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## **Gender Affairs Committee (GA6)**

### *Strengthening Women’s Engagement in Elections*

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RESEARCH  
REPORT



**Forum:** Gender Affairs Committee (SA6)

**Issue:** Strengthening women's engagement in elections

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## Introduction

Throughout history, women have been traditionally excluded from both political and economic life. This situation is caused because of many reasons including gender discrimination, societal norms, and even some people who consciously try to keep women away from political life. One example of this is the fact that women face many obstacles in both national and local elections. For women candidates, it is often really difficult for them to run for a position both of the societal norms and insufficient resources or capacities. For women voters, there are other barriers that do not make voting easier for them such as polling stations (where people cast votes) being far away or unsafe places. All aside, most women are not being completely informed about how to vote, where to vote, and such alongside already not having the knowledge, skills, or data to analyze what's right or what's wrong.

Although a lot has improved since the suffrage movement about women's place in political life, there are still many steps to take for an equitable society where everyone has a voice. As Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes, every individual has the right to "take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives". This is an essential right for democracies to exist and properly function. Unfortunately, today many factors remain to block women's participation in engagement in political life, including local and national elections. Encouraging more women to engage in elections and political life will help us achieve greater gender equality all over the world.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Universal Suffrage:** Basically, suffrage is the right to vote in local and national elections as well as taking part in deciding on adopting or rejecting new law and legislation.

**Gender and Sex:** World Health Organization (WHO) defines sex according to biological terms while defining gender according to someone's own choice and manners.

**Gender Discrimination:** Gender discrimination is the unequal treatment and behaviors of people based on gender. It is basically treating someone worse or in a different way just because of their gender in any part of life. In this issue, we will be focusing more on gender discrimination against women in political life.

**Elections:** Cambridge Dictionary defines an election as "a time when people vote in order to choose someone for a political or official job".

**Secret ballot:** Ballot, or secret ballot, is the system most Member States use for people to vote anonymously, so they can vote for whoever they want. It is applied to achieve political privacy.

**Polling Stations:** A polling station is generally a place such as a school or community center where people come to vote during elections.

**Voter Registration:** Voter registration or voter enrollment is a key election process that determines who is eligible to vote and who's not as well as preventing people from voting for other people or multiple times. It basically establishes who can vote and who can not. People who didn't complete registration will not be able to vote; this is what most Member States apply.

**Feminism:** Feminism being a much more general term compared to others on this list, it is an ideology that is all about all genders having equal rights and accordingly, equal opportunities in all aspects of life.

## General Overview

### History of Women's Suffrage (Voting Rights)

Although today it's a right most of us take for granted, women throughout history have fought for decades to earn the right to suffrage; it was not easy. The suffrage movement for women all around the world generally took place in the mid-19th century, and one may consider it too late. Why it was "too late" is the fact that women had the fight for many other rights before the right to vote. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, although it was a ground-breaking document, it can not be denied that it was written by a group of all-white propertied males (with the exception of Eleanor Roosevelt). It did not consider the specific needs and rights of women or even the basic ones. Many documents were written after it was seen that one document was not enough, and at the end of the 19th century almost most Member States had allowed women to vote with the Universal Suffrage Movement.

### Problems Women Voters Face

Girls and women have the right to take place in civil society activities, vote in local and national elections, be elected, and have the opportunity of making their voices heard. When we are talking about the obstacles women face while voting, there are two categories: cultural constraints and logistical/strategical problems.

Cultural constraints can be about the expectations of society, patriarchal traditions, or even religion. For example, there are many cultural beliefs in Nigeria and Pakistan that tend to isolate women from social and political life. Religions such as Christianity and Islam also might cause women to feel ashamed of voting or feel like they are opposing their religion. For instance, women might feel uncomfortable voting in the same room as men because they have to remove their veil due to registration. This is just a simple example of how religion could stand in the way of women taking part in political life. If we were to take a more general look, how women perceive themselves could even be an obstacle. For example, many women around the world see it more appropriate for themselves to take part in domestic activities or they might not feel politically informed enough to go and cast a vote. This leads us to another problem,

illiteracy and lack of education, therefore lack of political knowledge. If an individual is raised in a society where girls and women are not valued, it is a high probability that they are not educated or even informed on how to vote. Additionally, since there are not many women leaders, women do not feel particularly encouraged to take part in political life.

The more technical aspect of the problems they face is logistical ones such as the distance between polling stations and their homes. The place of the polling station not being safe and physical insecurities resulting from it could also prevent women from voting. Because of the lack of education and illiteracy, some women may not even know how to do registration which causes the problem of lack of documentation. Many women in rural areas do not even have IDs or birth certificates. Other than these, they might not vote because of their responsibilities such as domestic chores. Their health could be a problem (maybe even pregnancy). Overall, not being economically independent and poverty is a major obstacle that keeps women from voting.

### **Problems Women Candidates Face**

It must be acknowledged that women have been increasingly taking more seats in political life, however, it can't be said for any country that gender equality has been accomplished. Most women who decide to run for leadership are not supported enough by the government and they often have insufficient resources to run a campaign. They are mostly excluded from the financial circles that include the wealthiest donors. Most voters judge women by their personal lives and families. Since people are not used to women candidates, they feel the need to have more proof for them to vote for her while this isn't the case with men candidates. Women candidates are expected to somehow prove themselves in a different way during their campaign. Even how a woman looks is under more scrutiny compared to men. Alongside all these, the men-made and already biased institutions and the system does not help. With all of these conditions, women suffer when they decide to run for a position, many women do not feel encouraged to run for a candidate and even feel scared.

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

### **UN Women**

Established in 2010, UN Women is one of the most prominent organizations in the world that has the ultimate goal of achieving gender equality and empowering women.

### **UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**

The CSW is considered to be the main intergovernmental organization that was exclusively dedicated to achieving gender equality before UN Women. Alongside promoting women's rights, they document what women go through all around the world and set global standards for gender equality.

### **Sweden**

The Nordic countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway seem to come closest to gender equality in women taking part in politics. Sweden has the highest share of women holding legislative seats with 47 percent. Having a feminist government and laws against gender discrimination, Sweden supports gender equality and believes that “everyone, regardless of gender, has the right to work and support themselves, to balance career and family life, and to live without the fear of abuse or violence”.

## Timeline of Events

<b>1946</b>	The UN Commission on the Status of Women was established.
<b>March 8, 1911</b>	The first International Women’s Day was held.
<b>1979</b>	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination was signed.
<b>1993</b>	Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women was adopted.
<b>1995</b>	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was convened by the UN.
<b>2010</b>	UN Women was established.

## Treaties and Events

*The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination:* This convention is known as an international treaty which is considered to be a bill of women’s rights. This is the convention that was formed after it was understood that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights did not take into consideration women’s rights.

*The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women:* This declaration is crucial because it is the first document explicitly talking about violence against women and providing national and international action suggestions.

*Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action:* This conference is known to be the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing the rights of women.

## Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Although there are many past solution attempts alongside many resolutions and treaties that were specifically formed in order to achieve gender equality, it can't be said that it has been achieved. Treaties in the past definitely caused international action, that's undeniable. For example, it's known that the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action brought to pass 274 legal and regulatory reforms in 174 countries. However, no matter how many more treaties or conventions are created, in the end, ensuring women's participation in elections and political life requires governments' special attention and effort. A different approach is needed: one that tackles the underlying reasons why the percentage of women voters is low.

## **Possible Solutions**

The first thing to do for the Member States is to make sure that women in their societies are completely aware of their right to vote and take part in political life. The perception that men are more dominant in politics needs to be changed, therefore the government should raise awareness and support women. Training women as effective leaders and voters is a must.

Governments can revise their national election system in a way that every woman has fair opportunities to register to vote and then vote, and campaign. For women who live far away from their polling stations or who do not have an opportunity to go there can be assisted by the government. For women who feel unsafe voting, the government can provide protection for those who request it (but also make it accessible). How voter registration needs to be done, how to do it etc. can be explained in a more simple way in order to make sure everyone gets it.

For a more long term solution, it is a must to invest in girls' and women's education. Creating opportunities for women in political and even business life is an investment that needs to be done for more democratic and equal societies. Greater investments in education need to be done because it's a fact that societies that women are more educated have a higher percentage of women voters.

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