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Gender-friendly elections

# Repolling recommended in constituencies where women were not allowed to vote

Cites lack of facilities, voter intimidation, literacy as problems

**NEWSDESK**

A team of election monitors have demanded that polls be declared void in constituencies where women were barred from voting.

Gender Concerns International on Monday demanded that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) nullify the results and call fresh elections in every constituency where women were barred from voting due to flagrant violations of the ECP's code of conduct. The demand was made during a press con-

ference organised to share the preliminary findings of the Gender Election Monitoring (GEM) mission, a joint operation by the Aurat Foundation and Dutch NGO Gender Concerns International.

The GEM mission sent out 100 domestic and 10 international observers to monitor election activities at 555 women's polling stations nationwide from a gender perspective. Sabra Bano, the head of the GEM mission, started with the positives, such as the fact that in Sargodha, women voted for the first time in history in Lilliani and Moazamabad union councils.

However, she expressed

concern over areas in Upper Dir and other parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa where women were barred from voting through informal agreements between political parties or under threatening circumstances.

She said that in Upper Dir, only one woman in Darora union council cast her vote, while in six polling stations in Lower Dir saw not even a single woman voted. The situation was no different in NA-28 Buner, where women only cast votes in 10 out of 27 union councils, and parts of NA-5 Nowshera, NA-10 Mardan, NA-22 Battagram, NA-25 Dera Ismail Khan, and NA-35 Malakand, where

The report identifies a few polling stations where female polling officers were being 'assisted' by their husbands or fathers

women were not allowed to vote at many polling stations.

"The situation is not a true reflection of democracy. The ECP should take notice of this and nullify the result," she stressed.

The report commends the ECP's efforts to reach out to female voters and set up more polling stations to make reaching them more convenient. It also praises the intro-

duction of an SMS facility to find out where to vote and under which number, as it made voting significantly easier for literate women.

**In and around polling stations**

Some of the polling stations lacked facilities such as washrooms or drinking water for polling staffers, while material such as seals for the boxes, ink, and envelopes were not delivered on time, causing delays in voting.

The report identifies a few polling stations where female polling officers were being 'assisted' by their husbands or fathers.

The police and security

staff at female polling stations were mostly male, and not always aware of the exact procedures, which the report explains with an example that observers were allowed to enter polling places before they opened and were also allowed to assist in counting votes. It adds that there were cases where security staff did not allow women with children to enter polling stations.

Finally, the report cites urban women as having 'average' knowledge of voting procedures, but in rural areas and rural suburbs, women generally lacked information about voting, which "many political party agents have been found taking advantage of".