

## **Election Commission of Pakistan**

### **(Gender Affairs Wing)**

#### **Press Release**

#### **ECP marks International Day of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)**

#### **Inclusive elections are fair elections: Honourable Chief Election Commissioner of Pakistan, Mr. Justice Sardar Muhammad Raza**

ISLAMABAD, 4 December 2018: Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice Sardar Muhammad Raza has said that inclusive elections are fair elections where every citizen of the country is able to play their role.

He was speaking on a panel discussion on inclusive electoral processes to commemorate International Day of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) organised by Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) at ECP Secretariat on 4 December 2018. The ECP organised this event in coordination with DAI-Tabeer and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Persons in attendance included the Honourable Chief Election Commissioner, Justice Sardar Muhammad Raza; Secretary, ECP, Mr. Babar Yaqoob Fateh Muhammad; Additional Director General (Gender Affairs), Ms. Nighat Siddique, ECP officers, government officials, persons with disabilities and other socially excluded groups, civil society representatives and the media.

The CEC said, "The inclusion of PWDs in electoral processes is one such matter that merits consideration and effort." He further said that Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan states that "all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law."

The CEC spoke of the ECP's work to contribute to Pakistan's efforts towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, referring to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 (reduce inequalities) and 11 (increase inclusivity). He went on to elucidate reforms taken for the 2018 General Election, including postal ballots for PWDs, measures to register PWDs in the electoral rolls, and allowing visually impaired voters to be accompanied by assistants.

Justice Raza said the ECP was fully cognisant of the issues faced by PWDs during the 2018 electoral process, announcing that the ECP will make the Secretariat and the four provincial offices accessible for persons using wheelchairs. "During the next year, ramps will be built at ECP offices as part of these initiatives for greater access and inclusivity. I hope that when we commemorate the international day for PWDs next year, the Secretariat and provincial offices of the ECP will be accessible by then for persons using wheelchair," he added.

On the occasion, Additional Director General (Gender Affairs), Ms. Nighat Siddique thanked the participants and panelists for attending the event. She made a special mention of the ECP's Gender and Disability Electoral Working Group which comprises relevant government and non-government organisations. "This Working Group has grown over the last few years to become a regular initiative between the ECP and civil society organisations at the national and provincial level," she added.

She said the group was supporting the Commission in voter registration and voter education initiatives and helping find solutions to the challenges faced by socially excluded groups such as PWDs, transgender persons and religious minorities.

Mr. Ignacio Artaza, Country Director UNDP Pakistan, congratulated ECP for successfully conducting of General Election 2018 in which there were above 800,000 polling staff and 80,000 polling stations. "It is heartening to see that ECP is committed to furthering inclusive electoral process," he said. He appreciated the measures taken by the ECP for inclusive voter education and accessible electoral process.

In his remarks on the occasion, Mr. Amir Khan Goraya, Team Leader DAI-Tabeer, commended the ECP's rapid implementation of Elections Act 2017 in such a short period of time. He said all stakeholders including government, civil society organisations and international development partners need to work together on the agenda of inclusion of persons with disabilities and other socially excluded groups in the electoral and democratic process.

A panel discussion with PWD candidates and voters was held where panellists, including Mr. Raja Imran, Ms. Sairah Shams, Ms. Maria Qureshi and Mr. Zulqurnain Asghar discussed issues faced by PWDs as candidates and as voters. The session was moderated by Ms. AbiaAkram.

Key issues highlighted during panel discussion include lack of accessible polling stations and voter education initiatives, lengthy process for postal balloting and lack of representation of PWDs in the parliamentary institutions.

Mr. Imran Hussain said he was one of the first from persons with disabilities to contest on general seat in General Election 2018. He said the ECP took many first-time steps to ensure inclusion including holding multiple consultative meetings with persons with disability prior to General Election 2018 and addressing their concerns. He appreciated the fact that 80 to 85 percent of those concerns were taken into account during GE 2018. It was also acknowledged during the panel discussion that many initiatives for inclusion of PWDs including piloting braille posters were taken by ECP for PWD voter education.