

NEW ADVOCACY GROUP EMPOWERS WOMEN ELECTION CANDIDATES IN AFGHANISTAN

AdvocacyNet

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Washington, DC: As the 2005 elections approach in Afghanistan this Sunday, September 18, a new women's advocacy group has been launched to support women parliamentarians.

The Afghan Women's Independent Advocacy Commission (AWIAC) was formed on August 8 in Kabul to ensure equal representation of women engaged in the political process. The AWIAC draws upon the support of civil society groups and the private sector in an effort to build a strong political base for women candidates.

The Afghan Women's Network (AWN), a partner of The Advocacy Project, has been key in facilitating the group's formation. Led by director Afifa Azim, the AWN is a consortium of over 70 women's organizations with over 3,000 members. It uses partnerships, collaboration and lobbying to advance the rights of women and children in Afghanistan. The August 8 meeting brought together 150 women participants, including the Minister of Women's Affairs, Dr. Masooda Jalal. Other participants included independent women candidates, civil society groups, and representatives from the private sector.

One aim of the AWIAC is to build relationships amongst candidates prior to the elections. This will help candidates form a strong lobbying body to push for women's issues once in office. The AWIAC also assists women candidates in public outreach, working with the International Republican Institute (IRI) to provide free campaign posters.

Elections for both the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House of the National Assembly) and Provincial Councils will be held simultaneously September 18 throughout Afghanistan. These will be a critical test of women's political freedom four years after the downfall of the Taliban.

The AWIAC is helping Afghan women represent themselves more fully in the parliamentary elections and the period thereafter. The commission has formed five committees to address the issues of healthcare, legal rights, education, professional empowerment and political education. The commission will use a multi-sectoral, grassroots approach to build a common strategy for women's development over the next four years.

An increasing number of women have challenged social norms and risked physical threats to take part in Afghanistan's political institutions. In recent months, escalating violence across the country has resulted in the shooting of a female election worker, the murder of a woman by the Taliban accused as "an American spy", and the hanging deaths of three women aid workers in the northeastern province of Baghlan.

Due to the deteriorating security situation, the upcoming elections are resulting in proportionally fewer women candidacies for the 34 provincial councils, where pressure from local warlords has left many council seats empty by women. Only eight percent of the candidates for the provincial councils, 247 out of a total 3025, are women.

At the national level, although 25 percent of seats are reserved for women, female candidates represent about 12 percent of the candidates Wolesi Jirga in Kabul (328 out of 2707).

The AWIAC's creation is an important advancement by Afghan women towards women's integration into the democratic system. Many organizations, such as the AWIAC, fear that women must be supported so that they will not only be placed in power to serve symbolic purposes.

According to AP intern Carrie Hasselback, who helped establish the AWIAC, "The mere presence of women in the parliament will not automatically give them their share of influence on decision-making processes. Many [candidates] will be instructed by men with no women's rights on the agenda. Female networking and the building of a broad platform of support is essential for women's emancipation in Afghanistan."

The AWIAC hopes to strengthen the foundation that allows more women to become active in public life, not only as elected representatives, but also in civil society, business and government. A credible election on Sunday, September 18, will not only allow Afghan women to assert their political rights, but will assure their active participation in their country's reconstruction.

- Read more about the Afghan Women's Network and the AWIAC [here](#).
- In the summer of 2005, AP sent Carrie Hasselback from the Wagner School at New York University to work with the AWN. Read [Carrie's blogs](#).
- Read 2004 AP intern [Sarah Schores'](#) work on the 2004 AWN voting project.