

### Key Messages

- Election reforms and legislation have ensured some gains for women in electoral processes: representation in parliament and in Local Governments on reserved seats, minimum 5% of female candidates to be fielded by each political party, and a minimum 10% of female votes polled for declaring election results as valid.
- Women's performance and contribution in the parliamentary proceedings has been documented as impressive. Yet they are underrepresented in the legislatures and in decision-making positions during 2008-2018.
- Women's representation at all tiers of local government has slipped from 33% after enactment of the provincial local government acts post devolution in 2010. Women Councilors are being deprived of resources, development funds, and participation in meetings, office space, and travel allowances.
- Women's inadequate participation in the electoral process is a result of patriarchal norms and the inadequate attention to inclusive politics by mainstream political parties.
- Election Reforms and legislative action is needed to ensure that women candidates receive sufficient backing and support from their parties to contest elections, reserved seats are assigned constituencies, and women legislators are treated at par with male colleagues in terms of access to resources and decision-making positions. Women, as candidates and as voters require a safe and enabling environment free from harassment and threats of violence.

The policy effect was visible in the General Elections 2018 where the number of women candidates rose from 419 in the 2013 elections to 535, an increase of 127% (Table 1), in response to the mandatory 5% female candidates for each political part.<sup>1</sup>

As the party gave tickets to women, their numbers as independent candidates fell by almost 64%. A total of 535 women contested for general seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies: 165 as independent candidates and 270 on party tickets. Of these 8 women were elected directly to the national assembly and 7 to the provincial assembly (total 15). Fewer women actually won the general elections (Figure 1), except in Sindh where the percentage of directly elected women in the house increased slightly. Articles 51 and 106 of the Constitution of Pakistan, permit reserved seats for women, allocated on the basis of proportional representation of political parties, ensuring 16%-20% representation of women in the national and provincial legislatures and in the Senate.

While quotas are not a long term solution to the issue of underrepresentation of women in legislatures and in local government, they do provide a means to encourage and facilitate women's participation in politics as a step

### Context

The call for increased political representation of women at all tiers of governance and in decision-making bodies has been raised by the women's movement in Pakistan since the 1980s. In 2002, the government of Pakistan following the recommendation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Beijing Platform of Action (1995) introduced a set of measures to ensure the visibility of women in every tier of government ranging from participation in local bodies to national level decision making. Since then there are 60 reserved seats (almost 20%) in national parliament for women (of the total of 342 seats that includes 10 reserved seats for religious minorities and 272 for elected candidates). Reserved seats for women in provincial legislatures is approximately 17% of total seats. Yet these gains do not necessarily translate into leadership and decision making positions for women, in parliament and in political parties, despite the historical presence of strong women on the political stage and the twice elected first female prime minister of a Muslim majority country, Ms. Benazir Bhutto.

Key provisions of the **Elections Act 2017** for women:

Section 9: **Power of the Commission to declare a poll void** stipulates that due to "grave illegalities or such violations ... that materially affected the result of the poll at one or more polling stations or in the whole constituency including implementation of an agreement restraining women from casting their votes..." the Commission can call for a re-poll. In the Explanation to the section the Act says: "If the turnout of women voters is less than ten percent of the total votes polled in a constituency, the Commission may presume that women voters have been restrained through an agreement from casting their votes and may declare, polling at one or more polling stations in the whole constituency void."

Section 206 of the Act, **Selection for elective offices** provides that "A political party shall ... while making the selection of candidates on general seats shall ensure at least five percent representation of women candidates."

towards their representation through direct constituency politics. Such affirmative policies are needed as the numbers in Table 2 show.

Within the legislature women parliamentarians remain excluded from important decision making committees and positions. For instance, in the 2013-18 National Assembly only one parliamentary committee was chaired by women out of a total of nine committees while only six included female members.<sup>2</sup> The upper house (Senate) had only 7 women as Chairs of a total of 51 committees.<sup>3</sup> The KP

Assembly and the Balochistan Assembly had women as Deputy Speaker and Speaker respectively. The position of women as Committee Chairs in each provincial assembly (2013-18) was slightly better. Balochistan had 33% of

**Table 1: Women Candidates on General Seats in General Elections 2013 & 2018**

Legislature	Party Ticket		Independent		Total	
	2013	2018	2013	2018	2013	2018
National	61	112	74	64	135	176
Provincial	99	158	185	101	284	259
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>535</b>

Source: Aurat Foundation 2018.

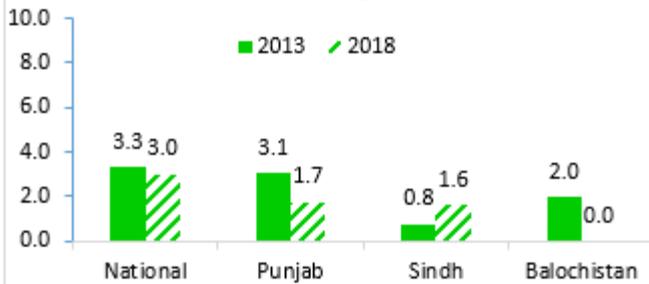
**Table 2: Women in National & Provincial Assembly by type of seat (2018)**

	% of Total seats	General	Reserved	Total Women
National Assembly	20%	8	59	68
KP	17%	-	20	20
Sindh	19%	2	29	31
Punjab	20%	5	66	75
Balochistan	16%	-	10	13

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan 2018.

Note: Constituencies where election was postponed are excluded and thus number of reserved seats vary.

**Figure 1: Women Elected on General Seats (% of total general seats)**



Source: ECP 2018

Note: No women elected on general seat in KP in 2013 and 2018

Committees chaired by women, while this percentage was lower in Sindh (16%), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (14%) and in Punjab (5%).

Nevertheless the performance and contribution of female legislators in parliamentary proceedings has been impressive in the past two assemblies (2008-2013, and 2013-2018), as they actively participated in parliamentary proceedings, submitting private member bills on governance, human rights, democracy and political development. They have been proactive in ensuring that pro-women legislation is introduced and in many cases passed (Child Marriage Restraint Acts, Workplace Harassment Act, Equal Wages for Equal Work, Domestic Violence etc.).

## Women in Local Government

Affirmative action in 2001 led to the 33% reserved seats in local government (LG) for women with a record 36000 women joining the LG Councils at Union, Tehsil and District levels. However subsequent reductions in the size of the councils as well as the reserved seats for women in 2008 led to only 24000 female members in LG, largely due to reduction in size of the Union Council -lowest tier of local government<sup>4</sup>, as post-devolution in 2010, each province amended the Local Government Act 2002, and none except Balochistan retained the 33% reserved seats for women. The role of local government Councils as the nursery and training ground for women in politics is critical. Not only does it induct them into the functioning of Councils and what representation implies, but it also brings them into contact with constituents who represent diverse communities and needs. The participation of women in LG provides a platform to the women from grassroots level amplifying their voice and visibility.

Engagement with community women to address their problems and grievances earns female Councilors respect in the community and be role models for other women.<sup>5</sup> Community women who may have difficulty accessing male Councilors or legislators, find it easier to meet with the women councilors, who can, as the first point of contact with the governance system and structures, help them learn how to interact with duty bearers and their elected representatives.

Despite this the all-important role LG and the Councilors has not been very effective as political measures and preferences have impeded the devolution of power and resources from the provincial to the LG level and undermined their role in governance. The Councils do not get enough resources and women Councilors in

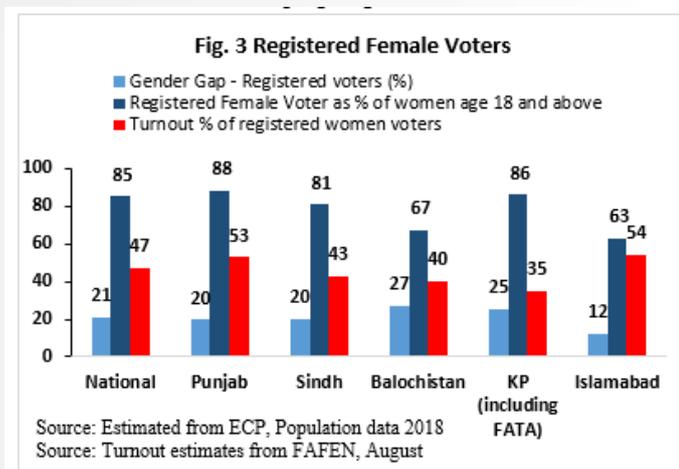
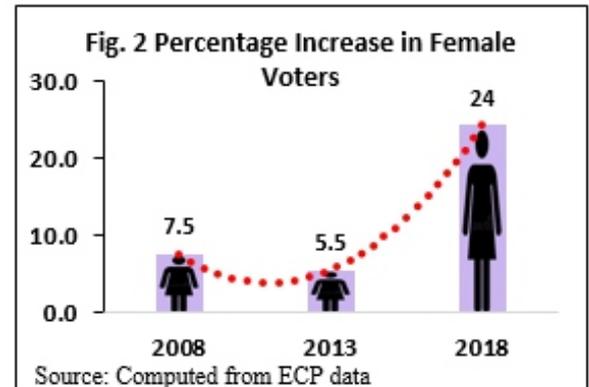
particular are deprived of development funds, decision making and active participation in meetings. Despite a lack of office space and resources women councilors have, developed their own strategies and networks to make space for themselves in LG and to meet the expectations of their female constituents. A large number are determined to continue playing an active political role and to engage with LG functionaries and some aspire to be provincial legislators.

## Women as Voters

Gender disaggregated data of registered voters in each constituency, shows a steady increase (Fig. 2), and suggests there are 46.7 million women registered in the electoral rolls, approximately 44% of the total registered voters, and 85% of total women of age 18 and above. An estimated 18% of the total estimated female population are missing from the electoral rolls.<sup>6</sup>

For the first time after the General Election 2018, the ECP published gender-disaggregated data on votes polled, showing a turnout of 47% (Fig.3). The data is not disaggregated by rural and urban areas.

Factors contributing to a low female voter turnout have been noted as lack of privacy at overcrowded polling stations, presence of male presiding officers, shortage of female polling staff and inadequate arrangements for separate polling stations for women.<sup>7</sup> Lacking transport and resources women are dependent on male family members to apply for and receive a



to apply for and receive a

National Identity Card (NIC), a prerequisite to voting. Women are disenfranchised by their families, tribes, and local and spiritual leaders, and can face social sanctions for casting votes, as well as threats of physical violence. Though the Elections Reform Act (2017) has reduced the infamous agreements between political parties to keep women voters from voting that were often exposed by the media in the previous elections, some constituencies have shown nil or lower than 10% votes and the ECP is now contemplating voiding the results of those constituencies

or particular polling stations.

## Achieving Representation—the Reality and the Way forward

The influence of gender and social norms on the electoral politics and processes in Pakistan limits and at times actively discourages women from participating in politics. At the same time policies that directly or indirectly promote gender inclusion do bear results. While political parties perforce had to meet the mandatory requirement of 5% female candidates, these were often nominated for constituencies where the political party is unlikely to secure a win, reinforcing popular myths that they do not fare well at the polls.

Receiving party support is not the only barrier faced by female candidates. Monetary costs involved—at the time of filing nomination papers and running an effective campaign—hinder women in participating successfully. There is no clause mandating the party to extend financial support to the candidate; instead, as widely reported by the media, aspiring candidates donate large sums to the party in order to secure a nomination.

The “women's wing” of a political party are unable to influence party structures and systems to ensure a level playing field, nor ensure decision-making positions for women within the party hierarchy.

Social costs—defamation, harassment, possible loss of family and community support—discourage aspiring candidates as election campaigning is often a no-holds barred enterprise, with smear campaigns and personal vilification. Given the existing social norms and codes of family honour, such negative campaigns against a female candidate can lead to immense social pressure and strain family relations.

Successful female candidates who are able to cross all these hurdles and challenges and enter the legislative assemblies or local government are marginalized as they are not provided opportunities or resources at par with their male counterparts. Women legislators are less likely to be involved in key decision making roles in parliament, discouraged from active participation in proceedings (especially in LG Councils) and subjected to sexist comments and harassment by male colleague.

## Recommendations

### Representation:

- The mandatory quota for fielding candidates should be monitored and implementation ensured by ECP and it should be enhanced in the next general elections. ECP should also ensure that laws for campaign finance are followed to facilitate participation by women, especially from the middle class.
- ECP and Parliament should introduce laws to bind the political parties to mainstream gender in the core committees and decision making bodies of parties.
- The criteria for reserved seats should be clearly identified and the process for selection be transparent. Women legislators on reserved seats should be assigned constituencies
- Local Government and LG elections are the training nurseries for many first time candidates, including women. The 33% quota for women at all tiers of LG should be reinstated.

### Voting:

- The mandatory 10% votes cast by female voters for valid results should be enhanced as it has provided an impetus to women's electoral participation as well as encouraged women candidature.
- Timings, locations, and facilities at women's polling stations for voters and for the female staff should be gender sensitive to increase participation
- A short module on concepts of democracy, political processes, voting rights and obligations should be included in high school and college curriculum.

## End Notes

1 The policy brief draws on the Rural Women in Pakistan-Status Report 2018 researched and produced by the Center of Gender and Policy Studies (CGaPS). Available at: <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/08/status-of-rural-women-of-pakistan>

2 <http://na.gov.pk/en/index.php>

3 Senate of Pakistan (2018).

4 Study on Local Bodies System and its Impact on Women, NCSW, 2010

5 <http://www.ncsw.gov.pk/previewpublication/14>

6 NCSW Factsheet. Missing Women: The Gender Gap in Pakistan's Electoral Rolls

7 Aurat Foundation., 2013. 2013 Elections - Women Representation in Legislatures

### Contributors: Dr. Yasmin Zaidi, Urooj Obaid and Muhammad Naeem Khan

Developed by Center of Gender and Policy Studies (CGaPS) for Awaz-e-Niswan. The support of UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) is gratefully acknowledged. Please send any comments to CGaPS at [program.cgaps@gmail.com](mailto:program.cgaps@gmail.com)

