

Afghan Youth Debates: Women's Limited Role in Politics Under Threat

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Efforts to boost the participation of women in Afghan politics are in serious jeopardy, an IWPR debate has heard.

Noor Mohammad Noor, a spokesman for the Independent Elections Commission (IEC), said that attitudes towards female members of parliament and provincial councillors remained "backward" and that it was proving difficult to change public perceptions.

Addressing more than 20 students from universities in Kabul and Nangarhar, he claimed legislation passed in July last year to reduce the number of provincial council seats reserved for women was a mistake.

Under changes agreed by the lower house of parliament, the percentage of seats allocated for women was revised down from 25 to 20 per cent. Only 84 seats out of a total of 420 are now earmarked for female councillors, he said.

"As the law has been ratified, we have to abide by it," Noor told the debate. "But without a doubt it's been a backward step for women."

The IWPR debate took place in Kabul on January 30, and was attended by students from the Afghan capital as well as about ten from Nangarhar University in the east of the country, via video link.

Hajira, an undergraduate from Kabul, recalled that one woman, Massouda Jalal, stood in the 2004 presidential race but none had been nominated in this year's campaign.

"We had a woman standing in the 2004 presidential election, so why aren't there any female candidates on the election list this time?", she asked. "Is there a problem within the IEC?"

Professor Mangal Shirzad, a senior law lecturer at Nangarhar University, agreed that significant cultural challenges remained for women seeking a role in Afghan politics. Security issues also deserved greater attention, he said.

"There are some restrictions and limitations on women under Islam and Afghan culture," he said, noting as an example that women are forbidden to leave their homes without being accompanied by a male relative. "We have to prepare the ground to allow women to feel safe in our society. Women have the right to be supported."

Wazhma, a student at Nangarhar University, raised the issue of security during the elections. She asked whether the safety of female voters could be guaranteed.

"My main concern is about our security," she said. "At the moment, whichever one of us leaves home in the morning can't be sure if they'll return home in the evening. How can women dare to go out and vote?"

Noor responded by insisting that the IEC was taking all possible precautions to prevent violence, both in the build-up to the April 5 vote and on polling day itself.

He said, "Security is part of IEC's agenda and we've asked security agencies to ensure the safety of voters, election staff and ballot materials. We're not only asking for security on polling day; we require security for the whole process.

"We have made a point of asking for good security for women, particularly the provincial candidates and the vice-presidential nominees."

Two female candidates are standing as presidential running-mates.

Nilofar Aziz, a member of Nangarhar provincial council, told the debate that she believed that Afghan women had only made nominal gains in politics since the Taliban administration was ousted in 2001.

"The results of attempts to improve political participation for women over the past 12 years haven't been very convincing," she said. "We are concerned that women might lose the limited progress that has been made."

Mohammad Faisal Nawid is a student at Kabul University.

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