

Keynote address of the West Africa Regional Representative of the Office of the High  
Commissioner for Human Rights, Andrea ORI

Dialogue and Sensitization Workshop for Party Selection Committees of Political Parties

7 February 2018

Banjul, The Gambia

HE. Vice-President and Minister of Women Affairs,

Hon. Minister of Justice,

Hon. Speaker of the National Assembly,

Hon. Chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission,

Members of Party Selection Committees of Political Parties,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you All for responding favourably to our invitation relating to this important dialogue and sensitization workshop for party selection committees of political parties.

As you know, elections are a necessary and fundamental component of sustained efforts to protect and promote human rights. They provide opportunities for citizens to exercise their civil and political rights, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, and also to vote and contest as electoral candidates. Experience has also shown that electoral processes can exacerbate, revive or trigger violence and conflict and can provoke targeted violence against women in their role as candidates or voters. Electoral support must therefore apply a human rights-based approach, which can contribute to upholding a safe and peaceful environment for all stakeholders and to strengthening the credibility of such processes.

In West Africa, women remain under-represented as voters, political leaders and elected officials, and Gambia is with no exception. This situation persists, despite their proven abilities as leaders and agents of change, and their right to participate equally in public affairs. The percentage of women in elected office in the region is still well below the 30 percent critical mass representation, and far from the globally recommended target of 'gender balance'. Many countries such as Nigeria, Burkina Faso, The Gambia, Benin, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, have even less than 10 percent women in parliament. This situation directly infringes on women's political rights, and restricts their abilities to influence decision-making process more widely.

Honourable guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Non-discrimination and equality are fundamental principles of international human rights law and they are essential to the enjoyment of all human rights. Nevertheless, women face multiple obstacles to participating in political life. Structural barriers through discriminatory laws, electoral arrangements, and violence and conflict, are among the factors which limit women's options to run for office. Capacity gaps also mean that women are less likely than men to have

the education, networks and resources needed to become effective leaders.<sup>1</sup> Male domination of politics in general, including political parties and state institutions further hinders women's political participation, in the face of either passive or active male resistance. Some individual women have overcome these obstacles with great acclaim, such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who became Africa's first elected woman President. On the whole however, the playing field needs to be levelled, in order to open opportunities for women to participate in the public affairs of their respective countries.

I wish to take the opportunity to salute the efforts made by the Gambian government with the nomination of a female in the Vice-President position.

In addition, international and regional recognition of the need to promote women's full participation in political and electoral processes has its origins in the principles of non-discrimination and equal enjoyment of political rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW, 1952). The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reiterates the right of women "to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government"; and other regional conventions, such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, (Maputo Protocol), explicitly state that the enjoyment of such rights shall be without distinction of any kind, including sex or gender.

My Regional Gender Advisor, Ms Isatou Harris will elaborate more on these international and regional instruments including UN resolutions and declarations later on her presentation.

Further, women's enhanced participation in governance structures is viewed as fundamental to redress gender inequalities in societies and - when successful- has led to greater responsiveness to citizen needs and rights, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace in countries affected by conflicts; such as in Liberia for instance where women were crucial in bringing peace in 2003, after 14 years of armed conflict.

Countries that have been most successful in bringing women into decision-making bodies are those that have put in place Temporary Special Measures (TSMs), like quotas. In 2010, Senegal adopted a gender parity law, which requires political parties to ensure that at least half their candidates in local and national elections are women. This led to a steep rise in women's representation, with 43.3 percent of women being elected in parliament in 2012 and 47 percent in local councils two years later. While less constraining, other countries have also adopted TSMs: Sierra Leone has legislated reservation of seats at the local level; Niger has legislated candidate quotas at the national assembly level; and Burkina Faso at both national and local levels. In addition, voluntary party quotas exist in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Niger. Although Cabo Verde has not put in place any such measures, the country attained gender parity in the Government in 2006, and since 2014, the Government has been led by a majority of women.

In 2015, Benin, Burkina Faso and Nigeria held legislative elections, yielding poor results for women candidates as in all three countries, as the percentage of women in parliament is below 10 percent (Nigeria has 5.6 percent women in parliament while Benin has 7.2 and Burkina Faso 9.4). As other countries are preparing to hold elections, OHCHR is proposing

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<sup>1</sup> See the 2011 UN General Assembly [resolution on women's political participation](#) (A/RES/66/130).

to support a lessons learned process with a view to codifying knowledge on strategies to increase women's political participation in West and also to identify strategic entry points for enhancing women's participation in electoral politics.

Honourable guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By the end of this workshop, I am convinced you will be able to develop an action plan for way forward to enhance women political participation in Gambian local politics. I have no doubt that this Dialogue will help to contribute promoting the enhancement of women political participation in Gambian local politics.

I am strongly encouraging Political parties to nominate female candidates for various elective positions under the banner of their respective parties or as independent candidates in the Local Government elections 2018.

I wish you a successful Dialogue and thank you for your kind attention.