study suggest that monitors need to specifically explore whether or not targeting men to pass on messages to women in their families (as the IEC sometimes did) is effective in practice, and to what extent public awareness radio broadcasting actually reaches women.

- **Introduce civics classes in schools:** As a way to lighten the burden of other public outreach activities, the Ministry of Education should consider implementing civics classes exploring the constitution and the electoral process in its schools. This would have a disproportionately large impact on young women who might not otherwise be able to access civic education classes or candidates' campaign activities owing to social restrictions.

- **Consider the role of schools as a focus for election activities:** Schools have the potential to offer a rare, safe, gender-neutral space for women to attend and participate in both information dissemination and campaign activities. There is thus clearly a need for more discussion between the Ministry of Education, the IEC and others on what, if any, formal role schools might play in future elections, and the matter agreed well in advance of any future polls.

- **Work to expand women's role in the political life of their communities:** While clearly an imposing task, it is important that programmers continue to look for ways to expand women's political voice within their own communities. One potential avenue would be to incorporate attempts to improve political awareness and collective organising into programmes already working on ways to improve women's collective economic empowerment, most notably women's NSP *shuras*. By providing a venue for women to discuss, define and organise around their political interests, these *shuras* or other bodies could capitalise on women's stated desire for a more active role in political life, and in the long run provide a counterbalance to other, male-dominated decision-making bodies. However, given widespread hostility and suspicion toward women's rights agendas across much of the country, such efforts would obviously need to be conducted with extreme sensitivity and full community commitment. Alongside this, civic education programming aimed at men should endeavour to convey the value not just of women's being able to vote, but of their being able to play an informed part in the electoral process as a whole.

Research

- **Extend scale and scope of research into women's electoral participation:** Given the limited scope of this study, it is vital that more research be conducted in this area to support planning for future elections. This should involve more research in Pashtun areas, which represent a major gap in this study. In addition, there is a need to focus in greater depth on the experiences of women voters, who in comparison to candidates have received relatively little research attention over the years.

- **Conduct more research into underage voting:** Research organisations should endeavour to understand the drivers and dynamics of underage voting in order to work out what types of role it plays in different areas of the country, especially given the fact that it may in some cases be driven more by the enthusiasm of younger, literate voters than by systematic fraud.

Elections in general, and women's involvement in them in particular, remain a relatively new phenomenon in Afghanistan, and one that is still very much evolving. Women still face significant barriers to ensuring their voices are heard both nationally and within their communities, and much remains to be done before they can truly engage in politics on anything like a level playing field with men. However, the gains of the past ten years remain significant, though fragile. As peace talks with the Taliban and an increasingly conservative public sphere cast growing doubt over women's role in Afghanistan's political future, it is vital that Afghan and international stakeholders alike continue to focus attention on how best to preserve—and build upon—these achievements.

Appendix: Socio-Demographic Information

Appendix Table 1: Distribution of informants and participants in the study by type of interview and by province

Type of interview	Province			Total
	Balkh	Bamiyan	Kabul	
IDI	23	19	37	79
FGD	19	26	19	64
Total	42	45	56	143

Appendix Table 2: Distribution of informants and participants in the study by age range and by province

Age	Province			Total
	Balkh	Bamiyan	Kabul	
21 – 30	6	7	8	21
31 – 40	12	17	21	50
41 – 50	6	7	15	28
51 – 60	13	8	3	24
61 – 70	0	0	0	0
71 – 80	1	1	3	5
81 – Above	0	1	1	2
Total	42	45	56	143

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