Forum: Special Conference on Securing and Advancing Democracy
Issue: Strengthening the voice and visibility of women in elections
Student Officer: Justine Noble
Position: Deputy President

Introduction

Strengthening the voice and visibility of women in elections is of utmost importance regarding the obtention of gender equality throughout the world. Both national and local elections are able to promote the political participation of women through various means. However, in order for this to work, measures must be put into effect to combat the many remaining obstacles to female progress. For instance, female candidates may receive less support through capacities and resources than their male counterparts rendering the competition between them unfair. In addition, if polling stations are located in remote areas or those considered unsafe, women are often too scared to use them. Unfortunately, electoral management bodies may be unaware of hindrances to women’s participation because they do not have access to the necessary knowledge, skills, or data to tackle the problems with which they are faced.

Past data has revealed that increasing the prevalence of women as leaders in governance is highly beneficial to them. Even in environments that prove most obstinate to female political participation, women demonstrate political power by finding loopholes; working across party lines for instance in parliamentary women’s caucuses. Women facing prejudice all over the world have successfully combated gender issues such as gender-based violence, parental leave, childcare, pensions, laws concerning gender-equality, and electoral reform.

Definition of Key Terms

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action is action favouring those who tend to suffer from discrimination; positive discrimination.

Council
A council is an advisory, deliberative, or administrative body of people formally constituted and meeting regularly.

**Election**

*An election is a* formal and organized choice by a vote of a person for a political office or other position.

**Gender Inequality**

*Gender Inequality* acknowledges that men and women are not equal and that gender affects an individual's living experience.

**Legislature**

Legislature is the legislative body of a country or state.

**Lower House**

The lower house is the larger of two sections of a bicameral parliament or similar legislature, typically with elected members and having the primary responsibility for legislation.

**Nominate**

Nominating corresponds to proposing or formally entering as a candidate for an election or for an honour or award.

**Parliament**

The Parliament is the highest democratical legislature.

**Single House**

A single house is a government with one chamber or house.

**Upper House**

The upper house is the higher house in a bicameral parliament or similar legislature.

**Quota**

A quota is a fixed share of something that a person or group is entitled to receive or is bound to contribute.
Background Information

Gender inequality within politics prevails in our world today although data does reveal progress is possible and achievable. As of February 2019, 24.3% of all national parliamentarians globally were women, a slow increase from 11.3% in 1995. As of June 2019, 11 women are serving as Head of State while 12 are serving as Head of Government. Currently, the country serving as the best example of promoting female progress governmentally is Rwanda, in which women have 61.3% of seats in their lower house. However, just like there are states leading the charge, there are states falling behind. Right now, in 27 states women account for less than 10% of parliamentarians in single or lower houses. As of February 2019, there were 3 governmental chambers in which not one woman held a seat.

Additionally, the average percentage of female parliamentarians varies greatly according to Global Region. As of February 2019, 42.5% of single, lower, and upper houses combined were comprised of women in Nordic countries, 30.6% in the Americas, 28.6% in Europe excluding Nordic countries, 27.2% in sub-Saharan Africa, 23.9% in Asia, 19.8% in Arab States, and 16.3% in the Pacific.

Gender-based inequality in all domains of government

Divides between males and females exist within all domains of government, including ministries and local deliberative bodies. Recent data from January 2019 reveals only around 20.7% of government ministers are women. Furthermore, there is a difference between men and women in the government regarding which ministries they preside over. Commonly held positions held by female ministers are in Social Affairs, Family/Children/Youth/Elderly/Disabled, Environment/Natural Resources/Energy, Employment/Labor/Vocational Training, and Trade/Industry. Moreover, in 103 countries, female participation in local deliberative bodies ranged from less than 1% to 50% with a median of 26%.

Causes for political discrimination against women

There are many causes for the divide between men and women within governments all around the world. Firstly, as stated by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women, one large hindrance is the economic burden women typically face in comparison to men, as well as their economic dependence on them. In addition, seeing as currently political parties are dominated by men, women even when trying to gain political influence “fall off the ground” because “men tend to choose those who are made in their own image”. In other words, men tend to support men. Women also may face physical violence, verbal abuse, and other forms of bullying. These problems are perpetuated and
reinforced by the media, which often places importance on a woman’s physical appearance over their political ideologies and suggested policies.

**Why is strengthening the voice and visibility of women in elections important?**

Finally, past data reveals that strengthening the voice and visibility of women in elections is beneficial to society in a multitude of ways. For example, research on *panchayats* (local councils) in India found that the number of projects aimed at providing citizens with safe drinking water was 62% higher in areas with councils predominated by councils than those overseen by men. Further evidence is provided by data from Norway, where a direct causal relationship between the representation of women in municipal councils and the promotion of childcare coverage was established. Therefore, it is evident that progress is not occurring at a fast enough rate. As of February 2019, only 3 countries had 50% or more women in single or lower houses of parliament, these countries being Rwanda, Cuba, and Bolivia.

**Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

**Bolivia**

Bolivia is one of the other three countries in the world in which more than 50% of the government consists of women. The country has served as an example for all UN member states by vowing to ensure its new laws aimed at fighting violence against women, overall discrimination, and political harassment and violence are sufficiently put into place to propel change. New laws additionally require gender parity leading to 53.1% of the government becoming female. To ensure the continuation of success, the government has promised to provide all necessary conditions, human and economic resources, and strengthened institutions.

**Cuba**

Just like Bolivia, Cuba, the final country with more than half of its government being female, has promised to continue its efforts to promote gender equality governmentally. The great strides Cuba has made have been deemed to not do enough to overturn the burdens Cuban women face such as the highest global direct maternal mortality rate. Thus, Cuba has pledged to further increase the number of women in decision-making roles in the government. As stated by Cuba’s President Raul Castro: “Political will is much needed to avoid turning the results obtained so far into our goals instead of making them a starting point and a pledge to achieve true equality for women”.

**Rwanda**

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Rwanda is one of the only three countries in the world in which women occupy more than 50% of positions within the national government. The country serves as an example to UN member states all around the world, transitioning from a country in the early 2000s that explicitly placed women as inferior to men to one that constitutionally demands at least 30% of government positions must be held by females. Since 2003, Rwanda has continuously boasted the highest female governmental representation proportionally worldwide, with 61% of their parliament’s lower house being comprised of women. In addition, four of Rwanda’s seven supreme court justices are women, one being the deputy chief justice. Although the presidency has remained dominated by men, women furthermore occupy 13 out of 26 cabinet seats.

UN Women

The efforts of UN Women promote female participation across the electoral cycle, additionally working alongside their UN system partners. One of UN Women’s primary focuses is adapting and putting into place temporary special measures or quotas, a means for increasing the prevalence of women in politics that has been proven effective. The organization also promotes and supplies evidence to inform national electoral regulations. The aim of these regulations is to provide women with fair opportunities to campaign and register to vote and protect them from election-related violence. Another main operation of UN women is to train women to be effective political candidates and leaders. By engaging with political parties, greater gender sensitivity is encouraged through internal regulations and actions that promote female political participation.

Timeline of Events

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>New Zealand is the first country globally to grant women the right to vote.</td>
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<td>1956</td>
<td>Doria Shafik begins a women’s rights movement in Egypt by, with 1,500 women, storming parliament and demanding complete political rights and equal pay. Her efforts would inspire others and eventually lead to the right to vote for women in Egypt in 1956.</td>
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<td>February 2016</td>
<td>Women in Iran win 17 seats in parliamentary elections. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani released a statement stating “This is a record and we are happy that our dear women are taking part in all stages, especially in politics”.</td>
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July 26th, 2016

Hillary Clinton named Democratic Party’s presidential nominee in the United States, becoming the first woman ever to be nominated as a presidential candidate in the US.

 Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, (A/RES/217)
- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995
- Women, peace, and security, 31 October 2000, (SCR1325)
- Women, peace, and security, 29 October 2019, (S/RES/2493)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Egypt

One country that serves as a global example for implementing successful measures to increase the voice and visibility of women in elections in Egypt. Aided by UN Women, Egypt established an Egyptian Feminist Union made up of 500 women’s groups and the Egyptian Coalition for Civic Education and Women’s Participation acting as an election watchdog. Over 500,000 Egyptian citizens from 27 governorates have become signatories of a National Charter illustrating the hopes of women for Egypt’s future. Along with UN Women, the Egyptian Government is putting the “Women’s Citizenship” initiative into place to grant ID cards to around 2 million women who lack them yet need them to vote and make use of public services.

Kenya

Another country that can be looked to as having made great strides in combating the lack of voice and visibility of women in elections around the world is Kenya. In 2010, Kenya’s constitution guaranteed gender equality along with the use of affirmative action. Furthermore, UN Women supported a gender audit of a draft Political Parties Bill to investigate whether the country was going beyond paying lip service to their cause. Additionally, the Interim Independent Electoral Commission took recommendations on board to increase the gender-responsivity of the bill. Once the bill passed into law, it stated for political parties to register, they must have no more than two-thirds of any gender in their governing bodies.

Colombia
A final example of a member state in the fight for gender equality within governments around the world is Colombia. In Colombia, UN Women aided the women civil society and government leaders in promoting the adoption of a 30-per-cent quota for female candidates in national elections. To get the general public involved, the country additionally launched an ad campaign that explicitly promoted the message: “Democracy without women is incomplete”.

**Possible Solutions**

In order to strengthen the voice and visibility of women in elections, UN member states must make it their primary focus to put special temporary measures or quotas in place. This method has been proven to facilitate voices previously unheard breaking through the barrier of gender inequality.

Secondly, national electoral regulations should be promoted and should be informed by evidence. The purpose of such regulations should be to make it so female members of society have the same opportunities as their male counterparts to campaign politically and register to vote. Additionally, they should shield women from election-related violence.

Furthermore, women should be trained to be good political candidates. Member states should consider establishing programs in local community congregational areas where women may gather for lessons in leadership, public speaking, debate, as well as self-defense. This can also take place through women engaging with political parties to learn through experience as done in an internship. In turn, this would promote gender sensitivity, especially if governments put internal regulations in place to promote the leadership of women.

Moreover, some experts in the field of eradicating gender discrimination within politics globally hold that different ways of combatting the issue apply to different stages of the electoral cycle. Additionally, within each stage of the electoral cycle, there are several aspects that must be taken into account and addressed individually. In the pre-election period of registration, useful steps to take include ensuring provision of sex-disaggregated data, considering the need for women-only registration teams. In the pre-election period of the nomination of candidates and parties, enforcing nomination rules regarding the number of women candidates and ensuring the enforcement of campaign finance rules regarding gender equality are possible solutions. In the pre-election period of voter outreach, possible steps that can be taken are planning gender-sensitive voter outreach programmes in terms of message, audience and delivery method, delivering voter outreach programmes for women that give consideration to ameliorate delivery methods, working with the media on gender-aware outreach and reporting, and working with civil society organisations on gender-aware outreach. In the pre-election period of planning for election day, ideas include conducting gender sensitivity training for polling staff,
ensuring ballot paper and instructions are accessible to those who cannot read and planning how to recruit both women and men to work in polling places.

In the election period of polling place management, possible measures include ensuring safety of polling station staff and voters by adopting appropriate measures, delivering priority in queue for pregnant women and mothers, organizing women-only queues and/or polling stations or booths within the station (where appropriate), and considering arrangements for collecting sex-disaggregated data. In the election period of voter information, member states could deliver voter outreach about election day as well as give consideration to improve delivery methods.

In the post-election period of election assessment, member states may include gender issues in the assessment of the past election, review operations manuals and outreach materials from a gender perspective, and include sex disaggregation in data analysis. In the period following, member states could revise actions and come up with further recommendations as well as improvements for regulatory framework regarding gender inequality.

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