

# MAKING VOTING ACCESSIBLE FOR **WOMEN VOTERS** IN GBA ELECTIONS 2020



Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) initiated its process to observe the political environment and implementation of election-related laws, rules, and regulations in October 2020 as part of its multi-phase monitoring of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) elections scheduled for November 15, 2020. The observation aims to provide objective, neutral, and impartial information to the Election Commission of Gilgit-Baltistan (ECGB), political parties, media, civil society organizations (CSOs), and citizens. The observation will contribute towards promoting a free, fair, transparent, and accountable election process as laid out in the Elections Act, 2017. Through 24 trained and non-partisan long-term observers (LTOs), FAFEN is systematically observing the nomination process, campaign period, and the ECGB's preparations. FAFEN aims to highlight barriers to women's electoral and political participation through a gender-lens.

## About Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) region is administratively divided into three divisions and 14 districts with its headquarters in Gilgit. The legislative assembly has 24 general seats and nine reserved seats (six for women and three for technocrats). Since the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, 2009, the first general elections took place in November 2009 and the second in June 2015. The Election Commission of Gilgit-Baltistan will hold this November's polls under the Elections Act, 2017.

FAFEN LTOs conducted 24 focus group discussions (FGDs) with social and political women activists. These FGDs helped gather women's opinions and views on their electoral and political participation. The FGD guide focused on women's involvement as voters and candidates, and the issues and hurdles they face. 188 women from the 24 constituencies participated in the FGDs.

The FGDs shed light on institutional, cultural, and administrative issues that hamper women's electoral and political participation. This report prioritizes issues that the ECGB can address before the election to improve women's turnout. A post-election report will cover detailed findings.

The following are the findings of the FGDs held on October 10, 2020, by FAFEN's LTOs:

### I. Access to Polling Stations

Limited accessibility to polling stations remained the most commonly raised issue by women in all the constituencies. A majority of women mentioned that the assigned polling stations are too far away, making it difficult for them to take time off from housework to go and vote on Election Day. They stated that many women cannot express their right to vote due to the mountainous terrain and lack of transport. They pointed out that women usually have to travel up to four or five kilometres to reach their assigned polling stations.



Some of the women participants in Gilgit-III (GBA-3) reported that members of one family who have the same address have their votes registered at different polling stations miles apart which creates problems for them to get there on Election Day. Participants drew attention to a similar issue from Astore-I (GBA-13), Astore-II (GBA-14), Diamer-IV (GBA-18), and Ghizer-II (GBA-20), where women reportedly faced accessibility issues. On the contrary, some of the group members from Kharmang (GBA-11), Shiger (GBA-12), Ghizer-III (GBA-21) and Ganache-I (GBA-23) reported that they are satisfied with the provision of separate polling stations for women. Most of the groups pointed out that the elderly and women with disabilities cannot reach far-flung polling stations since they are inaccessible due to poor road infrastructure but the women participants from Shiger (GBA-

Trust for Democratic Education and Accountability (TDEA) supports FAFEN to observe the electoral processes through a gender lens. This report bases its findings on FGDs conducted by FAFEN LTOs to identify the barriers to women's electoral participation that may be mitigated ahead of the GBA elections to ensure inclusive, transparent, and accountable elections. Trained FAFEN observers are deployed across all constituencies in Gilgit-Baltistan to observe the pre-election, Election Day, and post-election



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12) reported that it used to be difficult to cast vote but that's not the case any longer. Women participants from Kharmang (GBA-11) also shared that unlike previous elections, the polling station is very near this year.

The Elections Act, 2017, states in Section 59 (2), "the Commission shall, as far as practicable, retain the polling stations established for the preceding election but it may add to or alter the list as may be required to reduce the distance preferably to one kilometre between a polling station and the voters assigned to it."

The law allows election authorities to establish polling stations as deemed necessary to minimize voters' travel distance to cast votes. To facilitate women voters, and especially the marginalized, the ECGB may ensure that the polling stations are not more than a kilometre from the voting population.

Recommendation for ECGB:

- The ECGB should set up polling stations in close proximity to the assigned voters to reduce their travel time. These polling stations may preferably be established within a range of one-kilometer allowing for greater participation.

## II. Lack of Awareness Regarding Elections

Most of the groups highlighted women's lack of awareness on their electoral rights and entitlements as the basic hindrance to their complete electoral participation.



Section 12(c) of the Elections Act, 2017, states, "The Commission may conduct public awareness programmes and media campaigns, regarding the importance of maximum voter enrolment and participation in elections, especially by women..."

The law requires the Commission to take up proactive measures for enhancing citizens' participation in elections.

Recommendations for ECGB:

- The ECGB may run a multi-media campaign on television, radio, print, and social media in local languages to raise awareness among voters about their rights and entitlements, encouraging them to vote on Election Day.
- The ECGB may produce educational material, including leaflets, banners, and posters for this purpose.
- The ECGB may strategically place election-related information, including information on the voting process at public spaces including parks, transport stations, universities, and buses.
- The ECGB may solicit support from local CSOs to manage campaigns for encouraging voters to vote on Election Day.

## III. Outspread of COVID-19

The spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was also cited by groups as a hindrance to vote on Election Day. The ECGB must ensure COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures are in place both before and on Election Day to protect people from exposure to the virus.



Recommendations for ECGB:

- A code of conduct for voters may be developed to educate them on protection from COVID-19 and disseminated among communities before the election.
- The authorities may disinfect polling stations on Election Day.
- The polling staff may wear protective shields and masks during the polling and counting process.
- Officials may translate the COVID-19 protection guidelines into Urdu and other local languages for people's convenience. The staff could display them prominently. Masks may be made mandatory for everyone entering the polling stations.
- Social distancing floor signs may be marked outside the polling stations and polling booths to ensure that voters in queues stand well apart.

#### IV. Women Contesting Elections as Candidates

Participants of FGDs said that women candidates are often unable to acquire a support base in their communities and families. A large majority of participants from Gilgit-III (GBA-3), Nagar-I (GBA-4), Nagar-II (GBA-5), Hunza (GBA-6), Skardu-I (GBA-7), Astore-II (GBA-14), Diامر-III (GBA-17), Ghanche-I (GBA-22), Ghanche-II (GBA-23), Ghanche-III (GBA-24) expressed concerns that women are unable to contest elections as candidates. Participants from Nagar-I (GBA-4) said that once a woman nominated herself in elections, but the community and family demoralized her so much she decided to step down.



Recommendations for ECGB:

- An extensive campaign may be worked out and run through public-private partnerships to inform citizens, particularly on women's participation in elections as voters and candidates.
- The ECGB may identify communities and areas of low women participation by analysing data from past elections. The ECGB may run a targeted campaign, including meetings with local elders and leaders, to ensure improved participation of women.

#### V. Weather and Harsh Terrain

FGDs participants indicated that the weather in November might be harsh for them to travel to the polling stations. Due to the snowfall and the cold climate, it is difficult for households to survive on mountaintops and they migrate to cities or towns to make a livelihood. Such families, and especially women may not be able to participate in elections as their votes are registered at their home addresses.



Recommendation for ECGB:

- The ECGB may ensure setting up easily-accessible polling stations for remote and mountainous areas where access to polling stations is harder for communities. The Commission may provide improved access to women and persons with disabilities.

#### VI. Cultural Barriers to Voting

FGDs participants also identified a cultural barrier to their electoral participation and reported that women voters in some remote areas are not allowed to step out of their homes to cast their ballot. These places include Gilgit-II (GBA-2), Gilgit-III (GBA-3), Nagar-I (GBA-4), Nagar-II (GBA-5), Skardu-II (GBA-8), Skardu-III (GBA-9), Shiger (GBA-12), Diامر-III (GBA-17), and Diامر-IV (GBA-18). Moreover, due to the patriarchal set-up in these regions, women usually vote based on the choices made by their male family members.



The Election Act, 2017, states: "If the turnout of women voters is less than ten percent of the total votes polled in a constituency, the Commission may presume that the women voters have been restrained through an agreement from casting their votes and may declare, polling at one or more polling stations or election in the whole constituency, void. Therefore, the ECGB may take extraordinary measures in these regions to ensure women's participation in the upcoming polls.

In certain constituencies women FGD participants reported that they did not face any cultural hindrances during elections. These included Hunza (GBA-6), Kharmang (GBA-11), Astore-I (GBA-13), Astore-II (GBA-14), Diامر-I (GBA-15), Diامر-II (GBA-16), Ghizer-I (GBA-19), Ghizer-II (GBA-20), Ghizer-III (GBA-21), Ghanche-I (GBA-22), Ghanche-II (GBA-23), and Ghanche-III (GBA-24).

Recommendations for ECGB:

- The ECGB may identify communities and areas of low women participation by analysing data from past elections. It may hold individual or community meetings in these areas to overcome potential barriers to women voting.

- The ECGB may run a campaign to spread awareness on the law that if the turnout of women voters is less than ten percent of the total votes polled in a constituency, the Election Commission will declare polling at one or more polling stations or election in the whole constituency void.

## VII. NIC Registration

According to the Final Electoral Rolls published by ECGB on October 2, 2020, there are 745,361 registered voters - 405,350 men and 339,992 women. These numbers indicate a gender gap of 65,358 in the electoral rolls. Since an NIC is a pre-requisite for voter registration, women must need an NIC to exercise their right to vote. However, many women reportedly do not obtain it due to cultural and administrative reasons such as remote location of NADRA centres and misbehaviour of staff.



The FGDs participants reported a lack of National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) centres in their constituencies, making it almost difficult to travel to remote areas to acquire NICs. Women from the districts of Nagar-II (GBA-5) and Ghanche (GBA-23) highlighted that there were no NADRA offices in their constituencies. One participant from Ghanche (GBA-23) said, “(NADRA) registration centres are far away that makes it hard for women to travel and acquire NICs.” This limited access to NADRA offices to get their ID cards and limited access to voter registration is the main reason why women are not able to vote.

Most women participants requested that NADRA establish its offices at a nearby location or initiate a door-to-door service for women’s NIC registration to improve participation. According to the Elections Act, 2017, the ECGB and NADRA may make extraordinary efforts to bridge the gender gap ahead of the elections to ensure women’s full participation.

Recommendation for ECGB:

- The ECGB may undertake an extensive Women’s NIC and Voter Registration Campaign in collaboration with NADRA and CSOs. This drive may build upon the gains of a similar campaign spearheaded by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to reduce the gender deficit on the electoral rolls ahead of the General Elections 2023.