

The Gender Gap in the Electoral Rolls: Barriers to CNIC Registration

Introduction

There is a gender gap¹ of around 12.5 million in Pakistan's electoral rolls. According to the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) report on the final electoral rolls for 2018, women comprise 44.1% of approximately 105 million citizens registered as voters.² This restricts a significant percentage of Pakistani women from exercising their right to choose their political representatives and participate in electoral processes. It also effectively reduces the voice of women in improving the legal and regulatory framework for promoting gender equality in the country.

Women face systemic impediments in the process of getting their names on the electoral rolls due to the legal requirement of CNIC possession for voter eligibility. Proactive implementation of gender-sensitive legislation governing electoral assistance is integral to the meaningful participation of women in democratic processes.

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of the structural, institutional and cultural barriers faced by women in obtaining their legal identity document, the CNIC. While all citizens over 18 years of age who possess CNICs are now automatically added to the voters' list, those without CNICs are left out. Thus, the actual number of missing women may be greater than the electoral rolls gender gap and may be

determined when final, age-wise census data is released. Drawing on a research study conducted by DAI-Tabeer on the barriers to CNIC registration in Pakistan, this synopsis also lays out key recommendations for major stakeholders towards reducing the gender gap in the electoral rolls in the country.

Gender disparities in legal identity

The realities of massive social and economic inequality bear themselves out most prominently in the case of CNIC registration and the gender gap. Pakistan is a highly unequal society, stratified along lines of wealth, status, division of labour, gender, ethnicity and geography.

The everyday deprivations of poverty, inequality and dependency frame the access (or lack thereof) of many social groups, particularly women, to National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) services. These problems exist at the structural level, i.e. they overflow the merely institutional constraints of NADRA's own policies and processes, and relate to the wider policy, economic and political contexts in which NADRA and other institutions operate. These structural constraints can be elucidated through a brief enumeration of the challenges different marginalised groups, especially women, face in accessing NADRA and obtaining CNICs.

Voter eligibility criteria in Pakistan

Any Pakistani citizen can register herself/himself to vote, provided s/he:

- Is at least 18 years of age
- Is not declared to be of unstable mind
- Is a resident in the electoral region
- Possesses a CNIC issued by NADRA

Requirements in Practice for Women to obtain CNICs*

- Possession of an official government certificate (birth, marriage, matriculation or any other relevant certificate)
- Possession of a physical address
- Attestation of documents by public office holders
- Physical presence of a blood relative who has a CNIC at NADRA office

1. The gender gap is the difference between male and female registered voters. It is calculated by subtracting the number of female registered voters from the number of male registered voters.

2. <https://www.ecp.gov.pk/documents/genderaffairs/GA.jpg>.

* Based on field research and requirements listed on NADRA's website: <https://www.nadra.gov.pk/identity-requirements/>.

The gender gap in the electoral rolls

Year	Male	Female	Total Registered Voters	Gender Gap
	Registered Voters	Registered Voters		
2013	48,592,492	37,597,343	86,189,835	10,955,149
2018	59,224,262	46,731,147	105,955,409	12,493,115

Constituencies with the highest gender gap in the electoral rolls

Punjab

Name and no. of constituency	Registered Men	Registered Women	Gender Gap in Electoral Rolls
NA-87 Hafizabad-I	384,762	299,685	85,077
NA-122 Sheikhpura-IV	274,401	194,377	80,024
NA-77 Narowal-I	292,907	215,088	77,819
NA-119 Sheikhpura-I	245,253	173,384	71,869
NA-114 Jhang-I	282,267	210,515	71,752

KP

Name and no. of constituency	Registered Men	Registered Women	Gender Gap in Electoral Rolls
NA 48 Tribal Area-IX	196,668	77,537	119,131
NA-5 Upper Dir	268,134	179,280	88,854
NA-35 Bannu	328,817	250,055	78,762
NA-20-Mardan-I	248,987	181,551	67,436
NA-13 Mansehra-I	296,793	230,181	66,612

Sindh

Name and no. of constituency	Registered Men	Registered Women	Gender Gap in Electoral Rolls
NA-250 Karachi West-III	243,413	157,262	86,151
NA-246 Karachi South-I	305,940	230,748	75,192
NA-251 Karachi West-IV	239,849	165,803	74,046
NA-249 Karachi West-II	201,541	129,889	71,652
NA-240 Korangi Karachi-II	271,160	204,363	66,797

Balochistan

Name and no. of constituency	Registered Men	Registered Women	Gender Gap in Electoral Rolls
NA-259 Dera Bugti-cum-Kohlu-cum-Barkhan-cum-Sibi-cum-Lehri	213,195	142,121	71,074
NA-263 Killa Abdullah	148,722	838,91	64,831
NA-260 Nasirabad-cum-Kachhi-cum-Jhal Magsi	209,227	156,635	52,592
NA-272 Lasbela-cum-Gawadar	203,467	153,412	50,055
NA-258 Loralai-cum-Musa Khail-cum-Ziarat-cum-Dukki-cum-Harnai	178,802	135,089	43,713

Factors contributing to low registration of women

- 1. Lack of awareness:** The Lack of awareness about the benefits of legal identity leads to a lack of demand for CNICs from women. Many poor women who do know about the CNIC only understand it as a means of becoming a beneficiary of the Benazir Income Support Programme, or acquiring children's B-forms. Relatedly, women's alienation from the political process and lack of voice in state-society spheres creates a disinterest in registration.
- 2. Documentation requirements:** DAI-Tabeer's research indicates that complex documentation and verification requirements constitute one of the most significant supply-side impediments for obtaining a CNIC.³ NADRA requires the presence of a blood relative (father, mother, brother, etc.) or husband for the issuance of a CNIC. Several trips are often required to determine and comply with documentation requirements. Women often do not possess the required documentation such as nikkahnamahs or divorce papers and proof of physical address. The requirement of providing the ID cards of male relatives renders women applicants dependent on access to this documentation rather than empowering them to apply independently. Subsequent verifications by designated officers become a major hurdle for women to fulfil.
- 3. NADRA centres and mobile registration vehicle (MRV) accessibility:** Uneven infrastructural development makes accessing NADRA offices cumbersome and costly for women from rural/remote areas. NADRA centres are often located in district and tehsil headquarters and require substantial travel. The lack of adequate public transportation facilities and problems of mobility compound the issue further. Furthermore, MRV schedules are not advertised extensively among target communities, leading to a lack of information and (therefore) access. Requests for sending MRVs to specific areas can take extensive processing time. Moreover, the service is often dependent on mobile networks and is particularly slow in remote areas due to weak Internet connectivity. Civil society efforts coordinated by the Election Commission have increased access, but long-term reforms are needed to address this.
- 4. The financial and opportunity costs of the registration process:** Due to cultural factors, women often need to be accompanied by a male member to the NADRA office. They also need to make multiple trips to complete documentation requirements and collect the card. This not only substantially increases transportation costs, but also raises the opportunity cost for population from low-income quintiles who cannot afford to take time off from work and other responsibilities. There are also many women who have to rely on intermediaries such as male family members or agents, which adds an additional layer of cost to obtain CNICs. Women are also often the primary caregivers for children and elderly persons in their households and are also typically responsible
- 5. Poor state-civil society interface:** In the absence of any legal requirements, NADRA has rarely engaged civil society organisations to enhance its outreach and proactively register women and other socially excluded groups. Prior to the 2018 elections, the ECP made significant efforts to lead coordination between civil society and NADRA, which helped in identifying eligible women and then in the issuance of CNICs to them.⁴ Similar collaborative efforts are still required in view of the persisting gender gap, but the challenge is that the lack of a legal framework for NADRA-CSO engagement reduces incentives for a regularised interface.
- 6. Cultural biases and insensitivities:** The lack of women's-only counters makes accessing NADRA services difficult, especially for single women. This becomes particularly relevant in socially conservative areas where 'honour' and parda (veiling) place barriers on women's mobility and access in mixed environments such as those found in NADRA centres and other public spaces. While NADRA has laudably designated Fridays exclusively to women applicants, there is a lack of public awareness of this option. There is also a lack of routine training amongst NADRA staff on sensitisation for interacting with women and marginalised groups. DAI-Tabeer's research revealed that women from difference socioeconomic and cultural subgroups within Pakistan experience differential treatment and discrimination when applying for CNICs. Increasing the number of women staffers (and those from socially excluded groups) in NADRA would help transform the organisation's environment, making it inclusive and accepting. A further beneficial step would be conducting periodic sensitisation training for all staff with a focus on gender and social inclusion.
- 7. No legal obligation on NADRA to reduce gender gap:** Crucially, NADRA's own status in relation to the state and civil society needs to be clarified. Currently, NADRA operates as a revenue-generating organisation whose relation to the ECP is that of a profit-generating service-provider. While the new election law prescribes coordination between the ECP and NADRA for regularised updation of the electoral rolls for citizens who acquire CNICs, there is no legal obligation on NADRA to proactively endeavour for the registration of all citizens.⁵ The law includes a provision for the Election Commission to take proactive measures to register women in low-registration areas, but it does not place a similar responsibility on NADRA despite its central role in CNIC issuance.⁶ NADRA's drive to increase registration in remote areas and among marginalised/poor communities is not properly incentivised. Thus, the lack of clarification of NADRA's role in relation to the state and its citizenry itself acts as a structural barrier to more inclusive and widespread registration of citizens. The lack of the legal recognition of the CNIC as a 'right' versus a responsibility further places the onus on citizens to obtain identity cards.

3. <https://www.nadra.gov.pk/identity-requirements/>.

4. These efforts led to the registration of 4.3 million women for the 2018 general elections.

5. Elections Act 2017, Section 25.

6. Elections Act 2017, Section 47.

Typography	Challenge
Younger/single women	Issues of mobility and the lack of women's-only counters pose cultural barriers on single women to register
Widows, divorced women, women with marriage of choice, or those with oral marriages/divorces	Challenges in fulfilling documentation criteria related to the presence of blood relatives, and/or registered nikkah/talaaq namah in the event of either being conducted orally or through local clerics/jirgas.
Disabled women	The additional requirement of a disability registration certificate by the Social Welfare Department creates an added layer and burden of documentation.
Transgender persons	Challenges in fulfilling documentation criteria related to the presence of blood relatives due to familial and society stigmatisation. In the absence of designated desks, members of this group also face cultural insensitivities and often register themselves as male, despite subscribing to female identity.
Peasant women	Exhausting work schedules and daily wage cycles raise the opportunity cost for taking time off from work for CNIC registration.
Brick kiln workers	The operational hazards of brick-kiln work include unrecognisable fingerprints in NADRA's database, effectively excluding a majority of brick kiln workers from obtaining a legal identity. Furthermore, these workers often face resistance in the verification of documents by kiln owners who, fearing increased regulations and obligations by the Labour Department, actively prevent women from entering the formal labour force.
Footloose labour, rural peasants, bonded labour	Documentation challenges related to domiciles and addresses as they often lack physical addresses (permanent and temporary) owing to frequent relocations in search of employment and the use of informal domiciles such as tents.
Second-generation Afghan migrant women	Documentation challenges and are unable to produce evidence of domicile in Pakistan from before 1978.
Minority women	Challenges in marriage registration. Women thus fail to provide marriage certificates that also lead to the absence of birth registration certificates.
Non-Muslim women	Documentation issues, especially regarding marriage certificates. They are often asked to produce land documents or familial identification (e.g. asking for a grandfather's ID card from 1974). Additionally, their names are perceived as 'strange' and 'foreign-sounding' by NADRA staff. This not only leads to feelings of alienation among non-Muslim citizens, but to incorrect entries in NADRA records.

Policy recommendations for NADRA

1. Streamline documentation (nikahnamah, talaaqnamah, land documentation/proof of address) requirements for women from marginalised backgrounds;
2. Relax the requirement of having male 'guardians' and/or blood relatives to accompany female applicants;
3. Institutionalise alternative measures of biometric identification in case fingerprints cannot be taken due to effacement by hard labour;
4. Introduce attestation and verification by neighbours as witnesses of applicants' proof of address in cases related to footloose labourers;
5. Introduce sensitivity trainings and feedback mechanisms for NADRA staff to inculcate an appreciation of the unique circumstances and challenges faced by women and marginalised groups in obtaining legal identity;
6. Institutionalise more inclusive and diverse staff hiring mechanisms as well as women-friendly workplace policies;
7. Introduce designated transgender persons and women counters at NADRA centres and MRVs;
8. Increase MRV outreach and efficiency to cater to the needs of rural population;
9. Increase interaction with CSOs, school teachers, political parties and activists to fill information and awareness gaps among citizens;
10. Increase information dissemination about CNICs among women.

Recommendations for civil society organisations

1. Undertake mass advocacy and information campaigns at the grassroots level on the benefits of a legal identity for women and the requirements for obtaining a CNIC;
2. Conduct policy advocacy for legal reforms to 1) recognise the CNIC as a right rather than a responsibility on the part of citizens, and 2) require NADRA to proactively issue ID cards to citizens with set targets and timeframes;
3. Work on addressing structural causes of social exclusion to break the repetitive cycles of dependency and bondage prevalent among brick kiln labourers and similar groups;
4. Work with political parties to mobilise their networks for increasing women's CNIC registration;
5. Facilitate NADRA MRVs in reaching remote areas, spreading information about schedules;
6. Act as alternative nodes of information dissemination and registration-facilitation to help marginalised groups navigate through the complexities and documentation requirements for obtaining CNICs.