

Inclusiveness

How to ensure that women, differently abled, marginalized and excluded segments of society are brought into the main stream

“Every vote counts. The secret ballot is the cornerstone of democracy and the right to vote is universal.”

Inclusiveness according to the Oxford dictionary is the “practice or policy of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of minority groups”.

Elections should be as inclusive as possible, for voters and contestants alike. Inclusiveness is closely linked to the right to vote and the right to run for office, as well as the obligation of governments to facilitate these rights. There should be no discrimination toward any group in regard to voting rights or their implementation. An inclusive election process is also one that is based on open, broad consultation with stakeholders.

Article 88 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka stipulates that every person, unless disqualified by the specific provisions in the Constitution, shall be qualified to be an elector or voter. However, it is further provided that the exercise of the right itself is dependent on the name of such person being entered in the appropriate electoral registry.

WHAT SRI LANKA HAS DONE

Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) to design and implement a four year strategic plan (2017-2020) that takes into account the inclusion of women, persons with disabilities, youth and other marginalized populations in Sri Lanka’s electoral process. The strategic planning process aims to integrate all citizens as electoral stakeholders and promote a resilient democracy in Sri Lanka.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

The law in Sri Lanka states that women enjoy equal opportunities and equal rights like men. But women's representation in people's representative bodies in current Sri Lanka is as follows.

- In Parliament – 5.8%
- In the local authorities – 1.9%

In February 2018 local government election, quota system of 25% representation in local authorities has been introduced by government and increased the women's participation in politics.

In this backdrop ECSL is in the process of implementing a series of awareness programmes, for representatives of political parties and women activists on the empowerment of women politically, amendments to the laws of local authority elections, representation of women in local authorities and issues thereof.

According to the Strategic plan 2017-2020 of ECSL, at the district level all District Elections offices are conducting workshops inland wide to educate women.

Also ECSL collaborates with election observer groups in organizing awareness programs for women. Ahead of the February 2018 election, ECSL carried out a women's leadership program, "She Leads SL", with the support of International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). As a result of the "She Leads SL" training, nearly 43 percent of alumnae participated as candidates in the 2018 local government elections, utilizing skills gained from the training to elevate their campaigns.

YOUTH

As the next generation of political leaders, Sri Lanka's youth have a critical role to play in bolstering an inclusive democratic process that is responsive to all of its citizens.

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) is working with IFES to strengthen democratic participation of first-time voters. To support this effort, the ECSL and IFES are partnering with youth groups from across the country to conduct a

nationwide #YouthVoteSL campaign. The campaign sought to encourage young people to participate in elections.

Reform efforts seek to address issues in Sri Lanka's annual enumeration process which left thousands of 18-year-olds disenfranchised from electoral participation. Youth groups drafted and circulated a petition as part of the #YouthVoteSL campaign calling for reform. The petition garnered over 400,000 signatures from citizens of all ages and delivered to Parliament. A youth group from the north also launched a complaint with Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission to generate legal change. The #YouthVoteSL social media campaign reached over 134,000 users through Twitter and Face book.

The #YouthVoteSL social media drive culminated in a "Kites-for-Rights" event in Galle. The full-day event included polling and counting simulations led by the chairman of the ECSL and concluded with participants flying kites designed and decorated with messages promoting youth's right to vote.

The ECSL observed that it was a need of the way to educate the students learning in secondary schools about democracy and universal franchise. This was included as a program in the Four Year Strategic Plan 2017-2020 of the ECSL and steps were taken to create "Civic Education Circles" in secondary schools with the assistance of the Ministry of Education. As a part of this programme school children, the future generation, will be educated on democracy and universal franchise through the Students' Parliament. The new generation will get opportunity to frame an idea and experience on democracy.

SPECIAL VOTERS (WITH DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL NEEDS)

If all citizens are to have equal access to the election process, then the election process must include procedures to enable blind citizens to cast a secret ballot. For a wheelchair user or an elderly voter who uses a walker, a second floor polling station is just as inaccessible as mountain.

To address this issue, ECSL worked with the civil society partners to conduct targeted voter education initiatives for voters with disabilities. This session utilized simultaneous sign language interpretation and resulted in the production of five voter education videos with sign language for wider distribution on social media. The five videos were viewed over 3,000 times on Facebook alone.

The voters who cannot mark the paper with his/ her hand due to blindness or physical disability are allowed to accompany a person to the polling station. Also steps are taken to introduce a Brail Ballot paper cover for the blind voters.

In February 2018 Local Government election, ECSL requested from national observer groups to include persons with disabilities in their election observation teams. Following this request, the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) engaged 22 observers with disabilities.

ECSL has instructed to all district election officers to make sure that all the polling stations should be on the ground floor with ramps and polling booth should be at table height, reachable by someone using a wheelchair.

MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Grama Niladharis, who deliver registration forms, have had no direct access to people who lives in luxury flats or apartments, most of Slum areas and the plantation sector peoples. Most of them are not available in day time. According to the strategic plan 2017-2020, ECSL conduct education programs and distributes leaflets in those areas in holidays and Sundays. Registering officers go to those areas in evenings or holidays for registration process. ECSL send SMS to all mobile users during registration period about the importance of registration as well as important dates.

Homeless peoples and Gypsy peoples are not included in the voters' registry. Most of them do not have relevant documents. But this year ECSL decided to registry those people without Identity card numbers and with temporary house numbers. For that district level election officers conduct awareness programmes for those peoples.

VOTERS DAY

ECSL has launched a voters' day on the 1st of June of every year during the last

several years for the purpose of educating the voters on basic qualifications and the steps that should be taken in getting the names included in the Electoral Register.

Programmes are implemented in all districts to educate voters, where lectures are delivered, street dramas are staged, banners and posters are displayed, leaflets are distributed, art, essay and oratory contests are conducted and public awareness is created on the importance of revision of the electoral register.

AREAS HAVE TO COVER IN FUTURE

With the strategic plan 2017-2020 of ECSL lots of awareness programmes are conducted and most of the above areas are covered. But Sri Lanka does not have any system for the overseas voters, Prisoners as well as hospitalized peoples. Although Sri Lanka has postal voting system for the government sector workers, most of the private sector workers who engage in essential services do not have chance to vote. Therefore we need advanced voting system.