

Women Action Forum (WAF)'s Statement on Elections 2018: Women's Participation and Challenges

4 August 2018: Women's Action Forum (WAF) considers the 2018 Elections a critical step in the continuation of democracy in Pakistan. WAF commends the enthusiasm of women voters and candidates for participating in the electoral process despite all prevailing social, cultural barriers and security concerns. WAF also acknowledges the positive legal reforms under Election Law 2017, particularly related to the 5% mandatory women quota on general seats by the political parties, and declaring the elections null and void in polling stations/constituencies with less than 10% of the women voters turn out, in addition to others aimed at improving electoral procedures in the country.

Despite concerted efforts by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and civil society organizations prior to the elections, there is a large gap in women to men voter registration numbers (approximately 11.9 million) that needs to be highlighted. This is despite the fact that as the result of massive efforts of the ECP and civil society organizations; 24 percent more women were registered as voters in 2018 compared to the past. WAF urges ECP and NADRA to double its efforts to considerably reduce this gender gap prior to any upcoming election in the future.

WAF is concerned that despite ECP claims of providing all required facilities in line with the Election Act 2017, many polling stations consisted of small, dark, humid rooms without ventilation, in some cases not even equipped with fans and bathrooms and lacked ramps for old and disabled women.

WAF acknowledges the efforts of ECP gender desks of setting up a complaint management system for women at the national and provincial level, and further demands that the ECP take measures for making publicly available information on the number and proportion of complaints and petitions by women lodged, decided and upheld received through complaint cells, tribunals or the judiciary. WAF also notes that the ECP gender desk worked better at the federal level and the provincial desks were not considered responsive.

WAF recommends that women polling staff should be provided with safe environment, transport and be assisted in transporting election materials to the facility and their role/efforts in holding elections should be acknowledged in their appraisal/ACRs.

WAF remains deeply concerned over the serious allegations levelled by the political parties/agents of not receiving Form 45, delayed results, high number of discarded votes, last minute change of polling stations, the failure of the RTS app in the middle of the vote count, and other anomalies, and fears if these are not addressed adequately by the ECP it will further strengthen the fears of political parties and public perception of "engineered elections" that may undermine the legitimacy of the 2018 elections with serious repercussions on Pakistan's efforts to transition to a well-functioning democracy.

Election observers have noted that in several cases polling agents were told to leave the room when votes were being counted, which is alarming, and that security personnel were also noting results at the polling stations and transmitting them to what seemed to be a parallel tabulating centre.

We are deeply concerned that candidates representing sectarian and hate mongering political groups were allowed to contest the elections while candidates from legitimate parties were disqualified at the last minute on what seemed to be minor issues.

WAF observes that there is need for better voter education and facilitation and a simplified process of casting votes in the future elections. For the future, WAF demands that there should be adequate women's representation in the federal and provincial cabinets and parliamentary standing committees, in the decision-making and leadership positions. WAF also urges that all national policies formulated by the new government need to apply a gender lens and they should not be gender blind.

At the end, WAF welcomes the win by three minority candidates in the general elections 2018, and also a woman from the Sheedi community from Sindh, but is deeply disturbed that Ahmedi citizens continue to be excluded from the joint electorate system and continue to especially discriminated against in the voting process. WAF demands that the new government should take immediate measures to remove this blatant discrimination.