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ELECTION COMMISSION OF BHUTAN

(Ensuring Free, Fair & Democratic Elections & Referendums)



ECB/(Media-09)/2014/

Dated: 16th of December 2014

Press Release

Seminar and Release of Reports on Study of the Determinants of Voter's Choice and Women's Participation in Elective Offices



The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) in the Seminar conducted today presented highlights and Released (1) the Report on the Study of the *Determinants of Voter's Choice and Women's Participation in Elective Offices* that was undertaken by the Commission earlier this year and (2) the Workshop Report of the Regional Consultation on the subject among the member EMBs of South Asia and other stakeholders held at Paro from 14th-15th of October 2014. The report had also been released jointly by the outgoing Chair, Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan and incoming Chair, Chief Election Commissioner of Nepal, FEMBoSA in the presence of the Heads of all Member EMBs at Kathmandu in November 2014.

The ECB undertook this Research Study not only as a follow-up to the Resolution adopted at the 4th Meeting of the Forum of the Election Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA) held in Thimphu but indeed with great commitment and interest in view of the concern of all member EMBs on low representation of women in elective offices in all the respective countries.



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The study was conducted with support from the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIDP), UN Women, and Royal Government of Bhutan with every effort made to ensure that it is relevant to our context and meets high scientific standards for reliable information to base future action. It provides basis for a good understanding of the real situation, in particular the factors that determine women's political and electoral participation as equal partners and constituents of the Bhutanese electoral democracy and population.

For the information of general public, some of the key findings of the Study are as follows:

- (1) The Common Forum and Public Debates, media, civic and voter education programmes are the major sources of information to voters. The Common Forums and Public Debates are the two most important campaign platforms attended or observed by the general voters. The least effective means of campaigning were campaign rallies, posters, banners and leaflets;
- (2) About 59% of the female respondents were influenced or inspired by their family members and friends while majority of the male respondents were influenced by election campaigns. However, a majority of the voters reported a high degree of control over the decision as to whom to vote in an election;
- (3) In terms of perceptions, the survey found that women in general are considered less capable and inferior in decision-making and for representation in elective offices;
- (4) Statistically, there is a direct and significant association between the level of education and perceptions. Prejudices and stereotypes are found deeply rooted in the rural areas where the majority of voters have lower level of education and the prevailing perception is that women are less capable than men and less suited for leadership positions and matters involving public decision-making. However, the silver lining is that majority of



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respondents, both men and women, feel that there should be more women in elective offices;

- (5) The majority of voters perceived family responsibilities with women's primary role as mothers and housewives, lack of self-confidence and fear of incompetence in decision-making as the main obstacles in women standing as candidates and being elected;
- (6) The evidence from the field is that not many Bhutanese people are interested or willing to step forward to contest elections. Of those interested, the vast majority are males who are preparing to run in the future elections; and
- (7) As regards reform of the current practices, more than half (50.8%) of the voters indicated 'educating women' as the best reform to enhance their participation in the electoral process, followed by 24% suggesting the introduction of quota system and reserved seats for women and 12.3% for having simpler and straight forward electoral process and requirements to enhance women's political participation.

Given this context, the ECB proposes the following course of action as also highlighted by the Hon'ble Chief Election Commissioner in his address:

- (1) Conducting voter and civic education including gender sensitization programme on a continuous basis reaching every community;
- (2) Continuing with Common Forums and taking it further down at *Chiwog* level too in future elections;
- (3) Encouraging the engagement of and by Political Parties and Candidates on these issues;
- (4) Involving coordinators of Democracy Clubs to play an active role in focusing on the young people and the leaders of tomorrow;



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- (5) Organizing programmes to sensitize men and women to the complexities as well as subtleties of gender discrimination and the necessity of mainstreaming women in the political process;
- (6) Creating women enabling/conducive environment in the electoral procedures: and
- (7) Making the Functional Literacy Test more accessible by having the Test Centers located closer to women, preferably in the Gewog Centers.

The other stakeholders are urged to look into the following:

- (1) Formulation of policies and programmes to combat negative stereotypes and societal perceptions including review of educational curriculums;
- (2) Carrying out training programmes targeted not only at women but also at men, exposing them to the complexities of gender discrimination;
- (3) Increase the remuneration package especially for the Local Government posts;
- (4) Women who are interested to contest elections to be properly guided and trained to enable them to effectively contest elections:
- (5) Provide training in key areas such as leadership, public relations, lobbying and networking to strengthen women's skill for better and confident political engagement skills; and
- (6) The media to provide gender-sensitive coverage of news at all times, avoiding negative stereotypes and focusing attention on issues of special concern to women in news programming.



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The full Report can be downloaded from the ECB website and reference to the information therein may be made with due acknowledgement.

Media Unit

Election Commission of Bhutan