

Gender Assessment of the Electoral Process in Puntland



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On October 25, 2021, Puntland became the first federal member state in Somalia to hold democratic elections to district councils. “One person one vote” (OPOV) elections were conducted in the three districts of Eyl, Ufeyn and Qardho. In addition to their historic significance, these elections offer an important opportunity to learn lessons, not least when it comes to the promotion of gender equality and the political participation of women.

*In partnership with the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Puntland Research and Development Centre (PDRC) conducted a gender audit of the elections. The purpose of the gender audit was to document challenges as well as enabling factors for the promotion of gender equality. Insights from the process have been collected in a report, *Gender Assessment of the Electoral Process in the Puntland Federal Member State of Somalia*.*

This briefing paper presents key findings and recommendations from the report. The findings will be valuable for the promotion of gender equality in upcoming electoral processes, not only in Puntland, but also in Somalia’s other member states, to which Puntland’s efforts towards democratization can serve as an inspiration and example.



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Key Findings and Recommendations

Normative and Legal Context

The 2021 municipal elections were a significant step forward for women's representation as they brought women's representation to nearly 30% in three pilot districts compared to 15% prior to the elections. One of the main reasons behind this increase was the strengthened quota guidelines developed by the Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC). These guidelines contributed to a more diverse pool of candidates in some political associations. However, there is still a lack of binding measures in Puntland's legal framework when it comes to gender quotas, which leaves the door open to disregard gender equality in coming elections.

Recommendations:

- Adopt the "one in three model" to Puntland electoral laws.
- Ensure that political associations understand and adhere to the established quota, and reject incompliant lists.

Electoral Management

In preparations for the 2021 elections, TPEC emphasized gender equality and electoral participation of marginalized groups in its internal structures and civil service functions. However, several parts of the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Guidelines remain to be implemented, including a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination and harassment, the creation of a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Coordination Committee, and a systematic approach to gender mainstreaming in external processes.

Recommendations:

- TPEC should continue to follow up and monitor progress towards goals set during the 2021 elections in terms of gender equality, especially in internal processes, opportunities and recruitment practices.
- TPEC should collect sex-disaggregated data for all external activities, including voter turnout, and use data to inform operational planning.

Political Associations and Parties

The introduction of political associations has improved women's access to politics compared to the previous clan-based system. In the three pilot elections, 29% of the candidates were women (147 of 499 candidates in total). These women represented eight different political associations and ran for 87 seats. In the political associations in Puntland, women hold between 22% to 30% of the positions, but none is chaired by a woman. On the whole, women's participation within the associations lags, due to lack of financial support, cultural norms, incumbency advantages for men, the persistent claim that the associations cannot find enough women candidates, and a lack of legally binding quota provisions.

In this context, TPEC's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Guidelines strongly contributed to associations nominating nearly one third women candidates for their closed lists.



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Recommendations:

- Review internal procedures and policies, founding documents and membership rules from a gender perspective to promote equitable access and opportunity within the associations at all levels (members, leaders, candidates).
- Respect and implement to the full letter and spirit of the law all measures relating to promoting women's representation and positioning on the candidate lists.
- Maximize the associations' role in promoting awareness, capacity building and financial support to all members and candidates, especially women and traditionally underrepresented groups of women and men.
- Ensure that women candidates receive commensurate financial support and public exposure/platforms.
- Encourage Associations to earmark specific positions where women would top candidate lists, such as mayoral races.

Voter Registration and Polling Day

In partnership with civil society, TPEC conducted extension outreach and awareness to support registration among women. Women constituted just over half of the 48,535 registered voters. However, the under-registration of nomadic pastoralists, who are mostly men, may have skewed registration data. In the polling stations, women accounted for 31% of the staff, but only 5% of the polling stations had women as chairpersons.

Based on observations, it appears that women turned out to vote in high numbers, but there is no sex-disaggregated data of voter turnout, which means that these observations cannot be verified.

Interviews indicate confusion about the closed-list electoral system and suggest the existence of bias and family voting pressure from clans. Many voters, especially women, who are over-represented among those who cannot read and write, needed assistance when casting their vote. This compromised the secrecy of the vote. Additionally, heat and long waits constituted health hazards for some voters, including the elderly and parents with small children.

Recommendations:

- Ongoing enhanced voter education, including on the use of symbols, ballot papers and the closed lists, and targeted education for under-represented groups including women.
- Use of education strategies that are adapted to populations with high illiteracy rates.
- Increases presence of female polling workers by ensuring parity in polling station leadership roles.

Economic and Social Obstacles

The report notes that limited funding impacts women's ability to campaign, secure political alliances, connect with political actors or community leaders, and conduct public outreach. Male candidates were noted to have stronger support networks, access to contributions and loans from clans and businesses, and generally to be more financially prepared to compete than women. In the 2021 elections, a vibrant civil society contributed to enhancing women's participation as voters and as candidates through education, training and other support. Nevertheless, there is a need for increased support to women candidates to overcome economic and social obstacles.

Recommendations:

- Offer opportunities for women's leadership training including coaching, political finance and fundraising.
- Invest in media training programs and platforms for women candidates to build accessibility, confidence and public speaking skills.
- Identify innovative solutions to fill the gap on women's political funding, including potentially funding pools and/or training and tools to help women build their fundraising skills and networks.
- Engage women in the private sector to advance and promote women in politics.

Violence Against Women in Elections/Politics

The problem of violence against women in elections/politics (VAWE/P) is global and many interviewees for the report had personally experienced or knew a woman in Puntland who had experienced VAWE/P or violence related to a public or professional role. Forms of violence included acts of intimidation, physical assaults, exploitation, threats, humiliation, harassment, social media attacks, and killings. Women candidates and public leaders appeared to face the highest risk, followed by women journalists. The notion that harassment and abuse of women candidates is a "normal" part of politics undermines efforts to recognize and address the problem.



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In the 2021 elections, important measures were taken to create secure a electoral environment through gender sensitive electoral security planning, for example through the presence of a Women's Situation Room.

Recommendations:

- Set and meet internal targets for women's recruitment to all levels of the security apparatus including officers and electoral security commission.
- Map deployment distribution with gender-disaggregated data and strive to provide mixed-sex security teams to polling stations.
- Enhance training for security providers especially on crowd management, sexual harassment and other topics deemed relevant for gender-sensitive security training.
- Examine prevalence of VAWP online and offline and develop targeted strategic plans for preventing and responding to it.
- Increase use of Women's Situation Rooms and ensure widespread public awareness of their functions, services and how to access them.



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