**A gateway to rights**

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As the 16th National Assembly starts its first parliamentary year, it is essential to carry out a deep dive into the recently concluded elections. One key angle is the registration of women on electoral rolls, which is a prerequisite for citizens’ electoral and political participation.

According to the sixth Population and Housing Census 2017, women and girls comprise around 49 per cent of the total population of Pakistan. Despite significant efforts to empower women and fulfil their human rights, a great deal still needs to be done to improve the situation of gender equality in the country.

Despite impressive gains in various sectors, the gap between male and female voters on electoral rolls continues to persist. In Pakistan’s diverse landscape, a national identity card (NIC) serves not only as a vital document for identification but also as a key to unlocking a multitude of social benefits and political inclusion. It is a gateway to numerous social safety incentives and programmes designed to uplift communities and individuals.

From healthcare services to education support and skill development, a valid NIC is a prerequisite for accessing these benefits. This identification not only ensures that individuals are accounted for in the national system but also facilitates targeted and effective implementation of social welfare initiatives.

For instance, NICs for women beneficiaries are a prerequisite for accessing financial support and incentives offered by the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP). This welfare initiative not only ensures targeted assistance but also serves as a catalyst for increasing the number of women who obtain their NICs, subsequently enhancing their participation in broader social life.

The NIC also plays a pivotal role in financial inclusion, enabling women to access banking services, receive government subsidies directly, and engage in economic activities. As we strive for gender equality, ensuring that women have equal opportunities to avail themselves of these social safety nets is crucial.

Beyond social benefits, NIC registration empowers individuals with a fundamental democratic right — the right to vote. In a country where each vote can shape the destiny of the nation, women’s inclusion in the electoral process is paramount.

Gender inequality in political rights is evident; women have fought long and hard for their right to vote and hold public office. In Pakistan, the demand side of the equation shows that millions of women are not registered as voters due to non-possession of NICs. This figure also includes women who lost NICs during the devastating floods of 2022.

Compared to the 2018 general elections, progress has been made to increase the absolute number of women on the electoral rolls in the 2024 general elections. In response to this gap, and in line with Section 47(2) and Section 47(3) of the Elections Act 2017, NADRA has prioritized women’s NIC and voter registration campaigns that have evolved into an important coordination and implementation mechanism at the national and local levels.

This has resulted in increased awareness about the importance of women obtaining their NICs, in addition to strengthening women’s participation in the country’s democratic process. As a result, millions of women have been added to the electoral rolls of Pakistan to expand the voter base.

NADRA has also established a dedicated department ‘inclusive registration department’ (IRD) to increase registration of all segments of society, especially women and transgender persons. The IRD actively promotes the registration of marginalized communities by creating awareness about the pivotal role of identity in empowering individuals for fair participation in society. Through various initiatives such as mobile registration vans, media campaigns, and stakeholder engagement, the IRD strives to eliminate barriers to registration. A significant achievement for ensuring gender inclusivity and empowerment was recorded in 2023 with female registration reaching 50 per cent.

Through its eight regional head offices (RHOs) and an extensive network of 837 NADRA registration centres (NRCs) nationwide, along with 222 mobile registration vans (MRVs), NADRA aims to close the gender gap on electoral rolls before the next general elections.

To bridge the gender gap in CNIC registration, it is essential to understand and dismantle the obstacles that deter women from obtaining this crucial document. Cultural norms, lack of awareness, and logistical challenges often contribute to this disparity.

Intersectionality of ethnicity and religious minorities makes women more vulnerable in the face of discrimination in social security programmes, economic activity, health and education services. Hence integrating gender-sensitive policies in the NIC registration process can contribute to a more inclusive system.

This may include flexible operating hours for registration centres, ensuring the privacy and security of women during the registration process, and actively engaging communities to dispel myths and misconceptions surrounding NIC registration. To curtail these barriers, significant achievements have been made through joint efforts by NADRA, the ECP, and development partners.

Through their engagement campaigns, such as facilitating women to NRCs and MRVs, providing fee waivers and incentives to employees at NADRA, increasing working hours at NADRA offices to increase women’s registration, increasing the number of mobile registration vans, radio and television campaigns — all efforts have attributed to millions of women being added to the electoral roll since late 2018.

During the year 2023, NADRA issued 29.9 million identity documents through its NRC network as well as online operations. Additionally, 6.76 million child registration certificates (CRCs), 0.65 million smart NICOPs and 0.29 million smart POCs were issued during the same period.

In terms of meaningful political participation, low voter registration can discourage political parties from prioritizing women candidates in their electoral strategies. Political parties may be less inclined to nominate women if they perceive a lack of voter interest or engagement among women.

This perpetuates a cycle where fewer women candidates run for office, further limiting the chances of women holding leadership roles. Elected leaders often prioritize issues that resonate with their voting base. When women are underrepresented among registered voters, issues affecting women may receive less attention, leading to a lack of policies addressing gender-specific challenges. This, in turn, hinders progress towards achieving gender equality in leadership positions.

Hence, in the journey towards a more equitable and inclusive society, NIC registration stands as a cornerstone for ensuring that every individual, particularly women, can access social safety incentives and programmes, and exercise their right to vote. By addressing the gender gap in NIC registration, we not only empower women but also strengthen the democratic fabric of the country.

As the incoming government navigates the path towards progress, it is essential to recognize the transformative potential of NADRA’s work in registration to ensure that no woman is left behind, invisible and muted, in the corridors of social and political empowerment.

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governance. The views expressed here do not reflect those of any

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