

**Preliminary Statement on
Violence against Women
in Elections (VAW-E)
Monitoring of the Harari
and Somali Regions
Elections)**

**Ethiopian Women
Lawyers Association
(EWLA)**



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INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia held the Sixth National and Regional Elections on June 21, 2021 in six regions and two city administrations. However, due to some security, logistical and election administration concerns elections were postponed and suspended in some regions, in particular Somali and Harari regions, where election did not take place. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced that the postponed and suspended elections will take place on September 6, 2021 and they were subsequently postponed to September 30, 2021 to be held in Harari, Somali and some areas of the Southern Nations and Nationalities People (SNNP) Regions including a planned referendum in the South West part of the region.

Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA or Association), as it was done for the June 21, 2021 elections, recruited, trained and deployed from its members observers to contribute to an inclusive electoral process, in particular focusing on women's effective political participation. The Association has engaged in monitoring of violence against women in elections (VAW-E) in Harari and Somali on the September 30 election as well. The Association trained and deployed 23 mobile observers in Harari and Somali regional states. For the structured monitoring and data collection of the election day, four sets of checklists had been designed for the election day which are arrival, voting, closing and critical incidents.

This Association preliminary report is based on election day observation checklists filled by the observers as they witnessed at the polling stations. The observers were able to complete and submit checklists on VAW-E monitoring and filled out 22 arrivals, 59 voting, and 19 closing checklists. In addition, they reported four critical incidents as they witnessed them at their respective polling stations.

Main Findings

1. Environment Outside Polling Stations

Out of 59 polling stations visited by EWLA observers, queues were observed at 39 polling stations, while voters were not queuing at 20 polling stations when EWLA observers arrived. In addition, separate queues were organized for men and women voters at 31 polling stations, and such separate queues were not organized at 8 polling stations.

At 42 polling stations visited by EWLA observers, pregnant women and nursing mothers were allowed to go ahead of the queue, while at 2 they were not given such priority. At 30 polling stations out of 59, EWLA observers witnessed military personnel, security forces and/or armed forces outside or at near proximity of polling stations.

2. Accessibility of Polling Stations

Out of 59 polling stations visited by EWLA, EWLA observers assessed that a person with physical disability or mobility challenges (such as elderly, persons carrying small children) would have been able to enter 54 polling stations without assistance. In addition, according to EWLA observers, most of the polling stations (54) visited by them would have been equally easy for men and women members of the community to access.

3. Gender Balance among Election Stakeholders

Women were underrepresented among the poll workers of those polling stations where EWLA deployed its observers. Out of 59 polling stations visited by EWLA, 37 stations had men chairpersons, and 22 stations had women chairs. Moreover, 2 of 59 polling stations did not have a single woman member.

At the same time, women were under-represented among other electoral stakeholders, such as observers, journalists, and party agents. Out of 59 polling stations visited by EWLA, 11 polling stations did not have any woman observer, journalist and party agent; women observers were present at 41 polling stations; 6 polling stations had some women observers, journalists and party agents, and 4 polling stations had some women party agents.

4. Preparedness of Precinct Election Commissions and Compliance with COVID-19 Regulations

Essential election materials were not missing at any of the 59 polling stations observed by EWLA observers. At 51 of 59 polling stations visited by EWLA, all election officials wore masks and at 3 polling stations, some poll workers wore masks. At 5 polling stations election officials did not wear a mask.

5. Potential Disenfranchisement of Women Voters

At 3 polling stations out of 59 visited by EWLA observers, between 1 to 10 women voters were not allowed to vote because they were not on the voters' list and at one polling station between 1 to 10 women voters were not allowed to vote for a different reason.

It indicates the desire among potential women voters to participate in elections even if ineligible. At 10 polling stations out of 59 visited by EWLA, between 1 to 10 women voters were assisted to vote when they did not appear to be of need of any assistance. At 7 such polling stations poll workers did not interfere to stop assisted voting for women voters.

6. Sexual harassment and VAW-E During Voting Process

No cases of sexual harassment (verbal and physical) and VAW-E were reported by the EWLA observers outside or inside polling stations.

7. Closing and Counting

Due to long queues in Harar region, NEBE extended the voting process by two hours until 8:00 pm, instead of 6:00 pm. Out of 23 EWLA observers, only 4 could not stay throughout the end of the voting and counting.

At 21 polling stations where EWLA observed the closing and counting procedures, remaining electoral processes were not suspended due to disturbances or other incidents.

EWLA observers did not report any cases of VAW-E during the closing and counting processes at 19 polling stations.

8. EWLA's Observers' Rights to Conduct Observation

All of EWLA's 23 mobile observers had no difficulty entering the polling stations and conducting VAW-E monitoring during voting and closing procedures.

9. Critical Incidents

Four Critical Incident Forms were reported by EWLA's Observers. Out of 4 critical incidents, 1 was on an unsealed box at the time of opening and it was resolved by NEBE by taking a minute and counting down the inside documents in the presence of observers, NEBE higher officials and party representatives. Even so we made our observer fill Critical Incidents form. The 2 Critical Incidents forms were about late closing. EWLA's observers didn't feel safe to stay that late at night so they were not able to observe the closing. 1 out of the 4 Critical Incidents was in the presence of unauthorized personnel at the polling station and offering unnecessary help to voters near to the ballot box.

CONCLUSION

EWLA observers conducted the VAW-E monitoring in Harari and Somali regions without any interference. All 78 polling stations visited by EWLA either for voting or closing and counting procedures were properly equipped and essential electoral materials were not missing. At most of the polling stations (54) where EWLA observed VAW-E during voting procedures all or almost all poll workers wore masks due to COVID-19 precautionary measures.

Women were underrepresented among the electoral stakeholders. Out of 59 polling stations visited by EWLA, 37 stations had men chairpersons, and 22 stations had women chairs; and 11 polling stations did not have any woman observer, journalist and/or party agent.

At 3 polling stations out of 59 visited by EWLA observers, between 1 to 10 women voters were not allowed to vote because they were not on the voters' list and at one polling station between 1 to 10 women voters were not allowed to vote for a different reason. At 10 polling stations out of 59 visited by EWLA, between 1 to 10 women voters were assisted to vote when they did not appear to be in need of any assistance.

EWLA will incorporate the final observation findings from these 2 regions into an election report from the June elections as a final, comprehensive report and make it public in the coming weeks.

ABOUT EWLA

The Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) is a non-profit women's advocacy group founded by Ethiopian women lawyers. It began its work in 1996 after being registered in 1995. It has been re-registered as a Local organization by the Charities and Societies Agency in 2019 as per the Civil Society Organization Proclamation 1113/2019. EWLA has a vision to see a country where women are equal to men. EWLA’s mission is promoting the economic, political, social and legal rights of women and to that end assist them to secure full protection of their rights under the Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and other international human rights conventions. The Association, to achieve its mission, works through three core programs: Provision of Free Legal Aid Service to Women and Female Children, Public Education and Capacity Building Research and Law Reform Advocacy. EWLA has its head office in Addis Ababa and eight branches in Oromia, Benshagul Gumuz, Amhara, Diredawa, Gambella, SNNPR, Afar and Somali. The branch/regional offices are supported by 53 trained voluntary committees organized at woreda and zonal levels providing structures to reach women at grass root level in Ethiopia.

ABOUT EWLA VAW-E PROJECT

EWLA is implementing this VAW-E project under a cooperative agreement with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) who is providing technical assistance and subgrant with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The project aims at monitoring the VAW-E in the pre-election period and election day and allow citizen reports of VAW-E incidents through the toll-free hotline 7711. The observation findings and hotline reports will be used for the future advocacy for women increased political participation in Ethiopia