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**PANEL I**

**Women's equal participation in conflict prevention,  
management and conflict resolution and in  
post-conflict peace-building**

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## **ENHANCING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN POST-CONFLICT COUNTRIES**

This paper focuses on the discussions that took place in the Expert Group Meeting on “Enhancing women’s participation in electoral processes in post-conflict countries” which was held in Glen Cove, New York from 19-22 January 2004. The meeting was convened by the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in collaboration with the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations in order to contribute to a further understanding of the thematic issue of “women’s equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution in post-conflict peace-building,” one of the thematic issues under discussion by the Commission on the Status of Women in its current forty-eighth session.

The recommendations that were finally adopted by the Expert Group will not be presented here since these have been made available to you in document EGM/ELEC/2004/REPORT. Rather, the paper sheds light on the discussions and issues that were raised prior to arriving at the final recommendations. Statements such as this one can never truly capture the entire process, reflect the true flavour nor do the meeting full justice. The diversity of experiences and the genuine interest and commitment of each person attending that meeting led to discussions that were stimulating and thought provoking. The synergy that evolved allowed the group to come up with one of the most comprehensive lists of action-oriented recommendations regarding the role of women in electoral processes in post-conflict countries, many of which are fully applicable to non-conflict electoral processes as well.

Electoral processes in post-conflict countries provide an opportunity to enhance women’s participation and contribute to the achievement of gender equality. While post-conflict elections are only one aspect of peace building and reconstruction, they can contribute to building sustainable peace. During the last few years, the role of women in peace processes has received more attention and, more specifically, it is now understood that there can be no sustainable peace without the full participation of women and the integration of gender perspectives in all support to post-conflict countries, including their electoral processes.

During the meeting, the expert group reviewed twelve papers, then discussed and analyzed electoral processes in post-conflict countries and the obstacles, lessons learned and good practices in enhancing women’s participation in these processes. Based on its discussions, the expert group meeting adopted recommendations on the incorporation of gender perspectives into the phases of post-conflict elections and the roles of the various actors in support of women’s full participation.

### **Overview of the Discussions**

Much of what is generally known about women’s participation in electoral processes in non-conflict situations is relevant also to post-conflict situations: psychological barriers, inequality of resources, discriminatory cultural patterns,

indirect discrimination and the lack of clear rules. However, the discussions did take into consideration that women in different countries do not all share the same experiences. Hence, deliberations took into consideration the diversity of the situations, cultural differences, prominence of the role of political parties, strengths and weaknesses of civil society actors, and the electoral systems that are put into place, which are usually strongly linked to the nature of the conflict in that particular country.

Exacerbating this, post-conflict electoral processes do have certain characteristics that pose an additional set of challenges to women's participation. These may deal with the tight time constraints, which require that women be exceptionally aware and well-organized to take advantage of what has been agreed. Additionally, women may be disadvantaged by illiteracy or access requirements in registration and polling procedures, as well as by lack of awareness of ballot secrecy, or that the individual has a right to vote without being pressured to vote along family lines.

Over and above these domestic constraints, international observation teams have not always been gender-balanced nor gender sensitive enough despite a general agreement of the importance of such factors. This has sometimes marginalized gender issues from mainstream observation tasks.

The situation of internally displaced persons and refugees are of particular concern, in terms of registration requirements, including identity and residence documentation; citizenship and nationality issues. Difficulties of women to provide the necessary documents may relate to the process of displacement and discriminatory practices, such as the non-registration of the birth of girls, even though boys are being registered.

Women's organizations play an important role in supporting the participation of women as voters and as candidates in elections. In some countries, they have strengthened their position by developing networks and joint platforms/action plans as well as innovative approaches to engage traditional power structures. Capacity-building for women's representation have been successful together with efforts to strengthen women's overall status in a given country and change stereotypical attitudes. The latter often create psychological barriers for women's full involvement in public life, the existence of strong national mechanisms for women can influence attention to the gender dimensions of the overall electoral process.

### **Thematic Issues**

From the general discussion, a continuum of thematic issues emerged which were all discussed in working groups, with each group focusing on these issues from the point of view of three major actors: government actors, international actors and civil society actors.

The themes that were reviewed were:

The Legal Framework  
Political representation/ political parties  
Voter education/ civic education  
Election administration  
Election observation

Within these themes, several cross-cutting issues were identified, such as: enfranchisement, resources, media, training and special measures.

Each thematic area was discussed by all the working groups with regards to the challenges that women face within each area; the best practices and lessons learned; and the priority actions required in each area. Based on these discussions, the working groups came up with recommendations -by actor- to further enhance the participation of women in electoral processes in post-conflict countries.

## **1. Legal Framework**

The legal framework inclusive of constitutional, political, legislative and electoral laws and regulations must provide the fundamental basis for democratic elections with full participation of women. Post-conflict situations often provide a unique opportunity through peace agreements for radical changes in a country's legislative framework. Countries may thus adopt a new constitution, laws establishing political bodies and/or election laws as part of fulfilling peace agreements.

There are various challenges that face women's electoral participation that could potentially arise from the legal framework adopted in a post-conflict country. Primarily, the level of women's involvement, or lack of, in the consultations that lead to the development of legislation that directly affects their participation in electoral processes, both as voters and candidates, is a major factor. Additionally, equality provisions in constitutions, and laws related to citizenship and residency could further hinder women's participation in electoral processes. Electoral laws and regulations that are not sensitive enough to levels of literacy or to women's position within the country's over-all cultural traditions are also challenges that should be addressed.

The best practices identified within this thematic issue include the direct participation of women at peace tables and in constitutional negotiations. National women mechanisms have also been involved in reviewing all draft legislation related to electoral processes to ensure compliance with constitutional provisions and gender sensitivity. International actors, in this respect, were seen as crucial in their capacity to encourage the adoption of constitutional provisions and laws that would guarantee the opportunity for equal participation by women.

The priority action in the legal framework area is to ensure that the relevant laws and instruments give full expression to the rights of women as set out in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as other relevant international

agreements, and establish mechanisms for ensuring that those rights will, in practice, be enjoyed. The recommendations include several practical and action-oriented measures, inclusive of special measures such as quotas, to ensure that legal frameworks, and more specifically with regard to electoral processes, are conducive to enhancing women's participation in electoral processes.

## **2. Political Representation and Political Parties**

Challenges to women's political representation in political parties stem from the fact that most parties are male-dominated structures, where women's participation and gender equality issues are of low priority. Women's wings, if established, are often marginalized. Party lists are often constructed in a way that works against the election of women candidates. Sometimes internal party elections are based on systems of patronage and familial or social connections, which further act to exclude women. It is important to point out here that while the nature of the party may be able to evolve over time, the tight deadlines for electoral processes which often apply in a post-conflict situation mean that this is unlikely to be very helpful in the short run.

While there may be a proliferation of parties in post-conflict situations, this does not translate into increased opportunities for women's political participation. Despite the real or perceived lack of women candidates' capacity, often funding for training and capacity building is not available for women.

All these challenges are further exacerbated by women's family responsibilities which may constitute an obstacle to their playing an active role in politics. This will be particularly the case if, in an insecure situation, taking on such a role could put them or their families at risk of intimidation or attack.

Best practices discussed included establishing alliances between women NGOs and women party members to strengthen women's candidature and ensuring strict enforcement mechanisms that guarantee that women will be placed in electable positions on political party lists. If this stipulation were not complied with, then electoral management boards would reject the party list.

In the light of the Beijing Platform for Action, the priority action in this area is for governments to implement processes which give political parties the strongest incentives to involve women fully in all aspects of the parties' operations, including, if necessary, mandatory requirements (e.g. nomination of women candidates and internal party democracy) which a party must satisfy to gain or retain legal recognition. As for civil society organizations, they can play an important role as monitors by researching the work of political parties, their platforms and how their elected officials perform on issues of importance to women. International actors, on the other hand, are well positioned to assist with training all political party members (men and women) on gender awareness; encourage parties to develop platforms that address issues of special concern to women as well as train journalists on effective coverage of women candidates and issues.

### **3. Voter Education and Civic Education**

Women cannot be voted into office when they lack visibility. Hence voter education can focus the spotlight on women candidates and discussion of issues related to gender equality. Voter education campaigns can also address fundamental issues that pose obstacles to women's political participation. However, the lack of resources for voter education often poses an obstacle. Social attitudes regarding women as leaders may also lead to overlooking gender issues in voter education programmes.

In post-conflict countries, the new electoral processes may be unfamiliar to the majority of voters. Also the delayed development of electoral procedures may leave inadequate time for the development and implementation of voter and civic education programmes. Voter education may be provided in a manner which makes it accessible, or less accessible, to women (e.g. written forms which illiterate people will be unable to use). Voter education may be unavailable in places where refugees or internally displaced persons are located. Furthermore, voter education may be made available only at times or in places which are inconvenient for women, either because of their caring responsibilities or local traditions.

Some of the best practices identified in the area of voter education include developing guidelines for organizations that conduct voter education to ensure that a gender perspective is included in curriculum development. Voter education for youth was also identified as a best practice, through having voter education programmes reaching out to schools through youth parliaments and conducting "mock elections."

The priority actions in the area of voter education include having governments provide sufficient and sustained resources for neutral and accurate voter and civic education to ensure that all voters understand their electoral rights and responsibilities, and will be able to cast valid votes. Moreover, to enhance understanding of election-related issues, international actors were seen as key to support links between party leaderships and women at the grassroots level. It was also suggested that male community leaders, party officials and religious leaders be involved in endorsing and participating in the training and education programmes of women.

### **4. Election Administration**

The challenges to enhancing women's participation in this area are numerous. However, strong and efficient election management boards are the major factor in ensuring effective election administration.

Ensuring women's equitable political participation can be influenced by the logistics and mechanisms in place for running an election. Before the election, requirements for registration and for documentation can discriminate against those women who do not have identification in their own name or against internally displaced persons and refugees who have lost identification documents. On the day of the election critical obstacles may include the lack of facilities for women to register and vote, including location, transportation to voting polls and the duration and hours

of operation. Other obstacles on election day are lack of training for election administrators and the low representation of women on election management boards.

Women may be disadvantaged by inappropriate polling procedures. Access to polling stations can give rise to difficulties similar to those which can arise in relation to registration centres, and badly designed polling precincts can add to the problems encountered. Since polling involves processing the entire adult population of a country in a very short time, often in a single day, long queues of voters may form, which may be most uncomfortable for women voters, particularly the elderly and those with children. The problem will be made worse if the hours of polling are badly chosen.

Actions which compromise the secrecy of the ballot are a particular concern. Women may be subject to intimidation or threats designed to make them vote in a particular way, and/or to reveal how they have voted. The presence of people such as party agents at a voting station has the potential to intimidate voters, especially if the agents in question have a history of involvement in abuse of power, or intimidation. The secrecy of the vote may also be compromised by polling procedures which make blind or illiterate voters dependent on someone else to mark their votes.

Complex ballot marking requirements, and strict rules for the validity of ballots, can cause votes to be discarded even when the voter has attempted to indicate a clear intention. This is likely to impact in particular on the less educated and literate voters, a group in which women may well be over-represented.

The best practices identified by the expert group may seem like small measures not sufficient to overcome the challenges outlined above, yet each in its own way has contributed to furthering women's participation. For example, in countries where strict social traditions prevail, separate polling stations for women and men were established in conformity with local tradition. The registration of women voters and the staffing of polling centres were also conducted by women.

In countries where female illiteracy rates are still unacceptably high, logos or photographs are used on the ballot to allow the illiterate voter to identify her candidate or party list. Although the post-election phase was not included as one of the major areas of focus in group discussions, some best practices identified in this domain deserve mention such as enabling women to establish cross-party caucuses as a method to strengthen women's role in elected bodies. Some parliaments have also noticed a marked change in their culture of work in terms of working procedures and types of issues addressed.

The priority action identified in this area is for governments to establish electoral procedures which do not discriminate against women, whatever their situation, and which are administered by neutral bodies that are sensitive to gender issues and in which women are fully represented at all levels. Civil society organizations are key in advocating for such actions. They can also monitor the voter registration process as well as polling to ensure that women are guaranteed their independence in the voting process. From their perspective, international actors can play an important role in guaranteeing the quality of the election administration by,

for example, training of election officials, ensuring that when appointing election management boards these are gender balanced.

## **5. Election observation**

Both international observation missions and local observers face challenges regarding gender issues. Primarily, and similar to other aspects of election processes, women are often excluded from the observation process. International observation missions are often not trained to recognize specific obstacles that women face in electoral processes, including discrimination and harassment, hence these missions are often ignorant of gender equality issues.

Observers may meet only with party leadership groups, rather than with candidates, which deprives women candidates of the ability to raise their concerns directly with observers.

On the other hand, local observers who may not be faced with language barriers or time constraints, may be totally unaware of gender issues. In more traditional societies, they may even consciously overlook such issues.

Some of the best practices highlighted in the meeting included the use of a handbook or gender check lists for monitoring women's participation in elections, prepared by different entities. Another example is that of a country in which local NGOs are allowed to register as election observers.

The priority action in this area of election observation is for governments to facilitate the observation of elections in a manner which gives due priority to gender issues. Amongst other roles, international actors are there to encourage all governments to invite gender balanced international observation missions and encourage gender balanced observation by non-partisan observer groups. For observation groups, the priority action is to ensure that women are adequately represented and that election observers are trained on gender issues in electoral processes.