

Women Provincial Council Members in Afghanistan



International support to local government in Afghanistan is waning at a time when the provincial administrations are in a state of transition. What support remains often tends to focus on female elected officials.

Conducted for the Department for International Development in early 2016, this research aims to provide an updated understanding of the situation of women provincial councillors in Afghanistan today: The institutional framework within which they operate, the organizational support they can rely on, their individual qualifications, as well as their willingness and ability to act. Based on our findings, we present actionable recommendations to actors wishing to strengthen the role of women in provincial councils.

Fieldwork for this project took place in the provinces of Balkh, Bamiyan, Kabul, Herat, Kandahar and Nangarhar. 102 key informant interviews were conducted with provincial councillors, unsuccessful candidates as well as representatives of the provincial and central government and various donors involved with strengthening women's empowerment.

What is the mandate of the Provincial Councils?

Problematically, this is unclear. The law gives the councils authority to “oversee” provincial budget expenditure but fails to specify precise mechanisms through which oversight should be achieved. Draft legislation clearly outlining the councils' responsibilities has yet to be enacted. There remains considerable confusion among the councillors themselves, as well as their electorate, regarding the role of the PC – its members are seen as tribal-type problem solver rather than agents of accountability.

Cooperative relationships at the provincial level remain contingent upon good will and personalities rather than an established framework of checks and balances.

Do councillors have adequate organizational support?

No. A PC office is part of the Governor's office for administrative and budgetary purposes, which undermines the independence of the institution. Basic staffing is in place, but the operating budget for PC activities such as site visits and community engagement is limited and the provision of security is deemed largely insufficient.

Are councillors capable and motivated?

The general educational background of council members varies widely not only regionally but within the councils. PCs, especially in the centre and the North, do appear to be attracting some individuals with good educational qualifications and experience. But their potential has not yet been developed and given the right platform. PC members in a province like Kandahar lack even the most basic qualifications and, having acceded to their positions through patron-client relationships, may be committed only to serving particular interest groups.

Are women PC members able to play a full and equal role within the PC?

Women councillors tend to fall into two categories: “proxy” councillors, and those who have “earned” their position through past professional successes. The latter are often seen as offering a higher professional capacity than typical male PC members and generally appear more motivated to effect change. These women's ambitions mostly focus on gender-specific issues.

However, even women who aspire to participate fully in PC activities tend to be systematically excluded from PC operations (outside of the traditional women's domain) by their male counterparts. Women PC members are also more likely to suffer from financial and security concerns.

How are women in the public realm perceived?

The degree of resistance to their participation varies depending on location: in provinces where women have been seen to play an active part in governance, their participation appears to be more easily accepted by their peers and electorate.

Assistance to Women Provincial Councillors in the Afghan context?

A single donor-funded programme will not be sufficient to solve the fundamental issues of patronage, corruption and gender discrimination that permeate the PC, and Afghan society at large. When planning programming in support of women's participation in the PCs, two fundamental trade-offs should be considered:

1. An investment in durable gender outcomes in the Afghan context is not likely to be fiscally sustainable. Will an investment be made even if the Government is not, in the short term, willing or able to fund activities aimed at strengthening the PCs? This paper suggests donors commit themselves to achieving change even at the cost of short-term sustainability.
2. The creation of "safe spaces" has been shown to allow women to participate in local governance free from harassment and intimidation. While these spaces may help build confidence and allow for slow progress in perceptions over time,

they risk strengthening entrenched gender roles and segregation.

Are safe spaces an acceptable way forward, especially if requested by the women concerned? This paper recommends that donors be willing to accept safe spaces if necessary.

Recommendations

- Donors must strongly encourage the completion of the legal framework. Regulation should contain dispositions rendering each PC independent of the Governor's office and mandating the inclusion of women councillors in activities.
- Donors should consider contributing funds to core PC activities conditional upon women's participation therein and clear reporting of undertakings and results. In parallel, IDLG should lobby for the government to allocate some state resources to the same end, thereby signalling commitment to the strengthening of subnational accountability.
- Trainings for PC members should be reduced and refocused. Future efforts should be based on needs rather than gender, and involve practical learning rather than classroom-based training.
- It is crucial to increase the number and build the capacity of civil servants attached to the PC office. Their role should be expanded to include systematic filing and reporting in order to strengthen institutional memory.
- Donors should support PCs through a carefully tailored communication campaign designed to expose a large audience to the message that provincial councillors, including women, generate accountability.