

CONSOLIDATED RESPONSE ON POLLING STATION MANAGEMENT

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and contributions submitted by Stephanie J. Lynn, Resident Senior Program Director, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Franck Boulin, Senior Technical Adviser Support to an Effective Lao National Assembly (SELNA) a programme implemented by the Lao NA with the support of the United Nations, and Fida Nasrallah, Chief Technical Adviser on Elections MDP – UNDP, and Andres del Castillo Chief Technical Adviser United Nations Electoral Support Team UN EST Dili, Timor-Leste.

Question:

1. The league of women voters believe that improved polling place management with well-trained workers is vital to encourage increased women's participation. How could that end be achieved? What should be done to improve polling place management with particular emphasis on how women move through the polling process?
2. Experience has shown that when polling stations are manned by women poll workers they are less prone to instances leading to women disenfranchisement. Macedonia is a glaring example where female staff employed at polling places effectively countered family voting during the recent elections. What are the best practices in recruitment of poll workers?

Introduction

In most countries a woman's right to vote is enshrined in law, leaving no formal legal barriers to the electoral participation of women. In practice, however, many obstacles still keep women from casting their vote. The hurdles can be daunting, especially for women looking to run for office and for women in post-conflict situations, and are often difficult to overcome.

This consolidated response will consider how polling station management can increase women's electoral participation. While polling station management offers no quick fix for the low level of women's electoral participation in some parts of the world, it can make a substantial difference on voting day. This response will first highlight the key issues and will then focus on three key aspects of polling station management:

1. Accessibility: how can location, public transport provisions and so forth facilitate the voting process for women?

2. Staff and Staff Training: how can polling station staff improve women's electoral participation, and what training should they receive?
3. Security: how can polling station management improve security and alleviate safety concerns, so that more women are encouraged to make their way to the ballot box?

Women's participation in the electoral process

The level of women's electoral participation differs across the world and is largely context-driven. In addition to widely varying social and political systems, a state's religious and cultural practices play an important role in shaping women's electoral experiences.

Countries with a predominantly Muslim population are often associated with low levels of women's political participation, which is said to flow from the religious and cultural segregation between men and women. In Afghanistan, women's electoral participation remains disappointingly limited:

"Afghanistan held its second presidential and provincial council elections on August 20th. The conditions under which the elections took place were extremely difficult, primarily because of the security situation that may have kept many people from participating. In the end, it is estimated that over 4 million people voted, about 38% of whom were women. These turnout results have not been (and probably cannot be) verified because the data collection/IT system was so poor and the level of fraud was extremely high."

While religion is often pinpointed as the key factor constraining women's voting levels, research indicates that the dynamics behind these processes are often more complex. In Indonesia, the largest and most populated Muslim country, the issue of women's political participation in elections is not limited to women being denied the right or opportunity to vote on religious grounds. The underlying causes of low participation in elections, both for women (and men), are linked to religion, local customs, security issues, and family voting; so far, however, no conclusive evidence exists:

"..... the phenomenon of non-participation in elections could also give a different situation. In Indonesia, non-participation in elections (or "golput" – white group for not choosing anything¹) is reported as a growing phenomenon in the country. Interpretations of this experience vary widely. However, no disaggregated data between abstaining men and women have so far been made publicly available. This should be investigated thoroughly

¹ In Indonesia, each party associates with a colour. People who do not choose or have no clear preferences are referred to as the 'white group' – those who abstain.

in order to evaluate if this is or is not a side effect of “family voting”.” (Franck Boulin, Senior Technical Adviser support to Lao National Assembly).

Voting impediments are not limited to the Muslim world and are not exclusively rooted in religion; rather, they affect women in all societies that still hold a limited view of women’s roles in public life. As the iKNOW Politics consolidated response on women in traditional and conservative societies underlines, women often face resistance both from their families and the society as a whole to their participation in political processes. In some cases women do not have access to sufficient information to make an informed political decision and they are pressured by their families to vote for a male candidate². Such instances of ‘family voting’ remain widespread and are difficult to tackle. How, then, can polling station management make a difference?

Election Management Bodies

Overseeing the polling management of individual stations is the responsibility of every state’s national Election Management Body (EMB). These EMBs set out guidelines for polling station management, weighing in on every aspect of the electoral process. As a result, the composition and approach of these EMBs is crucial in safeguarding the measures proposed above to encourage greater women’s participation in elections. Having greater female representation on these EMBs is paramount; not only to affect the necessary changes and guidelines, but also to increase the visibility of women in the highest echelons of the electoral process. The following pages will discuss how these EMBs can improve a polling station’s accessibility, security, and staff management with a view to increasing women’s participation in the electoral process.

1. Accessibility

Accessibility is first and foremost a practical issue:

“Ensuring that polling stations are well laid out, preventing congestion, having separate entrances and exits to polling stations will streamline the operation, reduce queues, reduce waiting time and encourage voters, women included, to vote. In addition to proper management, the location of polling stations is also important for increasing women’s participation. Polling centres that are too far to get to will pose additional challenges; if the place is too far to walk to, or too expensive to get to, then voters, including women, will be disenfranchised.” (Fida Nasrallah)

² iKNOW Politics Consolidated Response on the Prevention of Family Voting. 2009
<http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/10863>

As Fida Nasrallah points out, physical limitations should not be underestimated. To increase women's electoral participation, their effort should be minimised: voting must be as quick, easy and cheap as possible. This requires that polling stations be placed in central locations and that public transport to and from these stations be free of charge. Stephanie Lynn also notes that childcare facilities should be provided for those women who cannot leave their children at home. In addition, voting hours should take into account voters' work patterns, special provisions should be made for the disabled, and arrangements should be made for those who cannot attend the voting station(s) in their electoral district on voting day.

Additionally, Election Management Bodies can choose to set up women-only stations. While it is often more complex to organise two separate stations, this is a sound solution for states and regions where strong male/female segregation persists. A widely used option in Afghanistan, for example, separate stations have been quite successful in drawing more women to the ballot box. The physical separation of men and women will not only make the voting process more accessible to women, it can also assist in lowering (if not eradicating) family voting, as mentioned above. It should be noted, however, that this policy is not always successful; in Pakistan, for example, the introduction of women-only stations has not been very successful.

As a final point, in highly conservative societies it is advisable to tap into local customs and make as much use of the already available resources as possible. This can include setting up polling stations in locations people are familiar and comfortable with, adjusting voting times to local needs and customs, and increasing the involvement from religious and community leaders or other parties that can be considered as 'neutral' and non-partisan.

As a general point, while the integrity of the electoral process must be ensured at all times, higher participation rates – both for men and women – can only be achieved by integrating the electoral process in national, regional and even local contexts as much as possible. In light of this, international organisations and NGOs providing electoral assistance should look to preserve a balance between enforcing electoral standards, methods and procedures, and respecting and integrating – to the largest extent possible – the needs and customs of the voters concerned. This is especially challenging in post-conflict situations, where lingering tension and unresolved local disputes as well as also infrastructural damage and population displacements, often impact strongly on the accessibility of the electoral process. In such cases, it is the responsibility of the Electoral Management Body to guarantee that each and every voter can reasonably make his or her way to the polling station.

2. Security

Electoral participation requires that voters feel safe enough to leave their houses and make their way to the polling station. While security is an issue for all of those involved, women in particular might be deterred from voting because of safety concerns. These concerns are often legitimate: social and political unrest may mount on election day, and even 'stable' states can witness sporadic violence or harassment of voters. Widespread or targeted violence on election day remains more rare, but still features significantly in a number of states.

For electoral participation to be as widespread as possible, threats of violence must be minimised and all possible measures must be taken to ensure voters' safety on the day:

“Without sufficient guarantees of security at all stages of the election process (and “sufficient” varies widely according to each country’s social and political environment), there can be no guarantee of election freedom, fairness, and integrity.”³

Security is the responsibility of each individual polling station management. As discussed above, maximum integration with local customs and a clear and constant awareness of local needs is key. This is not only to ensure the safety of those involved and the integrity of the voting process, but also to instil in voters the confidence that taking part in the election does not expose them to any risks. Both on the way to and from the polling station, as well as in and around the station itself, clear directions and appropriate security measures – if needed, for example, the presence of police or military forces - should contribute to a safe environment that encourages women to take part and cast their vote.

3. Staff and Staff Training

Staff and staff training is the third and arguably most crucial aspect of successful polling station management. At the most basic level, polling staff are there to guide voters through the voting process. Especially in countries with complex voting mechanisms, a multitude of political parties and candidates, and high illiteracy rates, polling staff are indispensable bridges between the voter and his or her correctly cast vote. Staff should fully understand the electoral procedures, be sensitive to local culture and customs, and be able to react

³ Voting Site Security. ACE Network. <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/vof/vof04/default/?searchterm=voting%20site%20security>

swiftly and efficiently when problems arise. This is essential for the smooth running of the electoral process in general, and for the participation of women in particular.

Well-trained polling workers also play a key role in the guidance of illiterate voters. Those unable to read and write may choose not to make their way to the ballot box because they assume that they will not understand instructions. As women continue to be disproportionately illiterate, especially in Africa and Asia, the impact this has on the level of women's electoral participation can be quite substantial. While illiteracy remains a major stumbling block when it comes to electoral participation, there are many ways to surmount it. By providing verbal instructions, displaying clear visual aids, and making use of colour-coding and symbols, illiterate men and women can cast their vote independently and successfully. In addition to increased participation, these measures will also significantly reduce the number of invalid or incorrectly cast votes.

It should also be pointed out that innovative practices in electoral processes, such as electronic voting, come with a whole new set of challenges that require a gender-balanced approach. Electronic voting reduces the number of invalid votes and is an excellent fraud prevention measure, but it also makes the voting process considerably more complex for those not familiar with such tools. Women, and older women in particular, may struggle with these innovations; in such cases, it is important that polling staff can assist those in need to understand the system and cast their vote.

Finally, to help achieve all the measures described above, polling stations should ensure that a gender balance is preserved among their staff. Having female polling station staff is crucial for women voters to feel comfortable. Especially with respect to security measures such as full body checks, employing only or mainly male staff could will a detrimental effect on women's voting turnout. Polling stations, however, often struggle to recruit women workers; Afghanistan, among others, has had difficulties in this area:

“In some places, like Afghanistan, they have separate polling places staffed by women. The challenge is to find and train enough women to conduct the process. This can help in societies where women usually must be accompanied by men if in the company of other men. These polling place officials should also be ready to assist women with low levels of literacy in marking their ballots. Election law provisions to allow family members/volunteers who sign an oath of assistance/secrecy to assist people/women to vote is important too.”

To successfully implement these policies, vacancies for polling workers should be widely advertised in places accessible to women, while every effort should be made to ensure that their applications are processed fairly and, if necessary, separately from those of male applicants (Fida Nasrallah). In addition, quota for women polling staff could be helpful in this respect; the 2007 national elections in Timor Leste, for example, employed provisions to ensure a gender balanced in their polling staff. Finally, the polling station management should provide sufficient training prior to the day, as well as strict guidelines to be adhered to at all times.

Conclusion

Polling station management can help overcome the constraints that prevent women from voting. While polling station management alone cannot solve the issue of low levels of women's electoral participation, it plays a critical role in drawing more women to the ballot box on voting day. There is, however, no one-size-fits-all approach; it is the responsibility of each EMB, and of each polling station management, to ensure that all possible precautions are taken to stimulate women's electoral participation and encourage women to take up their right to vote.

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