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**The electoral gender gap**

Gender gap indicators are useful in quantifying the level of exclusion faced by women. One such indicator, and a very crucial one, is the level of exclusion in the ownership of national identity documentation; for Pakistan, this would be the ownership of National Identity Cards (NIC).

The NIC is essential for a Pakistani woman to claim her rights; this could be the right to claim her inheritance, or to qualify for the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), to open a bank account, to register a mobile sim, and arguably the most important one: to cast her vote.

According to the latest electoral roll from the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), Pakistan's voter list comprises 55 percent men and 45 percent women, thus constituting a gender gap of 10 percent. The situation is even worse for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan as both the provinces have gender gaps of 14 percent.

But this situation represents a substantial improvement over the recent past. On the eve of the 2013 General Elections, Pakistan's electoral gender gap was at 13 percent. This three percent reduction in the national gender gap is primarily due to concerted efforts from ECP and other stakeholders. A key initiative in this regard was the ECP's 'Women NIC and Voter Registration Campaign', which was funded by international donor agencies and implemented through the Trust for Democratic Education and Accountability (TDEA), an NGO.

The campaign was launched in 2017, and by 2020 it directly facilitated around 0.8 million women in getting their identity cards. The facilitation included an awareness campaign to generate demand for NIC, which was followed by helping unregistered women navigate the documentation requirements for NIC registration and even provision of transport to the NADRA registration center where required. This project contributed nine percent to the increase in female voter registration in Pakistan from 2017 to 2020. Its indirect contribution could be much higher.

The Election Act of 2017 was crucial in setting the geographic priorities of this campaign, as Clause 47 laid down the threshold for identifying the electoral constituencies that needed extra attention. This clause identified national and provincial constituencies with a gender gap of greater than 10 percent to be the ones where the ECP has to take "special measures" to reduce the gender gap, which the act refers to as "male-female voters' deficit."

However, given the variance in the gender gaps at the constituency level, this 10 percent threshold did not do a good job of prioritizing constituencies. As per the 2018 electoral results, almost 68 percent of provincial constituencies across Pakistan fell above this threshold – that is: had an electoral gender gap of at least 10 percent. This created a situation where PP-148 Lahore, in Punjab, with a 10.6 percent gender gap, was at the same priority level as PB-23 Killa Abdullah, in Balochistan, which has a 30 percent gender gap. Constituencies in Punjab, the province with the lowest gender gap, accounted for 51 percent of these priority constituencies. While Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, with much higher gender gaps, accounted for much smaller shares of these priority constituencies.

With such priorities and the difficulties of implementing such a campaign in KP and Balochistan, it was natural for the campaign to have more of a tilt towards Punjab or districts that were closer to the 10 percent threshold than those that are further away from it. While this campaign's achievements have been substantial, there is a need to prioritize constituencies with the highest gender gaps. One way to do it would be to do an upward revision of the gender gap threshold defined in Clause 47 of the Election Act 2017.

But getting the NIC is only half the story; converting the NIC into polled votes is the second and arguably more challenging step. The General Election of 2018 was a test case for the ECP's NIC registration campaign. The results show that 60 percent of the polled votes were of men, while only 40 percent of women, thus resulting in a gender gap of 20 percent – double the current gender gap in NIC ownership.

Recent research flags some key issues deterring women turnout. The first is a research paper titled 'Mobilizing Women Voters: Experimental evidence from Pakistan'. Karrar Hussain and Attique Ur Rehman (2020) assessed the impact of campaigning on female voters in Kasur in Punjab. They observed the result of a door-to-door campaign. Female mobilizers carried out that campaign, and during the interaction, the campaigners highlighted the women-specific development work that the candidate had previously carried out. They found that in the areas where this campaign took place, the candidates' share of female voters increased by around five percent compared to areas where the candidate did not conduct a similar campaign.

In another paper, titled 'Together we will: Experimental Evidence on Female Voting Behavior in Pakistan', Xavier Gine and Ghazala Mansuri (2018) looked at the effects of an awareness campaign on female voters Sukkur and Khairpur in Sindh. They found that an information campaign on voting importance and procedures resulted in an 11 percent increase in female turnout.

These studies highlight some of the information barriers that have to be overcome by women to be able to vote. These information barriers are beside the patriarchal barriers that limit the mobility of women to cast their votes. This indicates that a lot more is required for increased female voter turnout even after NIC registration and not just from the government but also the political parties, intelligentsia, and civil society in Pakistan.

However, the crucial prerequisite for all other efforts is female NIC registration, in which some regions are lacking far behind others. The ECP needs to focus its efforts on a smaller set of electoral constituencies with the highest gender gaps in NIC registrations. This will result in a more efficient allocation of its resources and the limited donor funding coming in to eliminate the electoral gender gap in Pakistan.

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