**[Raising the bar](https://www.dawn.com/news/1432012/raising-the-bar)**

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VOTERS in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly constituency PK-23 Shangla I are going to polls again today (Sept 10). Returns of elections held here on July 25 had shown that, of the total number of votes polled, only five per cent of women voters ventured out to exercise their right to vote. The new elections law empowers the Election Commission Pakistan (ECP) to order a re-poll in such a situation. The women turnout in two other national constituencies, NA-10 Shangla and NA-48 Tribal Area-IX (North Waziristan), was 9.87pc and 9.94pc respectively, but rounding these off meant it was just within legal minimum limit.

The re-poll in PK-23 is the first instance of the ECP exercising its new power, and this will certainly help raise women turnout in this highly conservative pocket of the mountainous north of the country. However, the ECP had, in fact, dared to declare a by-election void on similar grounds earlier.

The by-election was held in May 2015 (before the present law was enacted) on a Lower Dir seat vacated by Jamaat-i-Islami chief Sirajul Haq after he was elected senator. The women turnout in the by-election was literally nil, ie not a single woman cast her vote. Amidst protests by rights activists, the ECP had concluded that zero participation meant that women were proactively barred, thus the election wasn’t free and fair, and so it declared it null and void. The Peshawar High Court, however, first suspended the ECP decision, and then in March next year set it aside, ostensibly for lack of evidence of active collusion among local political leaders that could have established that women’s absence from the poll was not an exercise of free choice.

*Actively barring women from voting may soon end, but many obstacles remain.*

The Elections Act, 2017, cleared the air in this matter and saved the ECP from the burden of proving whether or not women were proactively barred from voting by allowing it to presume that they were, in case women’s turnout was recorded below the set minimum limit of 10pc of the total polled votes.

The re-poll in Shangla will end active collusion to bar women, as did earlier action by the ECP in Lower Dir. Though the ECP’s initiative in 2015 did not ultimately succeed, women’s turnout in five provincial constituencies of Lower Dir was between 28pc to 41pc in the 2018 election. That is indeed a big leap forward from the malevolent turnout of zero.

Agreements between local powers to bar women from voting may soon become a thing of the past. The re-poll in Shangla may prove to be the first and the last to check this practice. The good news, however, ends here. Active collusion has not been the only obstacle to women’s equal participation in elections. The equality march has a whole range of mountains ahead of it.

Consider some facts from the recent general election. In 141 of 840 national and provincial constituencies where elections were held, the number of women coming out to vote was less than 50pc of men doing so in the same constituencies. In other words, women’s participation in polling in every sixth constituency of the country was less than half that of men’s.

Contrary to popular belief, the problem is not limited to remote rural areas, which are generally considered conservative, as women participation in metropolises has been alarmingly low as well. In the constituencies of Karachi and Lahore, for every five men, only three women travelled the distance between their homes and polling stations.

In only 3pc (ie 24) of constituencies across the country at least nine (but less than 10) women voted compared with 10 men — which can be termed at par with the latter.

Voter turnout is based on the number of registered voters and not all women (and some men, as well) eligible to vote are registered on the electoral rolls. According to the 2017 census, there are around 95 adult women in the country per 100 men, but their ratio in the electoral rolls is 79 to 100. Most estimates put the total number of eligible women voters missing from the rolls at a whopping 12 million, which translates into every fifth woman of voting age!

Women’s turnout figures are thus deceptive in depicting female participation. For example, in NA-263 Killa Abdullah, their turnout in 2018 is noted at 37pc, which is comparable to the 43pc for men. But it masks the fact that only around half of women of voting age were registered. So only around a sixth of potentially eligible women voters polled their ballots.

Similarly, in PS-116 Karachi West-V, only 26pc of registered women voted. Add to this the fact that the number of registered women voters in this constituency is only 55pc that of men — meaning that only one in seven women of voting age actually participated in polling.

The combined impact of low women registration and lower turnout makes it evident that equal participation of women in polling is as yet a distant dream. The Elections Act has addressed one problem by effectively blocking collusion between male political leaders to keep women away from polling stations. But the law stops here.

In strictly legal terms, voting is about free choice as no one can be stopped from it or forced to cast his/her vote. Yet it is crucial that the authorities provide equal opportunities and a level playing field to all to enable them to exercise their free choice.

For women, levelling the field requires razing innumerable ‘passive collusions’ encoded in patriarchal norms and traditions. To name one is the issue of physical mobility. Moving in public spaces, women face obstacles in our society that men probably cannot even imagine — these have a direct impact on their participation in elections, even though no formal ‘contract’ among men has existed to limit women’s mobility. Elections should not sustain or ignore such obstacles, it should pave the way to challenge and dismantle them.

The current law has already achieved its objective. We now need to raise the bar and develop a new affirmative legal framework that takes a proactive approach, and incentivises women’s equal participation in elections.

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