

Executive Summary

This handbook builds on the emerging outcomes of the joint Commonwealth and African Union (AU) dialogue in New York, in the margins of the 59th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meeting on women's political participation in March 2015 (Commonwealth Secretariat 2015a).

Convened to commemorate 20 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as the AU's theme for 2015, 'The Year of Women's Empowerment and Development towards Agenda 2030', the dialogue recognised that, while modest gains have been made, much remains to be done to achieve gender equality in decision-making.

Themed 'Beyond Numbers: Women's Political Leadership in Delivering Democracy and Development in Africa' (Ibid), participants identified gaps and shared good practices in promoting the proportion of women in decision-making positions across the governance spectrum and improving the impact they make on development and democracy.

The dialogue highlighted elections as one critical process through which political leadership can be accessed. It also underscored the central role that election management bodies (EMBs), political parties and legislatures play in ensuring gender-inclusive elections. The AU and the Commonwealth Secretariat affirmed their commitment to strengthening the capacity of these stakeholders to enhance the participation of women in elections. This practical handbook has therefore been designed with this goal in mind.

Together with the **Commonwealth Gender and Elections Checklist** (see Annex A), the handbook further responds to one of the four priorities for gender equity endorsed by ministers at the 11th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial Meeting held in Apia, Samoa, in September 2016 – namely, enhancing women's political leadership.

Drawing on the rich pool of resources on elections in Commonwealth Africa, this handbook targets the following players in the electoral cycle:

- political parties
- legislatures

- election management bodies
- civil society
- media and social media
- election observer missions, with a focus on Commonwealth election observer missions

It shares best practice and offers peer learnings and recommendations on how they might improve their contributions to women's participation throughout the cycle.

The definition of the electoral cycle that the handbook uses is well established among signatories to the Declaration of Principles for Election Observers (i.e. the pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral periods) (Commonwealth Secretariat 2005). The electoral cycle has mainly been utilised to guide standard actions of EMBs, but can be used as a framework for gender-inclusive actions by all actors, including political parties, parliament, civil society organisations and women aspirants themselves.

The handbook recommends that, for gender inclusiveness to become a reality, it is necessary to specifically address the hurdles to women's participation in all the three stages. In the **pre-election period**, there are actions for the EMBs such as training, planning and voter registration. EMBs should ensure that all these actions consider the different needs of women and men and adequately cater for balanced participation in these activities. Parliaments can also make laws or amend existing laws to address the obstacles. This stage is also a period for preparation on the part of political aspirants. Women political aspirants need to master the standard stages that apply to everybody, but additionally appreciate the significance of the 'gender template' on which their election journey will be structured.

The **electoral period** is the peak in this cycle. Competing in an election is a highly involving political activity. Women's candidatures face hurdles both in nomination and in campaigns. For women to get elected, they need to pass through three crucial barriers: first, they must put themselves forward for elections; second, they need to get selected as candidates by their party; and third, they need to get selected by the voters (see Figure 1.4) (adapted from Matland 1998, p.67). A variety of factors produce aspirants from all eligible people: parties as gatekeepers convert aspirants into candidates, while the community, as voters, turns candidates into office-holders.

Although the **post-election** period is like the ‘calm after the storm’ (or more of ‘the storm’, if the elections are followed by disputes and violence), this is one of the most important periods for change. Elections are usually followed by the announcement of a new cabinet. Where women have been under-represented in electoral processes for various reasons, Heads of State committed to gender equality have the opportunity to change some of that through their cabinet appointments. Leaders are also selected and announced in parliaments and (in the case of local government) in councils. In addition, this is the period when all parties, but especially the EMBs, media and election monitoring groups, analyse and reflect on the outcomes of the elections: it is a critical moment for making recommendations on improving gender outcomes.

The **checklist** follows the three stages of the elections, providing a guide for any one of the actors (but especially election monitoring groups) to ensure that relevant gender questions are asked at each stage and incorporated into the reporting. The checklist can also be used to conduct stand-alone gender audits of elections, by civil society watchdogs, gender commissions and any groups that have a specific gender brief in the elections.

The **handbook**, meanwhile, is structured around key commitments and role players, with relevant sections of the checklist at the end of each chapter. The reason for this is to ensure that it is as relevant as possible to these stakeholders, while recognising the overlapping and mutually reinforcing nature of these roles.

Chapter 1 (Introduction) provides an overview of where women are in political decision-making in the Commonwealth, what prevents women from entering politics and, conversely, what factors facilitate their political participation.

Chapter 2 (Normative Frameworks) covers the key international, Commonwealth, African, subregional and national commitments to achieving gender equality.

Chapter 3 (The Legislature, Electoral Systems and Temporary Special Measures) focuses on the role of the constitution and the legislature, especially in determining the electoral system, and laws that help guarantee women’s political participation.

Chapter 4 (Political Parties) concerns gender in the visions, missions and manifestos of political parties; the role of political parties in grooming women for leadership in their

own structures; nominations of, and support for, candidates, including in top positions; and the extent to which political parties infuse gender issues in the campaign. The chapter also covers the dilemmas faced by women who must choose between commitment to their parties and to causes dear to them as women. It looks at the role and experience of inter-party caucuses in helping women bridge this divide.

Chapter 5 (Gender and Election Management Bodies) concerns gender mainstreaming in the policies, composition and conduct of EMBs. This chapter also covers the many facets of elections – from voter registration, to running the elections on the day, to announcing election results – for which the EMBs are primarily responsible.





Chapter 6 (Civil Society) focuses on the role of civil society (especially women’s rights organisations) in lobbying and advocating for women’s participation; training and supporting women aspirants and candidates; and monitoring the outcome of the elections.

Chapter 7 (The Media and Social Media) breaks new ground by including the media as a key player in either excluding women or promoting gender-inclusive elections. Moving with the times, this chapter also includes a section on new media, a tool with many possibilities, but also many potential pitfalls, in the quest for more inclusive elections.

Chapter 8 (Election Observers) touches on election observation generally (domestic, regional and international), but with a strong focus on what has been learned through Commonwealth Observer Mission reports from a gender perspective, and how these can be strengthened in the future.

Chapter 9 (Conclusions and Recommendations) ties together the diverse threads in the handbook by suggesting how all the different actors can contribute to gender-inclusive elections and offers reflections and recommendations from a gender perspective.

Each chapter begins with an overview, based on facts and figures as at July 2017, when the handbook was compiled. It draws out the key gender issues overall and for specific actors, ending with a summary of key points and the relevant sections of the checklist. The following icons assist in the navigation of the handbook.

	Key points: This is a summary at the beginning of each chapter.
	Case study: The best learning builds on actual experiences. Some case studies are iconic and bear full mention. Others may soon become dated or may not be relevant to all readers. The handbook shares examples, but also encourages users to find their own case studies.
	Quick facts: The handbook has some quick facts where these help explain current realities and prompt us to think about how we can approach things differently.
	Checklist: This is an action-oriented handbook that ends with questions to help apply the learning. The checklist directed at each stakeholder and overall (Annex A) is the main 'take away' from the handbook, with practical applications to upcoming elections in each country.

References

- Commonwealth Secretariat (2005), 'Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers', available at: <http://thecommonwealth.org/history-of-the-commonwealth/declaration-principles-international-election-observation-and-code> (accessed 6 December 2017).
- Commonwealth Secretariat (2015a), *Beyond Numbers: Women's Political Leadership in Delivering Democracy and Development in Africa*, available at: http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/news-items/documents/Meeting%20Report_Women's%20Political%20Leadership_0.pdf (accessed 6 December 2017).
- Matland, RE (1998), 'Enhancing Women's Political Participation: Legislative Recruitment and Electoral Systems', in A Karam, (ed.), *Women in Parliament Beyond Numbers*, International IDEA Handbook, Stockholm.