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**PAKISTAN: EXTREMISM LIMITS WOMEN'S
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND WEAKENS DEMOCRACY**

ISLAMABAD – Women belonging to the Awami National Party (ANP) charged recently that increasing militancy and talibanization of the NWFP and FATA are a major threat to their political participation.

Speaking at a workshop on strengthening women's political participation, office bearers from the ANP women's committee said that women are the first victims of the warlike situation in the province and questioned how they can participate in politics in a situation where they are not free to move on the streets.

The workshop was one of five being organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) as part of its new program to strengthen women's participation in political parties.

To address the threat of extremism, and other obstacles to women's full political participation, representatives of women wings from the ANP, PML-Q and MQM prepared in separate workshops detailed plans to strengthen their women's wing and to ensure more representation on their parties' decision-making bodies. The plans were made as a way to ensure women can play their due role in a democratic political environment. A similar workshop with the PPP women's wing was held last month.

The plans are part of a National Action Plan developed in last December by women from five political parties including PPP, PML-N, PML-Q, ANP, and MQM. The National Action Plan sets out standards to strengthen women's wings and increase women's representation on all party decision-making bodies.

In addition to the threat of extremism, ANP women also raised concerns about agreements made among different parties to ban women from voting during last year's elections. They demanded strict implementation of their party policy not to ban women from voting.

Speaking at the inaugural session ANP Provincial Secretary General Taj ud Din said that their party supports women's participation at all levels and it does not discriminate on the

basis of gender. He noted that over the years the ANP has made significant progress regarding women's role in decision making and they are committed to offering even more opportunities to strengthen women's role in their party.

PML-Q women's wing office bearers made plans to complete the organizational structure of the women's wing and to increase women's representation on the party's central working committee, central executive committee and other decision making bodies as a way to ensure their views are considered in important party decisions. They also committed to hold regular meetings, improve communication between the women's wing and the main party, institutionalize training and strengthen the election process in the women's wing.

Addressing the workshop PML-Q women's wing President Farukh Khan said that close cooperation and coordination amongst different levels of the women's wing is the key to their strength. She announced the formation of different committees within the women's wing including election coordination, inter-provincial coordination, media, fundraising, education and culture to make the women's wing more responsive.

MQM participants, including the head of the women's wing Kishwar Zehra focused on the need for more representation of women on the Rabta Committee and other decision making bodies of the party. They also identified training for members of the women's wing as a priority to help strengthen their political knowledge and role in the party.

Deputy Parliamentary Leader of MQM in the National Assembly Haider Abbas Rizvi in his remarks said that his party believes in an integrated and effective role for women from all walks of life including the political decision making process.

Former Canadian parliamentarian and Cabinet Minister Ms. Joy MacPhail shared her experience struggling for women's rights in her party and confirmed that women around the world face similar challenges. She stressed that unity, effective organization and collective action can help overcome many of these barriers and recommended that they start with small actions and build on successes to make further progress.

NDI Country Director Sheila Fruman said that it requires courage for women to get involved in politics, especially in Pakistan where they face extremist threats in addition to other obstacles. She noted, however, that parties that create more space for women stand to gain because women represent more than half the voters.

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The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. More information is available at www.ndi.org. NDI's programs in Afghanistan are supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development.