

General Elections 2024

Gender Diversity, Accessibility, and Inclusion

Statement by Forum for Dignity Initiatives

Disclaimer:

Forum for Dignity Initiatives-fdi issues this statement based on its observation of 10 selected constituencies only. This is an independent statement without any affiliation or biases toward any of the political parties or stakeholders. The data on registered voters, voter turnout, etc. is purely derived from the Election Commission of Pakistan's website.

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Context:

On the 8th of February 2024, Pakistan conducted its 12th General Elections, witnessing a substantial increase in candidate participation compared to the 2018 and 2013 elections. A record-breaking 18,000 individuals contested the 266 National Assembly seats and 590 Provincial Assemblies, spanning federal and four provincial constituencies.

Acknowledging the efforts of the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) Gender and Social Inclusion Wing, the 2024 elections saw a noteworthy improvement in women's political participation and voters nationwide. Of Pakistan's 128 million population, 53.87% were male voters and 46.13% were female registered voters for General Elections 2024.¹ The electoral gender gap, nearly 1 crore, showcased significant progress. However, an analysis of the voter-to-population ratio revealed provincial disparities. Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa recorded 57% and 53% voters, respectively, surpassing half of their populations. In contrast, Islamabad and Sindh closely aligned with the 50% threshold, while Balochistan lagged at a mere 36%.²

The 2024 elections held particular significance, serving as a litmus test for Pakistan's legislative, executive, and judicial efforts to foster inclusivity in the electoral, political, and democratic landscape. Aimed at empowering marginalized communities, including women in all diversity, individuals with disabilities, religious and ethnic minorities, and transgender persons, various sections of the Elections Act, 2017 were invoked as in the section 206 of the election laws that obliges political parties to allocate 5% of general seat tickets to women. However, various concerns from the civil society organizations (CSOs) as well as media outlets highlighted the non-compliance of 5% allocation of party tickets to women u/s 206. One of the reports issued by a CSO mentioned that only 4.64% representation was given to women across the country among the 6,037 total candidates nominated by 111 political parties for GE 2024.³ It came out as a challenge that neither political parties endorsed its compliance nor the ECP released statistics on the parties' compliance rate if they have met this obligation.

Undoubtedly, Sections 48, 203, 170, and 206 of the Elections Act, 2017 played crucial roles in this endeavor but revealed gaps in implementation, emphasizing the need for continued vigilance and improvement in electoral processes.

fdi as a rights-based organization, expresses deep concern regarding the strong expression of doubt on the election rigging, delays in elections result announcements, various political parties expressing their reservations on the accuracy of the counting especially in relation to form 45 and form 47. The voters, all political parties, civil society, and the media are actively raising

¹ Election Commission of Pakistan <<https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/photos/3/province.jpeg>>

² FAFEN Report on Electoral Rolls General Elections – 2024 <<https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/240131-GE-2024-Electoral-Rolls-Assessment-Report-Final.pdf>>

³ FAFEN Statement on the Contesting Candidates 2024 <https://fafen.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FAFEN_Press_Statement_on_Women-Candidates_2024_02_05_corrected.pdf>

apprehensions about the potential impact of these rigging claims on the integrity of the electoral, political, and democratic processes in Pakistan. fdi urgently calls upon the Election Commission to establish a dedicated committee or board to promptly investigate the allegations of election rigging.

Exclusion of Transgender Persons in General Elections (GE) 2024:

In the 2018 general elections, forum for dignity initiatives (fdi) actively played a role in the passage of the Transgender Persons (Rights and Protection) Act, 2018. The organization supported independent transgender candidates in their election bids, anticipating that future elections would be more favorable for both transgender voters and their candidacies. Despite these legislative advancements, the total registered trans-voters since the 2018 to 2024 elections reached only 3200 in comparison to 1800 registered trans-voters in 2018 and an insignificant number of these voters showed up on the polling day. Moreover, a disheartening reality has unfolded in the run-up to the 2024 elections, as no political party has granted party tickets to transgender individuals. In the 2018 elections, five transgender candidates participated, but this year, only three transgenders contested independently without institutional support. Notably, Nayab Ali independently ran for a national assembly seat from NA-46 and NA-47, while Ms. Sobia Khan and Saima Shaukat sought provincial assembly seats from PK-81 and PK-46 respectively. Their journeys, navigating the intricacies of filing nomination papers and mobilizing campaign finances, underscore the challenges faced by transgender candidates leading up to polling day.

Sr. No.	Name	Constituency	Status	Symbols	Votes ⁴
1	Nayyab Ali	NA-46 & NA-47	Independent	Green Chili	323 112
2	Muhammad Bilal/Sobia Khan	PK-81	Independent	Airplane	40
3	Shaukat Raza Mir/Saima Shaukat	PK-46	Independent	Peacock	926

Status of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs):

According to statistics released by the Bureau of Statistics, as of 2021, Pakistan had a population of 371,833 individuals with disabilities.⁵ The provincial-level legislation on Disabled Persons recognizes the right to political participation for Persons with

⁴ All these numbers are quoted from ECP website by Consulting form-47

⁵ https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/disability/disability_data_28252021.pdf

Disabilities (PWDs) under section 16, encompassing both the right to vote and the right to contest elections. However, during the General Elections 2024, only one PWD namely Mr. Raja Imran Hussain contested elections both on National Assembly and Provincial Assembly seats as an independent candidate, while a significant number of PWDs exercised their right to vote, surpassing the number of transgender voters. The overall observation suggests that polling staff exhibited preferential treatment towards PWDs in facilitating the voting process, potentially influenced by their training. Nevertheless, PWDs encountered multiple challenges regarding their specific disability while casting their votes, as outlined in the key challenges section one by one.

Sr. No.	Name	Constituency	Status	Symbols	Votes ⁶
1	Raja Imran Hussain	NA-55 & PP-15	Independent	Racket and Bowl	58 63

Elections 2024 Observation by fdi:

Forum for Dignity Initiatives (fdi) is a dynamic, all women-led research and advocacy forum dedicated to championing the civil and political rights of young women, women with disabilities, and transgender individuals. Our primary focus lies in empowering women from diverse backgrounds, along with women with disabilities and transgender persons, to actively participate in Pakistan's electoral, political, and democratic processes. fdi played a pivotal role in actively observing the General Elections of 2018, disseminating its recommendations to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), and sharing its concerns with all key stakeholders. In the current election cycle, fdi's top leadership, executive body, and volunteers undertook nationwide observation efforts covering 10 constituencies and nearly 100 polling stations across the federal, Punjab, and Balochistan Provinces of Pakistan. Our diverse team of observers included individuals representing various genders, abilities, and backgrounds. The specific constituencies and polling stations observed by fdi's dedicated observers are meticulously listed in the Annexure-

fdi developed an “Election Observation Tool” (see Annexure-II) for its observers based on identified parameters to observe the inclusion of women in all diversity, women with disabilities, religious and ethnic minorities, and transgender persons in the electoral processes. The election observation tool thoroughly covered the internal and external environment of

⁶ All these numbers are quoted from ECP website by Consulting form-47

polling stations including the accessibility of persons with disabilities (PWDs) to polling booths, entrance and exit gates for male, female, and transgender persons, presence of female polling officers at the combined polling stations, training of the polling staff and their behavior with the targeted voters, security measures and presence of female security staff and observation of the camps of different political parties outside of the polling station, transparent and non-discriminatory approach of the polling staff, polling agents and contesting candidates, etc. The observers approached transgender persons, PWDs, elderly persons, and minority groups post-polling to record their voting experiences. The observers commenced their observance from the opening of targeted polling stations to the tabulation process and final issuance of form-47 and form-46 to the polling agents. This analysis is a consolidated version of the observations received by 10 observers, from roughly 100 polling stations in 10 NA, PP, and PB constituencies each. This includes both male, female, and combined polling stations hence the findings below are well-reviewed and well-observed.

Key Challenges:

The comprehensive efforts put forth by the Election Commission of Pakistan and its Gender and Social Inclusion Wing have truly earned commendation, spanning from the voter registration process to the seamless execution of votes casting on polling day. The extraordinary surge in the participation of women voters during the General Elections of 2024 is a testament to the exemplary performance exhibited by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and its dedicated polling staff. However, it becomes even more crucial to acknowledge and address the challenges faced by both voters and the polling staff, as well as the security agencies. Tackling these challenges head-on before the elections could have undoubtedly paved the way for an even more exceptional and inclusive participation of the targeted voters on election day.

I. Low/Zero Turnout of Transgender Voters

While middle-aged women, young girls, and old-aged women showed unexpected participation in the recent elections, the turnout of transgender voters was disappointingly low. Out of 100 polling stations surveyed in Punjab and Islamabad, only 4 to 5 reported the presence of transgender voters. Shockingly, a mere 10 trans-voters turned up, lacking even the necessary X-card. Our observer noted two trans-voters who declined to discuss the treatment they received from polling staff, suggesting social exclusion. Challenges faced by transgender voters encompass difficulties in obtaining or renewing CNICs, exclusion from voter lists, limited awareness about voting significance, and on-the-day obstacles like financial constraints for transportation and discrimination at polling stations. The segregation of booths into male and female sections adds another layer of hindrance, restricting access for transgender individuals.

II. Inadequate Training of Polling Officers

While efforts were made to sensitize polling staff, including the Presiding Officer (PO) and Assistant Presiding Officer (APO), on catering to the needs of PWDs, elderly individuals, and transgender persons, some Polling Officers lacked sufficient training and awareness in providing preferential treatment and ensuring a seamless voting experience for these targeted

voters. Additionally, last-minute transfer calls for a few Presiding Officers caused logistical challenges, making it difficult for them to set up the polling station and coordinate with the rest of the staff. Instances of unnotified absence among polling staff on election day further burdened POs, burdening them to perform double duty.

III. Limited Polling Staff at the Combined Polling Stations

Limited polling staff were deployed at combined polling stations, where 90 out of 100 observed had up to 4 booths accommodating thousands of voters. Notably, there was a shortage of staff, with one male Polling Officer and a maximum of 12 other officers per team of three. This led to extended wait times, especially for female voters, as the female polling staff showed inefficiency, causing delays in the overall process.

IV. Logistical Challenges

Logistical challenges were significant, with essential items like stamp pads, block stamps, indelible ink, pens, scales, and tamper bags absent in many Punjab and Balochistan polling stations. Polling Officers had to arrange these items themselves after the voting started, ensuring their availability for the entire polling day. At combined polling stations it was mismanaged with no provisions for separate entrances for male and female voters and there were no dedicated exit gates too. Voters were using the same gate for entrance and exit, and it caused chaos and uncomfortable experiences for female voters.

V. Insufficient Number of Female Security Officers

While there were no significant security issues reported during the election day, a notable concern arose regarding the insufficient deployment of female security officers at combined and designated polling stations for women. This resulted in male officers guarding female sections, causing inconvenience for voters who observe privacy measures like purdah.

VI. Voter Education Gap:

- Both male and female voters lacked awareness about the voting process. Despite guidance from polling staff, middle-aged and elderly women and even men struggled with folding ballot papers and identifying the specific ballot box color for each assembly.
- Many women possessed CNICs and visited polling stations, but some couldn't locate their names on electoral lists. Additionally, they were unfamiliar with using the ECP service to message their CNIC number to 8300 for timely information about their polling station. Voters were not educated on where to stamp, not to use their thumb impressions on the ballot paper, etc.

VII. Primary Concerns of Persons with Disabilities:

While the polling staff, particularly the Presiding Officer and Assistant Presiding Officers, were cognizant of the unique needs of disabled individuals and prioritized their voting experience, a range of challenges persisted due to the diverse nature of disabilities. Physically disabled voters encountered difficulties accessing polling booths, as even though they visited polling stations were situated on ground floors, many featured elevations without accompanying ramps.

Additionally, visually impaired voters faced issues comprehending and identifying candidates' symbols. Although some Presiding Officers permitted blood relatives to assist visually

impaired voters at certain polling stations, this practice was inconsistent across all locations. Notably, in Punjab, there were instances where Polling Officers struggled to recognize the specific requirements of visually disabled individuals. One observer reported that some Polling Officers insisted that visually impaired persons cast their votes independently, without any assistance from blood relatives.

A separate incident involved a 35-year-old deaf and mute woman, who, due to her partial hearing and understanding, was denied the opportunity to have a blood relative assist her during the voting process. Upon scrutiny of her card, it was revealed that she possessed a normal Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) rather than the specialized CNIC designed for persons with disabilities. This incident underscores the under-registration of disabled individuals with the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP).

VIII. Suspension of Mobile Phone Network and Internet Services:

Mobile phone and internet services suspension is one of the major concerns to ensure transparency to conduct free and fair elections in any democracy. Suspension of both mobile phone networks and internet services on polling day posed challenges for both voters and polling staff. Those who found their names missing from electoral lists couldn't use ECP services to verify their voting details, resulting in exclusion after traveling long distances. Internet suspension also impeded polling staff for a smooth coordination with Returning Officers (ROs) and submitting voting results, causing delays, and hindering communication between Presiding Officers.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) explicitly stated that its Election Monitoring and Complaint Cell (EMCC) services would operate around the clock on election day. Voters were informed that they could register their complaints through either landline or WhatsApp messaging. Unfortunately, the suspension of internet and cellular data services hindered voters from effectively communicating their grievances to the ECP, resulting in a significant operational setback.

IX. Challenges to Voters within the Polling Station:

- In both Punjab and Balochistan Provinces, our observations revealed a lack of accessibility for disabled individuals at all polling stations. The absence of ramps posed significant obstacles for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), making it difficult for them to access polling booths. Notably, Islamabad stood out with a commendable effort in establishing accessible polling stations in Sector F-10 and F-8, equipped with ramps for PWDs.
- Congestion was a prevalent issue in combined polling stations, contributing to a lack of discipline in voter queues.
- Inadequate furniture hindered the establishment of suitable seating arrangements for elderly and disabled voters.
- The absence of clear distinctions between the entrance and exit gates created confusion, especially regarding the separation of male and female voters in certain polling stations.

- Incidents of medical emergencies in female voting booths were reported, without any provision for immediate medical assistance. Residents in the neighborhood had to handle these situations independently, causing disruptions to the overall polling process.
- Most polling stations lacked proper water facilities, with some having only one water tap running for nearly 2000 voters. Additionally, sanitation measures were neglected, resulting in unclean toilets and polling areas.
- A disconcerting observation was the presence of male polling staff smoking within the polling station premises during peak hours, causing discomfort among female voters especially pregnant and unwell. This practice needs immediate attention to maintain a professional and respectful polling environment.

X. Challenges to Voters Outside the Polling Station:

Gender Disparity at Party Camps: Camps of the political parties stationed outside the polling stations lacked female representation. Female voters faced difficulties interacting with male representatives to obtain house numbers and block code slips.

Security officers failed to adequately inspect voters, polling agents, and candidates at various polling stations in Punjab and Balochistan, neglecting to enforce the mandatory collection of mobile phones. The lapse in security allowed individuals to bring their mobile phones freely into the polling stations. In contrast, in Islamabad, there was better adherence to the code of conduct, with both polling agents and participants complying with the regulations at the polling stations.

Incident of Undue Influence on Voters: The voting process within the polling station was conducted without any harassment or discrimination. However, incidents occurred outside the polling stations where some party workers and polling agents exerted undue pressure on individuals to vote for a particular party or candidate. For instance, workers affiliated with Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) compelled one of our voters to vote for a TLP candidate. Additionally, certain party members directly approached the Presiding Officer, seeking assurance that women had voted for their candidate. These actions raised concerns about the overall transparency of the voting process.

Recommendations:

- It is recommended that comprehensive training programs should be developed and implemented for all polling staff, with a specific focus on sensitizing them to the needs of PWDs, elderly individuals, and transgender persons. The focus should be on the transgender and PWDs' pertaining laws to create wider awareness about the right to vote and contest elections. Similarly, a collaboration with community organizations and advocacy groups can be made to further sensitize polling staff and enhance their understanding of the diverse needs of different voter groups.
- There should be a backup list of trained individuals who can step in if a Polling Officer or any polling staff is unable to fulfill their duties. Likewise, additional polling staff to combined polling stations should be deployed, ensuring a higher staff-to-booth ratio to expedite the voting process.
- In every combined polling station, there should be both male and female Presiding Officers and female security officers. There should also be separate entrances and exits for female voters.
- Concerning combined polling staff, it is recommended that there needs to be both male and female Presiding Officers. The overall number of polling staff should be increased, for instance, if there is a team of three officers including two APOs and 1 PO, the number of Polling Officers should be increased from 1 to 2 to manage the voter turnout. Similarly, polling material (ballot papers, inkpads, stamps etc.) should be provided in abundance to the polling staff to prevent extra hustle on the polling day.
- To address the logistics shortage issue, it is recommended to establish a centralized distribution system for election materials. This ensures that all polling stations receive necessary items well in advance, reducing the burden on Presiding Officers.
- Both male and female voters lacked awareness about the voting process. Despite guidance from polling staff, middle-aged and elderly women and even men struggled with folding ballot papers and identifying the specific ballot box color for each assembly.
- Although the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is currently conducting voting awareness campaigns, it is observed that these initiatives predominantly target urban areas. There is a notable lack of awareness among both women and men in rural areas regarding the voting process. To address this gap, it is imperative to implement more geographically focused campaigns. Additionally, fostering peer-to-peer awareness within communities and elucidating vote-casting procedures can prove beneficial. To maximize outreach, employing diverse communication channels such as radio, television, and social media for information dissemination is essential.
- Regarding the suspension of mobile phone networks and internet services, no alternative solution can be proposed, as it is imperative to ensure uninterrupted mobile data and internet services on polling day. This is crucial to prevent any

misunderstanding or miscommunication among polling staff. Additionally, voters should have the ability to promptly communicate their grievances to the Election Monitoring Control Center (EMCC). Similarly, a continuous and reliable internet service is essential for the seamless submission of results.

- In both Punjab and Balochistan Provinces, our observers revealed a lack of accessibility for disabled individuals at all polling stations. It is recommended to identify these polling stations in advance to install ramps for the accessibility of PWDs. Secondly, all types of disabilities should be taught to the polling staff and relevant measures should be advised accordingly.
- To avoid congestion in combined polling stations it is recommended to designate more polling stations and the queue management system should be improvised by designating separate queues for PWDs, transgender, and elderly persons.
- Provide adequate and suitable furniture for polling stations to accommodate elderly and disabled voters, ensuring their comfort and ease of access.
- Clearly demarcate entrance and exit gates, and implement visible sign boards to avoid confusion, particularly about the separation of male and female voters.
- Improve water facilities at polling stations, ensuring an adequate number of taps for voters. Address sanitation issues with regular cleaning and maintenance.
- Enforce a strict no-smoking policy within polling station premises, especially during peak hours. Provide designated smoking areas outside the premises to maintain a professional and respectful environment.
- Political parties should be encouraged to actively include female representatives in their camps outside polling stations.
- To address the undue influence outside the polling stations, it is recommended to increase surveillance and monitoring outside polling stations to detect and address incidents of undue influence promptly.
- Political parties shall engage with voters prior to the voting day to educate voters about the voting procedures.

Remarks on Trans-Inclusion:

The consequences of backlash and judgment by the Federal Shaira Court on the status of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 were evident during General Election 2024. Transgender voters were not encouraged, mobilized, or supported by any of the political parties' election campaigns. None of the parties prioritized to allocate reserved seats or party tickets for any of the transgender candidates. The voter turnout among transgender individuals on election day was notably low, raising concerns about the effectiveness of the Transgender Protection Act, of 2018, and the overall performance of relevant entities in ensuring an inclusive electoral process. As previously discussed, potential reasons for the lack of trans-voter participation and exclusion in the political process have been explored.

To address this issue, it is recommended that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) initiate targeted campaigns focused on trans-awareness regarding elections and voting procedures. Comprehensive data on registered trans voters should be shared collaboratively with civil society organizations to mobilize resources effectively. Additionally, political parties need to be accountable for not allocating party tickets to transgender candidates. To further facilitate trans-candidates, waiving the nomination fee for them to contest elections is advisable.

Efforts to resolve the issue of Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs) should prioritize reflecting the preferred gender identity expression of transgender individuals, and this information should be accurately represented in electoral rolls. Furthermore, every Form-47 should include a dedicated column for transgender persons to track their voter turnout in elections.

ANNEXURE – I

Sr No.	Observer	NA & PA Constituency	Polling Station No.	Registered Voters ⁷			Total Vote Cast ⁸		
				Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1	Naheed Akhtar (Disable Person)	NA-47 ICT-II	PS No.202 PS No.205 PS No.206 PS No.165 PS No.168 PS No.176	433, 200	227, 175	206, 025	252, 916 (58.38%)	142,995	109,921
2	Shayan Imran Gul	NA-46 ICT-I	PS No.227 PS No.223 PS No.231 PS No.233 PS No.237 PS No.239 PS No.240 PS No.329 PS No.331 PS No.332	350581	183925	166656	149586 (43%)	Gender-segregated data is missing on Form-47	Gender-segregated data is missing on Form-47
3	Maham Javed	NA-48 ICT-III	PS No.1 PS No.2 PS No.3 PS No.4 PS No.5 PS No.6 PS No.7 PS No.104 PS No.105 PS No.106 PS No.107 PS No.109	299, 247	157, 305	141, 942	182,853 (61.10%)	100,264	82,589
4	Nadeem Ahmad (Transgender)	NA-46 ICT-I	PS No.227 PS No.223 PS No.231 PS No.233 PS No.237 PS No.239 PS No.240 PS No.329 PS No.331 PS No.332	350581	183925	166656	149586 (43%)	Gender-segregated data is missing on Form-47	Gender-segregated data is missing on Form-47
5	Yasir Mehmood (Transgender)	NA-53 Rawalpindi-II PP-10, Rawalpindi-IV	PS No.24 PS No.42 PS No.45 PS No.9 PS No.50 PS No.51 PS No.38 PS No.39	401, 376	207, 590	193, 786	213,016 (53.07%)	114,713	98,303
6	Zoya Chaudary	NA-74 Sialkot-V	PS No.264 PS No.277	539,393	289,189	122,734	273, 236 (50.66%)	148,466	103,618

⁷ T= Total, M=Male, F=Female

⁸ All these numbers are quoted from ECP website by Consulting form-47

7		PP-53 Sialkot-X	PS No.283 PS No.284 PS No.282 PS No.327 PS No.328 PS No.329 PS No.330						
	Asghar Khan	NA-116 Sheikhupura-IV PP-144	PS No.127 PS No.216 PS No.213 PS No.164 PS No.165 PS No.167 PS No.168 PS No.169 PS No.171 PS No.170	582565	323287	259278	582,565 (51.58%)	179,174	121,340
8		NA-79 Gujranwala-III PP-67 Gujranwala-IX	PS No.309 PS No.310 PS No.312 PS No.313 PS No.314 PS No.315 PS No.316 PS No.317 PS No.318 PS No.319	599, 139	329,205	269,934	303,278 (50.62%)	179,975	123,303
	Uzma Yaqoob								
9		NA-262 Quetta-I PB-42 Quetta-V	PS No.23 PS No.119 PS No.72 PS No.54 PS No.30 PS No.47 PS No.32 PS No.19 PS No.86 PS No.20	239,192	96,864	96,864	77,303 (32.32%)	54,129	23,174
	Shazia Malik								
10		NA-262 Quetta-I PB-42 Quetta-V	PS No.50 PS No.35 PS No.42 PS No.27 PS No.24 PS No.115 PS No.66 PS No.26	239,192	M142,328	96,864	77,303 (32.32%)	54,129	23,174
	Salma Khan								

