

CONSOLIDATED RESPONSE ON THE PREVENTION OF FAMILY VOTING

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and contributions submitted by ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (<http://aceproject.org/>); Sonja Lokar, iKNOW Politics Expert and Chairwoman of the Stability Pact Task Force; Julie Ballington, iKNOW Politics Expert and Programme Specialist Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU); Mireya Reith, Program Officer, Women's Political Participation, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI); Julia Brothers, Program Officer, Election and Political Processes, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI); and Christopher Henshaw, Resident Senior Director in Macedonia, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

Question

What will you suggest to counter proxy and family voting in Macedonia to enable women voters exercise their right free of any outside influence? How can women voters be empowered to make independent decisions?

Introduction

The ability of women to exercise their voting rights independently and freely is an important step toward the advancement of women's participation in the political process. In some cases, this right may be violated by pressuring women to vote for a candidate that they do not support or not to vote at all. Research shows that in some cases the violation may come from women's family members and is known as family voting. According to some research findings family voting is still an important issue in Macedonia. Although women mainly exercise their right to vote, among voters in the Albanian ethnic community, especially in the rural areas, there continues to be an issue with family, or proxy voting. Further, within the Roma ethnic community, some women notably abstain from exercising the right to vote. (Friscik, J. and Duarte, M. p.4. 2007) The prevalence of family voting among ethnic groups in Macedonia is also confirmed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which stated that in the 2009 presidential and municipal elections in Macedonia family voting was more widespread in ethnic Albanian areas (23 %, compared to 7% in the rest of the country). (Election Observation Mission. 2009)

This consolidated response includes descriptions of family and proxy voting and provides recommendations on how to eliminate family voting through holding trainings and public awareness campaigns, strengthening legislative frameworks, and sensitizing election commissioners and observers on issues faced by women.

Definitions of Family and Proxy Voting

Although the concepts of family and proxy voting are used interchangeably in some cases, they have different implications. The definition of proxy voting on the ACE Network is the following:

“In a very few systems, voters who fulfill certain legislative qualifications may be able to appoint a proxy voter to vote for them. A proxy vote may be given where a voter is unable to attend a voting station through infirmity, employment requirements, or being absent from the area on voting day-- often similar qualifications to those for voting by mail.”

In some cases, like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, proxy voting is legal. If a voter is unable to participate in an election, then he or she can designate another person, a proxy voter, to vote on his or her behalf. In the cases where proxy voting is legal election authorities have to determine whether or not the proxy has a right to act as proxy.

Family voting is a practice where a family member casts votes on behalf of the entire family or where one member of the family pressures other members to vote for a certain candidate. According to Jerome Leyraud, in the Macedonian context family voting refers to the practice of (male) heads of family influencing other family members, in particular women, in the course of voting. Mr. Leyraud identifies three types of family voting which are: a.) male family member accompanying one or more female relatives into a polling booth; b.) family groups voting together in the open; and c.) a male family member obtaining ballot papers on behalf of other family members and marking them as he sees fit. Leyraud also states that family voting has been documented in newly-democratizing Central and Eastern European countries since the early 1990s. (Family and proxy voting in Macedonia. ACE Network.)

Family voting, if conducted on a large scale, may lead to the mass violation of women's voting rights and fraudulent election results. Preventing family voting is often not an easy task, as it is rooted in cultural and social norms of the voters, which may require a long time and multiple efforts to overcome. For example, in societies where political parties align by ethnic, regional or sectoral lines, especially in a post-conflict environment, many people vote en masse for candidates from their own communities. In rural areas, often the village leadership (which can be a senior male figure or a council of male family heads) decides who to support, and the whole family/clan/village is expected to conform with this decision. This is aggravated in areas where there is a history of violent conflict between ethnic or religious groups. Until individuals in the community feel that they are no longer under threat by the "other" ethnic group, the pressure to band together electorally remains strong. Guaranteeing secrecy of the ballot is not enough to eliminate these social pressures. According to Anita Vandenbeld, iKNOW Politics Project Manager, one way of countering this is to encourage internal democratization and development of pluralistic political parties. Ms. Vandenbeld points out that political parties that are based on broad policy objectives are less likely to generate "family" voting than nationalist parties or those based on the personality of a particular leader.

Other external factors that can discourage women from voting or make them more prone to family voting are the timing of an election, the location of polling stations and protective measures existing to ensure voters rights. Therefore, one of the most effective ways of combating family voting should be a multi-dimensional approach beginning well before election day. (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2009)

Strengthening Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks

Strengthening election regulations and the work of electoral commissions is a way to prevent family voting and secure women's rights to vote. The legal framework should ensure that polling stations are accessible, that there is accurate recording of ballots and that the secrecy of the ballot is guaranteed. The principle of secrecy of the ballot requires election legislation to ensure

that secret voting is not only a voter's right, but an absolute obligation. Legislation should make it clear that every voter's ballot must be marked and cast individually and secretly. Additionally,

voting provisions should require that all ballots and voting materials be adequately safeguarded before, during and after voting. (International IDEA. p.71. 2002)

According to the ACE Network, one of the reasons for the occurrence of family voting is a weakly designed legislative framework with non-existent or inadequate safeguards to prevent family voting. Sometimes the inexistence of adequate regulations regarding the voting procedures (for example to protect the secrecy of the vote) and weak provisions to enforce sanctions against violators of existing regulations can contribute to family voting. Additionally, a weak implementation of existing regulations can further contribute to the problem of family voting. Angela Bargellini mentions that even though cultural and educational obstacles are evident, the root cause of the Macedonian problem is the loose implementation of existing legislation. (Family and proxy voting in Macedonia. ACE Network. 2009) Therefore, ensuring a strong legislative and regulatory electoral framework and enforcing its implementation can help to minimize family voting. For instance, in OSCE's conclusions to the 2009 Observation Mission to the presidential and municipal elections in Macedonia, family voting was documented in 13% of visited polling stations, which despite being a high number is notably lower from the first round of elections. To prevent family voting after the first round of elections, the State Election Committee (SEC) issued practical guidelines for the work of Municipal Election Commissions (MECs) and Election Boards (EBs), which contained a strong directive to prevent family and proxy voting. The SEC also conducted additional training for the representatives of MECs and EBs. (Election Observation Mission. 2009)

At the same time, incorporating new technologies for monitoring elections is another tool to prevent family voting and ensure the secrecy of vote. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) recommends the following:

“The legal framework should be flexible enough to allow for technological innovations to be applied to various aspects of balloting and counting, for example, utilizing electronic voting machines for recording and counting of ballots. Such wide flexibility might be regulated by requiring that certain types of approval be obtained before adopting them.” (International IDEA. p.71. 2002)

Establishing a strong legislative framework regulating elections is an important step toward eliminating family voting. It is critical to create and strictly implement provisions securing women's rights to vote secretly and giving election commissioners legal authority to stop family pressure at polling stations.

Securing Women's Access to Polling Stations and Independent Vote Casting

To secure women's voting it is essential to ensure their ability to independently reach polling stations and safely cast their votes. Depending on the cultural and socio-political context of a country, it may be necessary to secure women's safety while travelling to the polling station, ability to get official identification cards prior to elections, and accessibility to female election commissioners or election observers to refer their questions and concerns. Julie Ballington highlights that separate polling stations have been used in some Arab states, for instance in Lebanon, to allow women to vote secretly and without intimidation by male relatives. Ms. Ballington mentions, however, that there are logistical challenges to this option and it may be costly to implement. Furthermore, speaking about electoral processes in Jordan and Yemen, Amal Sabbagh specifies the importance of taking into account cultural and social realities in a country:

"To overcome the illiteracy barrier, symbols or logos were adopted for each candidate on the ballot papers. Establishing women's committees in each electoral district charged with the registration of female voters and overseeing polling on election day also facilitated women's roles as voters and increased their turnout rates. Both Yemen and Jordan have separate polling stations for men and women, which respects the traditional tendencies in those societies. Additionally, in the 2003 elections, Jordan allowed voters to use any polling station within their district, rather than specifying a polling station for each voter. This provided easier access for women voters, whose freedom of movement is more restricted." (Sabbagh, A. p.67. 2005)

The role of election observers and election committees in securing women's independence during the voting process is essential. The UN Election Guidebook highlights that election

bodies, especially at the polling-station level, must guarantee the secrecy of the ballot and prevent family voting as a critical element in securing the confidentiality and independence of women's voting. For instance, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Macedonia recommends that the municipal electoral boards (authorities) take on the responsibility of stopping family voting and that the national election commission conduct election day simulations with the relevant government authorities on challenges to voting, such as family voting. NDI has advised the election commission that one member of each polling table should be designated with the responsibility to observe for and prevent family voting. (Reith, M. and Henshaw, C. Expert Opinion. 2009)

At the same time, election observers should be watchful for instances of family voting and assess whether any polling procedures are disadvantageous to women. (Women & Elections: Guide to promoting the participation of women in elections. pp. 72-83. 2005) Antonio Spinelli in the consolidated reply posted on the ACE Network, recommends holding training sessions and capacity building exercises aimed at electoral officials and poll workers. Mr. Spinelli mentions that such activities are likely to enable poll workers to enforce regulations designed to prevent family voting directly at the polling stations. (Family and proxy voting in Macedonia. ACE Network. 2009) To reiterate the importance of international and local observers to prevent family voting, Julia Brothers, Program Officer at NDI, mentions the following:

“For family/proxy voting, the presence and active monitoring of international observers, nonpartisan domestic monitors and party agents can help discourage family voting and expose it when it occurs. The presence of observers in polling stations serve as deterrents not only to voters attempting to vote for multiple people, but also for the polling officials themselves in letting such a vote occur in the first place. Moreover, well-trained partisan agents can challenge votes that are cast illegally.” (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2009)

As mentioned above, creating favorable conditions for women to access polling stations and to cast their votes secretly is one of the critical steps to securing independence of women voters. Such an environment can be created by setting up separate polling stations for women,

strengthening the role of international and local observers, and sensitizing election observers and commissioners on barriers faced by women during voting.

Educating Women Voters and Holding Public Awareness Campaigns

Educating women and their family members on the right of women to vote independently is one of the key tools in promoting gender equality in the electoral process. According to the United Nations, voter education should make clear that suffrage is universal and should help create a culture in which women are encouraged to participate and are welcomed into the electoral process. It is often appropriate to craft special messages for women voters and to take generational issues into account when doing so. (Women & Elections: Guide to promoting the participation of women in elections. p.58. 2005) Mireya Reith, Program Officer at NDI, points out:

“Building awareness about and preventing family voting is a collective responsibility, and involves the men just as much as the women. It is difficult to stop family voting because in many Macedonian communities men argue that family voting is tradition. As such, in order to counter family voting, it is important to be sensitive to that fact that the authorities running the polls are drawn from the same community as the voters, so there are real disincentives to enforce laws, regulations or penalties related to family voting – i.e., either poll workers don’t feel comfortable asking the men in their communities to change their behavior or acknowledge the risk of putting women in greater threat of domestic violence by making them the subject of such confrontations between their husbands and the poll workers.” (Reith, M. and Henshaw, C. Expert Opinion. 2009)

Speaking of organizing training and voter education projects in Macedonia, Sonja Lokar, iKNOW Politics Expert and Chairwoman of the Stability Pact Task Force, mentions that the Gender Task Force of the Stability Pact collaborated with the largest Macedonian women's organizations and the non-profit organizations from the Albanian, Roma and Turkish communities to train women activists from these minority groups. These non-profit

organizations conducted special campaigns advocating real freedom in voting and held massive door to door campaigns in rural areas raising public awareness on women's human rights. The campaigns also aimed at encouraging women not only to vote independently, but also to participate in nation-wide campaigns for equality of women in politics. Additionally, Ms. Lokar suggests the following:

"It is crucial, that women non-profit organizations and politicians who are coming from the minority groups are supported and funded for their work serving as role models for rural women with very low level of civic and political literacy." (Lokar, S. Expert Opinion. 2009)

While organizing training sessions and campaign schools for women voters, it is important to keep certain socio-cultural and logistical details in mind to ensure that women are comfortable in attending and participating in these sessions. Julie Ballington, Programme Specialist at IPU, mentions that in South Africa, ahead of the 1994 elections, some voter education programs were held for women separately, so that they did not feel intimidated by men in the education process. For instance, the Black Sash organization in South Africa ran separate workshops for women, which encouraged them to speak up and discuss what they wanted. The workshops were also focused on dispelling fears about the voting process, by staging voting exercises, rehearsing the voting process, and discussing intimidation techniques use by men to influence women during voting. Additionally, Black Sash and many other civic organizations in South Africa emphasized the importance of involving women trainers in the voter education programs to overcome cultural barriers and to encourage women by conveying information historically considered being part of the male domain by a female trainer. (Ballington, J. p.147. 2002)

There are very creative tools and messages used to mobilize women voters, which account for cultural norms, social expectations, access to information resources, and the overall socio-political situation in a country. For example, in the 2002 parliamentary elections in Morocco, NDI concentrated on a media campaign targeted at women voters by producing billboard and TV ads. The ads were 35 seconds long and were aired in both Berber and Arabic. These ads showed a baby playing with a paper ballot while a child's voice narrates, expressing his wishes and ambitions for his future in the areas of education, employment, community service, and healthcare. At the end of the ad, a voice calls on women to vote, suggesting that the child's

ambitions could be fulfilled if women participate in the democratic process. This campaign is a great example of how cultural and traditional norms can be used in a campaign to mobilize women voters to participate in elections. (Consolidated Response on Working with Women Candidates and Women Voters During Elections. p.4. 2008) Another example is the TV spot promoted by the OSCE Mission to Skopje calling women to vote independently in the presidential and local elections in 2009 in Macedonia. The spot aims to tackle family voting, an irregularity observed during the 2008 parliamentary elections. (OSCE. 2009)

Speaking about a creative use of media for empowering women voters, Julie Ballington also highlights the importance of recognizing that in some cases women voters can be less formally educated than men, which requires designing targeted voter education campaigns. Speaking about voter education programs in South Africa, Ms. Ballington mentions that in rural areas, women often cannot make use of written voting instructions and are more likely to respond to verbal political appeals. For instance, to educate women voters in rural areas a film was produced portraying women in rural areas and highlighting the problems faced by women and ways to organize voter education programs in rural areas. As many rural women did not have access to television, the documentary was widely disseminated by means of mobile video units. (Ballington, J. 2002)

Using the combination of training for women and their family members and public awareness campaigns can bring positive changes to voting cultures both among men and women voters. Modern election campaigns utilize not only printed materials carefully crafted to cultural and social images of a particular country, but also involve TV and radio programs for a broader outreach, specifically among illiterate women in remote areas.

Conclusion

To eliminate family voting during elections it is important to educate women and their family members on women's rights to vote independently and secretly. It is also important to influence cultural perceptions and social-norms that promote family voting by holding public awareness campaigns long before election day and encouraging the development of pluralistic political parties. Election commissioners and observers are responsible for watching and preventing family voting in election polls. Some experts suggest that it is also

important to make the voting process safer for women by creating separate polling stations and allowing women to vote at the nearest polling station. Additionally, it is critical to create a strong legislative framework that ensures women's rights and provides election commissioners with a legal means of sanctioning family voting.

Further Reading

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