

Women prohibited from casting votes

GEM MISSION URGES ECP TO DECLARE POLLS NULL, VOID

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Although overall female voters turned out in big number and it was heartwarming that women in Pakistan refused to bow down, yet in areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa women were barred from casting their votes. Due to this flagrant violation of election rules and code of conduct, the Gender Election Monitoring (GEM) Mission calls upon the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to declare elections null and void in those constituencies where women were barred from voting.

The Gender Election Monitoring (GEM) Mission - a joint mission of Aurat Foundation and Gender Concern International, the Netherlands based organisation - made this demand in its preliminary report that was shared at a press conference on Monday.

The GEM observation mission had sent out 110 observers in Pakistan to monitor election activities from gender perspective throughout the day at 555 women polling stations in major cities of Pakistan. The mission observed elections in Karachi, Peshawar, Lahore, Islamabad, Rawalpindi and some other areas in Pakistan.

The Head of the GEM Mission in Pakistan Sabra Bano along with the Deputy Head of Mission Magda De Meyer and Coordinator of Domestic GEM Mission Farkhanda Aurangzaib held the press conference and delivered the preliminary findings of the mission.

Sabra Bano informed that in Upper Dir and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa women were barred from voting through political party agreements or under threatening circumstances.

"In Upper Dir it was the case in the entire district and only one woman was able to cast her vote in UC Darora. In Lower Dir women were stopped from voting in seven constituencies, and in Buner district women were not allowed to vote in 17 UCs. Women were also barred from voting in several constituencies in Mardan, DI Khan, Nowshera, Batagram and Malakand."

Though according to ECP, no transport was allowed by parties yet this was violated all over the country. Voters reported that they were being offered money to vote for a certain party, she said. In some polling stations political agents took over the organisation and tried to 'guide' the female voters.

In other areas campaigning was going on inside polling stations, showing clearly party signs, wearing T-shirts, serving tea and even a sticker was noticed of a political party on a polling booth.

Although there were more polling stations closer to the women's homes, the facility itself often was not up to mark. 'We noticed many stations that really were too small, where there was no place for observers and party agents to sit and where it was burning hot inside. Moreover, this prevented privacy for the voters. In another place several mixed polling stations were all in one room, which led to complete chaos.

The complaints of inadequate physical space within the polling booths were received from most of the polling stations. There were no washrooms for polling staff as well as women voters at most of the stations'.

She also highlighted that in some stations furniture was not sufficient and comfortable enough to sit on all the day. In some other polling stations, for instance in Karachi, material was supplied very late and also lacking at some places e.g. seals for the boxes, ink, envelopes, extra white boxes. Normally material should be delivered a day before but in some cases it was reached the polling booth at 11:00pm.

Police and security staff often found male in female polling stations and women police personnel were seen only at a few places.

In Sargodha, women voted for the first time in the history in union councils Lilliani and Moazamabad.

The mission in its report regretted that although the ECP is an 'all men's club', yet it also recognised that it did an enormous effort to reach out to female voters and to set up as many polling stations so that women did not have to cover great distances (the 2km rule).

The introduction of SMS facility to find out where to vote and under which number, was very successful with literate and young women. However, illiterate women and women from more rural areas remained dependant on political party camps to get to know their polling station location, block code and serial numbers.