

■ ELECTION COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN SECRETARIAT

No participation of women at the decision-making level

Our correspondent

Islamabad

Among total strength of 2,288 employees in Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) Secretariat, there are only 21 women whereas there is no participation of women at the decision making level.

The statistics were shared by Aurat Foundation Representative Farkhanda Aurangzaib at a press conference organised to launch a paper titled 'Women's Participation in the Upcoming 2013 Elections: Pakistan: Pakistan's International Law Commitments under CEDAW' jointly produced by Aurat Foundation and Democracy Reporting International (DRI). The paper presents recommendations aimed at improving fulfilment of women's right to participate in political and public life as enshrined under the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Both groups called for different branches of the state to provide gender-disaggregated data, meaningfully consult with women's groups, and undertake additional special measures to promote women's political participation in Pakistan and identified areas where Pakistan is not compliant with the requirements for political participation of women protected under CEDAW, ratified by Pakistan in 1996. They said that significant problems in Pakistan persist with regard to participation of women as voters as well as candidates. "Only twenty percent of members of the National Assembly and eighteen percent of the provincial assemblies are women. Merely three percent of directly elected seats are held by women in the national and the provincial assemblies. Moreover, there are reportedly

eleven million fewer women registered as voters than men in the electoral rolls," said Executive Director Rozan Maria Rashid.

Aurat Foundation and DRI recommend that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra) provide publicly accessible gender-disaggregated data broken down by administrative units in order to enable effective scrutiny of women's political participation; and that political parties be required to publicly provide regular and standardized information about the number and proportion of women in their executive and leadership positions. The ECP carries special responsibility to promote greater participation and in protecting the rights of women voters. It could carry out specialized voter education; increase the integrity of polling stations,

improve accessibility to polling (including through recruitment of female staff), undertake stronger action against those curtailing the rights of women voters, and promote scrutiny by women observers and agent. The Aurat-DRI paper also supports additional measures by parties and civil society to safeguard the rights of women voters and candidates.

Farkhanda stressed the need for political parties to review and strengthen their commitments towards equal participation of women. "Parties could promote and ensure greater inclusion of women in decision-making and leadership positions within parties", she said. She added that political parties could be required to nominate a minimum proportion of women candidates to contest on winnable general seats.

Madiha Farhan from DRI stated that equal electoral par-

ticipation of women is essential to the legitimacy of democratic processes and structures. "It is essential that the relevant state organs take all necessary measures to eliminate discrimination against women as committed to under treaties such as the CEDAW and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)."

Speakers at the conference proposed that additional resources, greater security, and special media coverage and policies for women candidates is needed in order to provide more equitable opportunities to women contesting on general seats. They pointed out that one of the recommendations in the paper is greater access to remedy in election disputes for women through broadening of the category of those permitted to file election petitions to include voters, civil society organizations and parties.