Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
Research for a better Afghanistan

UN WOMEN
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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Violence against Women in Afghanistan's 2018 Parliamentary Elections:

Contents

About the authors

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1.   Introduction

Women are more visible in Afghan politics than ever before, with women holding key leadership positions such as ministerial posts, governorships and ambassadorships. At the same time, a review of media reports demonstrate some of the many challenges that women still face. In 2012, for example, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) reported that:

> 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 sets out an operational framework for furthering women's empowerment and gender equality under the government's overarching Afghanistan National Development Strategy. 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….has even reversed some of these gains.[1]

One of the most significant barriers to female participation in political processes is the threat of violence, in all of its forms and manifestations. There has been in Afghanistan a history of violent reactions to the promotion of women's rights and their involvement in public politics.[2] In response to this continued challenge, AREU and UN Women partnered to conduct research that would identify various forms and patterns of violence against women in elections (VAWE) and how that violence undermines their capacity to participate in the electoral process in an equal manner. The study aims to better understand VAWE, in order to provide concrete recommendations to respond to and limit such violence in the future.

1   Oliver Lough, Farkhloqa Amini, Farid Ahmad Bayat, Reyhaneh Gulsun Husseini, Zia Hussein, Massouda Kohistani and Chona R. Echavez, Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2012).
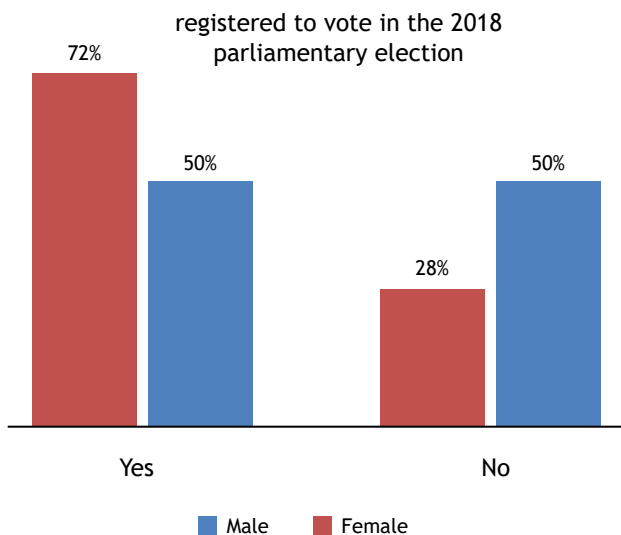
2   Deniz Kandiyoti, The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005), 31.

To do this, AREU selected two provinces to conduct preliminary research in the first phase of the study: Nangarhar and Kabul. These provinces were selected to better compare violence in a relatively secure province, Kabul, and in a province with significant areas of insecurity, Nangarhar. Research was conducted between 13 January and 19 February 2019. The qualitative aspect of the research involved 28 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus group discussions (FGDs) in both rural and urban areas with a range of participants, including parliamentary candidates, IEC staff, election observers, those who had worked on campaigns, members of civil society and local leaders. Of the 49 respondents involved in interviews and FGDs, 41 were female and eight were male. In addition to this qualitative data, AREU designed a survey that was implemented in urban areas of Kabul and Nangarhar and in three rural districts from each of these provinces. The survey aimed at better understanding general attitudes towards VAWE in the two provinces. As of 20 February, a total of 533 people have been surveyed in these two provinces.

This briefing paper provides a review of initial findings and reflections on the various forms of VAWE, as well as some potential policy recommendations for responding to and limiting VAWE. It begins by reviewing some of the types of violence cited by women in interviews and making some comparative conclusions about VAWE. It concludes with a series of broad recommendations. A more complete analysis, with specific recommendations, will be published at the conclusion of the research.

2.   What is Electoral Violence Against Women

The 2018 parliamentary election was held during continued violence and insecurity. According to a recent report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 2018 was the most dangerous year for Afghan civilians ever recorded. This violence has had a serious impact, particularly on women and children, who made up 38% of all the civilian casualties in 2018.[3] Beyond the impact of war, however, women and children face a broad range of threats and forms of violence that impact them on a daily basis.[4] Despite all of these challenges, an estimated 45% voters succeeded in taking part in elections across the country, with the exception of one province, Ghazni.[5]

the same for men and women: they overwhelmingly pointed at insecurity as the primary cause (38% of women and 35% of men). In addition, for women, pressure by family members followed as the second highest ranked factor (25% of women and 21% of men). Among both respondents and in the literature, however, there is no clear consensus on how violence against women in elections should be defined and analysed.

registered to vote in the 2018 parliamentary election

Main factors that prevent women from participating in elections

Violence and elections are deeply interwoven in Afghanistan, with each round of voting including attacks on polling stations, voters, campaigners and candidates, as well as a variety of other forms of violence.[6] Initial survey results suggest that women are less likely than men to have registered to vote previously in the 2018 parliamentary elections (50% for women to 72% for men) and that the main factor preventing women from participating in elections is

As with other political concepts in Afghanistan, it is important to understand the historical context that shapes understandings of the term. For instance, "democracy" and associated understandings of democratic processes, such as elections, need to be understood in a historical and cultural context in which gender is an essential aspect. In a series of interviews and FGDs, AREU research found that the term "democracy" was associated not just with certain political processes, but also with a series of practices that were considered un-Islamic.[7] At the same time, Afghan men were more likely than women to associate democracy with the behaviour of women, suggesting some problematic conclusions about the opposition

3   UN Annual Report, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, (United Nations, February 2019),
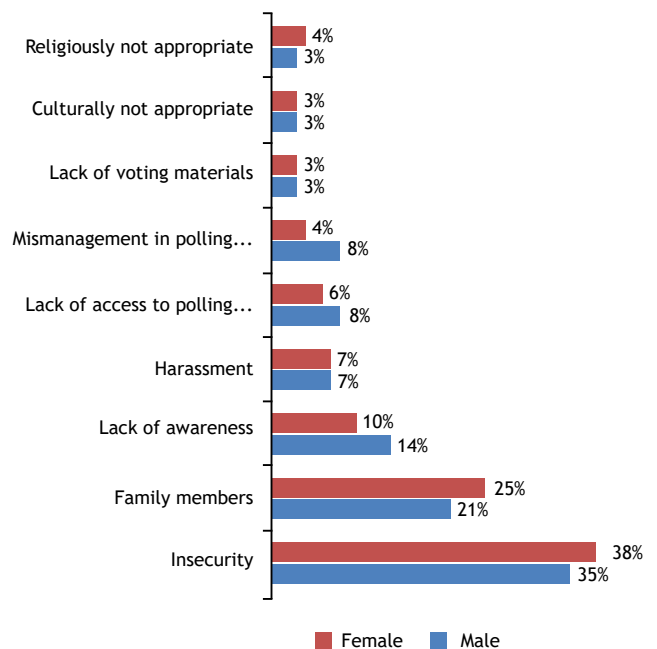
4   See, for example, UNAMA, UNHCR, Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women

5   Shadi Khan Saif, Voting for landmark Afghan parliament polls concludes (Anadolu Agency., 21 October 2018).

6   Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan (Columbia University Press, 2011).

7   Anna Larson, Deconstructing Democracy in Afghanistan (Kabul: AREU, 2011).

of men to female participation in certain democratic processes, such as elections. Similarly, it is important to understand how violence is being understood locally and what this might mean for elections in Afghanistan.

The United Nations Policy Directive on Preventing and Mitigating Election-related Violence (2016), in particular, understands election violence as a form of political violence, which is "often designed to influence an electoral outcome and therefore the distribution of political power."[8] This takes a variety of shapes and forms and is also understood in different ways at different times, ranging from direct attacks on female candidates, to psychological efforts to suppress the female vote. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs, and reviews of other literature, suggest that the ways in which violence is understood, does much to shape the individual's perception of it and inherently shapes the ways in which individuals believe that violence should be dealt with. It also demonstrates in many cases that the threat of violence is almost as important as physical violence itself. To better understand and prevent VAWE, it is useful to look at violence in a series of overlapping categories. These categories include:

Chart 1: Types of violence reported by respondents

Types of violence	Variations	Examples cited by respondents and other incidents
Direct physical violence against voters, candidates, etc.	• Attacks on parliamentary candidates • Attacks on polling stations • Domestic violence	• A BBIED attack at a PD 17 Kabul polling station that killed 14 on election day • A BBIEB attack at a registration centre PD 13 • Physical altercations inside polling stations • Domestic violence aimed at female voters
Indirect physical violence	• General insecurity	• An IED at a police checkpoint in Jalalabad that killed voters on their way to the polls • Fear of attacks on polling stations • Threats by the Taliban to cut off the fingers of voters
Psychological, social and emotional violence	• Intimidation • Harassment	• Harassment of female candidates by other candidates or supporters of their opponents • Family members preventing women from voting • Women criticized by family members or other community members for voting or participating in politics in other ways
Sexual violence	• Sexual harassment • Shaming	• Female candidates coerced sexually in exchange for the promise of votes • Women harassed online regarding political issues
Exclusion or coercion	• Exclusion • Coercion	• Exclusion based on supposedly religious grounds • Women told by either family members or officials that they could not vote
Structural violence	• Unequal access to education, justice, transportation and other forms of infrastructure	• Women not knowing their rights regarding voting • Women not having the ability to travel to polling stations • Women unable to file complaints when denied the right to vote
Fraud and corruption	• Voter fraud • Corruption	• Reports of corruption and fraud, leading to certain candidates winning and denying voters the ability to select their own representation

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8   UN Women and UNDP, Preventing Violence Against Women in Election: A Programing Guide (2017).

A. Direct physical violence against female voters, candidates and campaigners

Many respondents began their discussions of VAWE by focusing on direct physical violence against women and others who participated in elections. This included, for instance, a suicide bombing of a polling station in Kabul. Violence against candidates often threatened those who work for campaigns or find themselves near campaign events. Several respondents, for instance, cited the suicide attack on parliamentary candidate Abdul Nasser Mommand in the Kama District, in Nangarhar. Female candidates discussed the need to hire bodyguards to keep them safe, particularly while campaigning in public places. Female candidates appeared to be targeted in a similar way to male candidates.

> " In areas where there are local police (Arbaki), they are not allowing us to observe the election process and were supporting specific male candidates. This was a real challenge for us. - Female election observer "

Most of these attacks on candidates, voters or campaigners are largely attributed either to the Taliban or other anti-government groups looking to discredit the government and the electoral process, or to individuals or groups supporting a rival candidate and looking to either kill the candidate or intimidate voters.

There were also reports of less severe instances of physical violence. In one case in Nangarhar, a female polling station monitor described how the son of a candidate barged into their polling station and slapped a female election worker, who he thought was preventing people from voting for his father.[9]

Similarly, domestic violence may be linked to the election process, with women describing how family members, often times husbands, might beat them if they are not acting in a manner deemed acceptable. As one Malik[10] described: "Yes, I have seen by my own eyes in our neighbourhoods that a men beat his wife [because she want to vote for someone else] and said: 'I am your husband and whatever a husband says the wife should obey that.'"[11]

Direct physical violence often times has an indirect impact as well. Several interviews, for instance, pointed to the media reports of the Taliban cutting the fingers off of those who voted. This was not a factor

in the areas studied, but the threat of Taliban violence still was central to most accounts. These accounts, along with rumours of other attacks on polling stations, meant the threat of violence ultimately had a much greater impact on voters, leading many to stay home, than actual attacks did.

B. Threats and indirect physical violence

While accounts of direct physical violence were common, not many respondents were directly impacted by physical violence. In contrast, almost every respondent described how insecurity, threats and other forms of indirect violence impacted their participation in the election process.

Insecurity shaped the voting habits of both women and men, particularly in less secure areas. As one female head of a polling station explained: "Most people didn't register and didn't vote because of poor security situation in Nangarhar. From one side fear of Taliban and Daesh[12], and from the other side, fear of powerful local [commanders]...Such people create problem during elections...In the most recent election two explosion occurred in this district, both in polling stations."[13]

In contrast with this, female candidates were disproportionately impacted by insecurity when compared with male candidates, and insecurity greatly curtailed their ability to campaign. As one local leader described, "even in Kabul, a women candidate is not able to go to all districts of Kabul province to see people and to do campaign. The reason for this are armed group, kidnapers and other criminals."[14]

The impact of these threats is often combined with other types of violence against women. For instance, in Nangarhar there were no accounts of women being killed for voting. However, there were numerous references to women being physically punished or even killed for leaving home without permission or otherwise defying the male members of their families. These rumours are augmented by media articles about such cases,[15] and in interviews these cases were brought up as another reason for women not voting, demonstrating how violence in other areas shaped elections as well.

> " Campaigners were bullied and there were rumors about them on social media. - Female candidate "

9   Interview, NGR-BSD-VAWE-Razia-SA-160219.

10   Local elder, often times acknowledged by the government as an informal representative of a certain area.

11   Interview KBL-VAWE-Jamal-Kh-070119.

12   The movement supporting the Islamic State (ISIS) in Afghanistan.

13   Interview, NGR-SR-VAWE-Shakilla-SA-110219.

14   Interview, KBL-PGHN-VAWE-Jan-IG-200119.

15   See for example, Jethro Mullen and Masoud Popalzai, Woman stoned to death in Afghanistan over accusation of adultery (CNN, 4 November 2015).

C. Psychological, social and emotional violence

Closely related to threats and indirect physical violence, women are subject to a range of psychological, social and emotional violence that impact men much less. This violence oftentimes builds on social and cultural norms around the role of women in politics. As one female head of a polling station stated: "The first challenge is cultural beliefs of this society where men lead and rule women. Without their permission women can't take any personal decision."[16]

Several respondents explained that men in their families attempted to directly control who they voted for or if they voted at all. In some instances, even highly educated women reported being criticized by their husbands or other relatives if they supported the wrong candidate, making it more difficult for them to participate meaningfully.

Social pressure is also applied around issues of women's participation more generally. One female candidate interviewed described how while staging a campaign rally, she was interrupted by a Wakil-e Guzar[17] who criticized the women and all present, saying that "it was shameful for females to be politician and, as a result, shameful for anyone who supported them."[18]

Respondents also cited instances of female candidates being bullied, particularly through social media and in other forms. One female candidate was said to be receiving 40 to 50 harassing SMS messages a night.[19]While in some cases, such harassment was said to make women even more determined to participate in the election process, the psychological toll was clearly severe and impacted both candidates and voters alike.

D. Sexual violence

Sexual violence against women during election was the most difficult area to gather data on, and had rarely been discussed in public sphere due to cultural and security sensitivities, though it was

> " I don't have the power to stand against political parties and powerful men. - Female candidate from Kabul "

raised subtly in multiple interviews. Most of female candidates interviewed for this study reported a variety of shapes and forms of sexual violence against women candidates. One candidate said "I believe 50% of female candidates faced sexual harassment. Such candidates were promised positions [in exchange for sexual acts], but often this never occurred. After the election day, I submitted a complaint to IECC in a USB and CD where I had documented such harassment, but they refused to review the documents."[20]

In other cases women were more indirectly sexual harassed. Multiple candidates were criticized for campaigning publicly and the fact that they travelled extensively led to complaints and rumours that they were acting inappropriately. Another candidate was faced with rumours on Facebook that she had had sexual relations with a male candidate. This led other commenters to threaten her with physical harm. In another similar case, it was rumoured on Facebook that a candidate who had divorced her first husband and remarried, had not actually been officially divorced, meaning that she was committing adultery. In another instance, it was said, one female received more than 50 direct messages a night promising votes in exchange for kisses or other sexual acts.[21]

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16 Interview, NGR-SR-VAWE-Shakilla-SA-110219.

17 Local leader and representative of the people living in a specific urban neighbourhood.

18 Interview, KBL-KBL-VAWE-Hamida-SA-300119.

19 Sexual views on female candidates; from kissing to men's nonsense (Azadi Radio)

20 Interview, NGR-SR-VAWE-Shakilla-SA-110219. While it was impossible for AREU to independently verify these claims, they were an important theme in repeat interviews. This suggests that even if such violence is not in fact happening, the fear of such violence impacts how women operate politically.

21 Sexual views on female candidates; from kissing to men's nonsense (Azadi Radio)

E. Exclusion or coercion

Women also report being unable to participate in elections or, when they are allowed to participate, being pressured to vote for a specific candidate. In many interviews, women, for instance, acknowledged that they needed the permission of male family members to vote, usually their husbands. The same was true for most female candidates, who struggled to campaign without the full support of male family members.

In other instances, it was stated that women were denied the right to vote for supposedly religious reasons by religious leaders who argued that it was against Islam for women to participate in politics. This religious pressure on women not to participate in politics can also be more indirect and, as one campaigner stated, "it is difficult for women to stay in a mosque [for a campaign event] for long."[22]

Similar to reports of women being denied the ability to vote were reports of coercion where women were instructed to vote in certain ways. This pressure often came directly from family members, though in some cases there may be wider pressure from community members to vote for certain candidates. Women were considered more susceptible than men to be victim of this type of pressure.

Relatedly, it is worth noting that there is limited confidence in the secrecy of individual votes. Respondents mentioned ways in which votes had been made public and some felt that secrecy was not guaranteed. This meant that if female voters defied their families or communities while voting, they felt it likely that this information might become public.

F. Structural violence

Respondents also pointed towards structural inequalities and other structural constraints that prevented women from voting. The most common of these was education, with both women and men pointing to a lack of literacy and low-levels of female education as leading to the exclusion of women from the voting process. Similarly, it was argued, there were fewer female candidates, because education levels among women were lower.

When it came to voting, the other major structural challenge pointed to was transportation. Female candidates, in particular, claimed that they struggled to get all of their supporters to polling stations because women are often not allowed to travel significant distances alone or, in some cases, unable to do so even with a male relative. The distance to polling stations thus disproportionately impacted women over men.

G. Fraud and corruption

Finally, some respondents emphasized the denial of the power of the vote through fraud or corruption as an act of violence. This was more commonly reported by men in interviews than it was by women, though fraud and corruption clearly impact both men and women.

As one man in Nangarhar explained, "I think that violence is taking the vote of another person by force or through fraud, or by forcing a person to vote in a certain way through money or power."[23] Another malik interviewed suggested that fraud by the elite did violence to the votes of all Afghans, while also suggesting that the lack of infrastructure to bring women to polling stations should be considered violence.

> " Men need more awareness of the value of women's vote. Women are more interested in politics than they were in the past, but there is still gender discrimination and that is why women can't get higher into the political ranks. Women need to see more political leaders in the higher ranks to encourage their participation.
> - Female election monitor "

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22   Interview, NGR-BSD-VAWE-Razia-SA-160219.

23   Interview, NGR-KM-VAWE-Fayaz-IG-130219.

3. What and Who Causes Electoral Violence Against Women

As the section above suggests, there are multiple forms of violence that women are subjected to during the voting process and there are also multiple causes of that violence. The majority of respondents pointed first to **the Taliban and other anti-government groups** as targeting electoral processes more generally, and women in particular. This includes attacks on polling stations and the popular threat of cutting off the fingers of those that participate in elections.

At the same time, however, **other candidates** were seen at the root of certain attacks. These candidates are often supported by **other local power holders** who work to undermine women's participation in elections either to drive support towards their candidate of choice or for more cultural reasons. **Local communities** were also seen in more conservative areas as infringing on the women's right to vote and at times using violence to exclude them from elections. **Families, and male relatives** in particular, are also important gatekeepers who may use violence to prevent voting. This included accounts of domestic violence, but also, more commonly, simply the exclusion of women from electoral processes. Closely related to this, **social and cultural norms**, were often pointed to as the root cause of this disproportionate inability to participate in political processes.

More indirectly, the Afghan government was accused by several respondents of not doing enough to curtail VAWE. In particular, **the IEC** was singled out for not having more robust protections for women, both as voters and as candidates. Similarly, while no respondents complained directly of **the ANP** causing violence, there was a sense that they were not doing enough to prevent violence. As one female candidate explained: "I went to police and complained about, but police told me to bring the evidence, at least the cars plate number. Well, it was late evening time, in darkness my campaigner was not in a condition to note the car's plate. So, police didn't follow up it."[24] Opinions about **civil society groups** were more mixed, with many thinking that they are helpful, but some respondents still insisting that they were not doing enough to prevent violence.

> " Look at me. I am not one person. I am many people. I have to do my professional work, I am a mother, I am a nurse, who cares for her family, and I have to be a traditional women and deal with the customs of my family. At first, my husband was always asking, "why are you coming home late? Who are you talking to?" And finally, I had to tell him, "you are interfering. If you don't like my political work tell me to stop, and I will stay home and be the best housewife. It is no big deal. But if you want me to continue working, you cannot interfere. It is not a big deal. I am like water and can be added to anything."
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> After that, I was fine with my family. - Female candidate "

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24   Interview, KBL-KBL-VAWE-Rahima-SA-0150119.

4.   Initial conclusions and what can be done to Prevent Electoral Violence Against Women

While the categorizations of violence above provide an initial model for analysing and understanding VAWE, some conclusions can be made across categories, as well as preliminary recommendations which will be expanded upon in the final report.

Insecurity and other forms of election violence affect both men and women: As long as there is widespread insecurity in Afghanistan, it is likely that elections and the political processes connected with them will continue to be violent, and that the impact of violence will remain unequal.

Despite similarities between violence against men and women, women are disproportionately affected: This is most clearly seen in the difficulties of women to access polling sites, but is also clear in the wide array of challenges that hamper female candidates during the campaign process. For instance, a female candidate described how, as a woman, she could not drive or attend meetings at night. Similarly, she was teased by other politicians who wanted to know why the men in her community could not represent themselves, but needed a female candidate.

Physical, psychological and other forms of violence often blur together: While the violence that gains the most attention in the media are oftentimes physical attacks, this physical violence is often combined with psychological and other forms of violence. Attacks, for instance, led to fear about the election process more generally.

Violence often combines with other forms of discrimination: VAWE also cannot be separated from the social and cultural context it takes place in. Women faced violence, discrimination and a wide array of other challenges that create a political culture that generally seeks to exclude women.

Weak institutions contribute both to the exclusion of women and other forms of violence

Violence continues not because there are no laws to deal with it, but because these laws are not being implemented. "Laws encourage women to participate and there is no law that hinders women's participation. There are many IEC regulations designed to establish polling centres and registrations centres for women. Despite this, there are still villages around the country, where these facilities are far away and where it is impossible for women to reach them."[25]

Steps that IEC can take in order to prevent violence aganist women during election
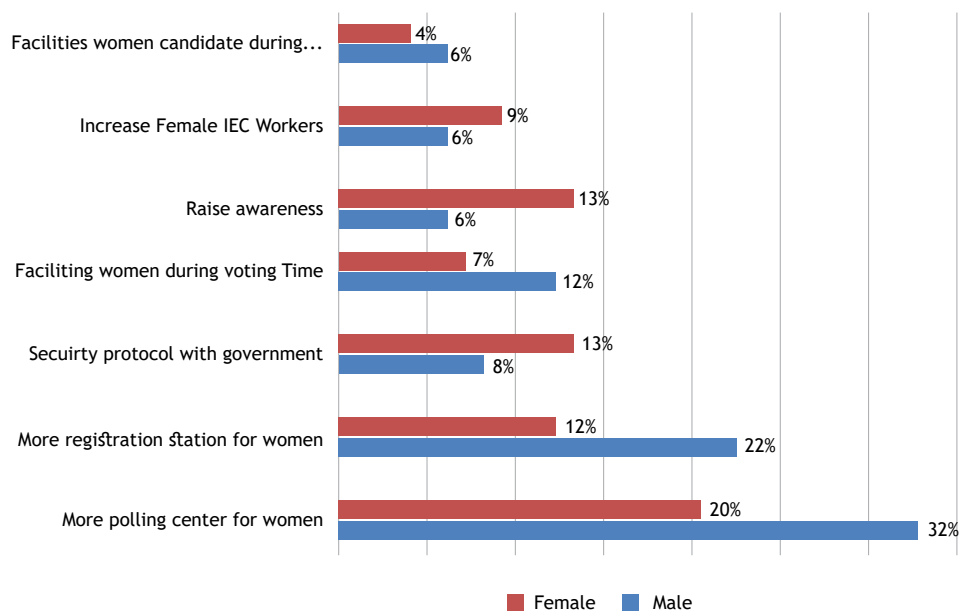
25   Interview, KBL-Observer-FEFA.

No single path forward for preventing violence: Since there are such a variety of causes of violence against women in elections, it is not surprising that there is no single solution. The final report on VAWE will go into greater depth in providing recommendations, but initial findings suggest that women would benefit from:

- Better protection of female candidates

- Better protection of female voters

- Better support structures within elections for women. In particular:

- More female staff working in election centres

- More female police at polling stations

- Better transportation facilities for women to vote

- Better voter education on women's rights so that both women and men are aware of the rights of women when it comes to elections

- Better enforcement of current voting laws, particularly targeting those that work to deny women the right to vote

- Better partnering with the media, a key force in shaping perceptions around elections, in terms of messaging around VAWE

- More visible female political leadership to encourage greater participation of women at all political levels

Acronyms

AREU	**Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit**
ANP	**Afghanistan National Police**
BBIED	**Body Borne Improvised Explosive Device**
IEC	**Independent Election Commission**
IECC	**Independent Election Complaint Commission**
UNAMA	**United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan**
VAWE	**Violence against Women in Elections**

About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul that was established in 2002 by the assistance of the international community in Afghanistan. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy-relevant, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results and promote a culture of research and learning. As the top think-tank in Afghanistan and number five in Central Asia according to the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report at the University of Pennsylvania, AREU achieves its mission by engaging with policy makers, civil society, researchers and academics to promote their use of AREU's research-based publications and its library, strengthening their research capacity and creating opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate. AREU is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of donor organisations, embassies, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, Afghan civil society and independent experts.

AREU's core donor is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Specific projects in 2019 are being funded by the European Union (EU), Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF),Save the Children, EUNPACK, and UN Women.

AREU holds memberships in multiple international development consortiums including the RESOLVE Network, Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), A Conflict Sensitive Unpacking of The EU Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and Crisis Mechanism (EUNPACK), ADB- Asian Think Tanks Network (ATTN) and The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC). For more information visit www.areu.org.af

In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.