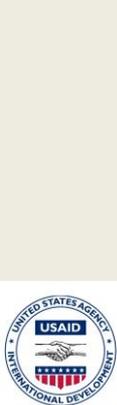


VOICE-OUT FOR BETTER: EXPERIENCES OF POLLING STATION MEMBERS IN 2017 BY-ELECTION



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



PHAN TEE EAIN
(CREATIVE HOME)

Acknowledgment

The study “Voice-Out for Better: Experiences of Polling Station Members in 2017 By-Election” intends to advocate the Union Election Commission of Myanmar for taking appropriate and gender responsive measures so as to better prepare for the upcoming 2020 general election. The study was commissioned by the Phan Tee Eain (PTE).

We are thankful to the Socio-Economic and Gender Resource Institute (SEGRI) for their technical support. We would also like to thank the enumeration team, the polling station members, and the election sub-commissioners who participated in focus group discussions and key informant interviews in Hpruso, Kayah State; Chaungzon, Mon State; Monywa, Sagaing Region; and Hlaingtharya and Hlaing, Yangon Region.

We would like to express our sense of gratitude to National Democratic Institute (NDI) for their financial support which made us possible carrying out the study.

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Executive Summary

The 2008 constitution of Myanmar grants the Union Election Commission (UEC) as election management body and responsible for organizing and overseeing elections in Myanmar, as well as vetting parliamentary candidates and political parties. The Commission is an independent body and is made up of Sub-National Commission Offices in State/Region, district, township, and ward & village tract throughout the country.

Pyithu Hluttaw Election law (2010) gives the power to the UEC supervising the polling booths at various constituencies including the forming polling booth teams and appointing *suitable persons from amongst the civil services personnel as polling booth officers*. It is described in the law that the polling booth teams shall be formed with civil services personnel, and citizens, associate citizens or naturalized citizens who are trusted and respected by the local public and are included in any voting roll as far as possible.

In 2015 general election, as per the study from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) commissioned by Phan Tee Eain (PTE), women constituted more than 60% as polling station officers or deputy polling station officer. The school teachers, the female-dominated government sector in Myanmar, served as polling station officer, the deputy, and member all over the country.

The study intends to collect the experiences and challenges encountered by the polling station members in pre, during, and post-election. The study was conducted in five areas: 1) Hpruso, Kayah State; 2) Chaungzon, Mon State; 3) Monywa, Sagaing Region; and 4) Hlaingtharya and 5) Hlaing, Yangon Region. Altogether 67 respondents (41 polling station members and 26 sub-commissioners) participated and the study employed 9 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and 13 Key Informant Interview (KII).

The chapter 3 portrays the personal information of respondents. The majority of Polling Station members were female (80%), in contrast, the majority of sub-commissioners were male (85%). All Polling Station Officers and Deputy Polling Station Officers are secondary school teachers of Ministry of Education, majority are married and in the age range of 45-64, almost all possessed graduate level of education. Almost all sub-commissioner and Polling Station members have a sound experiences in 1990, 2010, 2015 general election and 2012 by-election. Only 27% of sub-commissioners possessed graduate level of education.

The chapter 4 reveals the main findings of the study. It explores the challenges and barriers that the polling station members encountered not only in 2017 by-elections but in 2015 general election. The challenges were segmented into 5: 1) recruitment and capacity development of polling station members; 2) challenges in translation the guideline of manual into practice; 3) challenges in administration; 4) challenges lie in weak cooperation and accountability; 5) low public awareness on election; and 6) challenges experienced as woman Polling Station Members.

The chapter 5 proposes a set of recommendation based on the findings. The recommendations are aimed to advocate the Union Election Commission to be better performing in future election process. The recommendations include: seeking informed consent for the assignment as polling station member; reviewing and revising the existing guidelines and manuals for clear division of labour, demarcation of authority, and financial and human resource arrangement; delivering hands-on training with well preparation time and inclusion of gender aspects and handling practical issues; having a mechanism to ensure strong coordination and complaints; providing measures to increase public awareness on voter education/civic education; providing the special measures for female polling station members in responding their practical and strategic needs; and establishing a reporting and investigation mechanism for violence and encouraging to report.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment	2
Executive Summary	3
1. Introduction	6
2. Objectives, Methodology and Limitation	7
3. Respondents Profile	9
3.1 Respondent by sex and study area	9
3.2 Profile of Polling Station Members	9
4. Main Findings of the study	15
4.1 Recruitment and Capacity Development of Polling Station Members:	15
4.2 Challenges in translation the guideline of Manual into practice:	16
4.3 Challenges in Administration	16
4.4 Challenges lie in weak Cooperation and Accountability:	17
4.5 Low Public Awareness on Election	19
4.6 Challenges experienced as women Polling Station Member	19
5. Recommendation	20
Reference:	22
Annex I: Questionnaires	Error! Bookmark not defined.

1. Introduction

Myanmar is a unitary republic, with elected representatives at the national and, state or region levels. On the national level, the head of state, the President, is elected indirectly through an Electoral College. According to the 2008 constitution, the term durations of the legislature, the President, and the Cabinet are five years.¹

Voting occurred in all constituencies, excluding seats appointed by the military, to select Members of Assembly to seats in both the upper house (the House of Nationalities) and the lower house (the House of Representatives) of the Assembly of the Union, and State and Region Hluttaws. Ethnic Affairs Ministers were also elected by their designated electorates on the same day as per rights given by 2008 Constitution article 161, although only select ethnic minorities in particular states and regions were entitled to vote for them.

The country has so far had 16 general elections since 1922; the last general election was in 2015 and the next is expected in 2020. All elections are regulated by the Union Election Commission.²

The 2008 constitution of Myanmar grants the UEC as election management body and responsible for organizing and overseeing elections in Myanmar, as well as vetting parliamentary candidates and political parties.³ It is also a mixed electoral independent election commission and secretariat management body staffed by an independent election commission and secretariat.⁴ The Commission is an independent body and is made up of Sub-national Commission Offices in State/Region, district, township, and ward & village tract sub commissions throughout the country.

The responsibilities of the UEC include organizing elections; compiling a voter list; informing and educating the electorate using mass media; registering political parties and vetting candidate nominations; training all their staff on operations and procedures; conducting polling and counting; resolving electoral disputes; and verifying and announcing the results.⁵

Pyithu Hluttaw Election law (2010) gives the power to UEC supervising the polling booths at various constituencies including the forming polling booth teams and appointing *suitable persons from amongst the civil services personnel as polling booth officers*. It is described in the law that the polling booth teams shall be formed with civil services personnel, and citizens, associate citizens or naturalized citizens who are trusted and respected by the local public and are included in any voting roll as far as possible.⁶

The study from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) commissioned by Phan Tee Eain (PTE) shows that women constituted more than 60% as Polling Station Officers

¹ The Constitution of Republic of Union of Myanmar 2008, Section 61, 119, 151, 168, 235

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_Myanmar

³ Constitution Republic of Union of Myanmar 2008, Act 398 to Act 403.

⁴ Elections in Myanmar, 2015 General Elections: Frequently Asked Questions, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 2015

⁵ IFES, 2015

⁶ The Pyithu Hluttaw Election Law, Act 39, The State Peace and Development Council, The Union of Myanmar, 2010

or Deputy Polling Station Officers in 2015 general election.⁷ Most of them were school teachers working under Ministry of Education, the female-dominated government sector in Myanmar. In the past during military regime, it was not uncommon in seeing that the school teachers and school children were performing the assigned tasks such as welcoming the state's high level officials and state's guests, collecting the data such as national Census, etc. Such practice, combined with their social status in the community that school teachers are trust worthy and highly respectable, there is no one else except school teachers when the UEC identified 'trusted and respected civil services personnel'.

Background of the Study

During 2015 general election, Phan Tee Eain (PTE), as an agency performed election observation, observed that there were challenges encountered by the Polling Station Officers throughout the election processes (pre, during, and post-election). It was learnt that there was little support such as financial, technical and materials to the Polling Station Officers, however, they sometimes received blaming from communities, officials and media.⁸ Policies and procedures are also found out that not supportive effectively to reduce stress and burden of polling station officers. All these experiences of women Polling Station Officers were not recorded and reported for taking an action and improvement. There are electoral related study and assessment focusing on election commission, voters, political parties, and election observers, but very limited studies on polling station members.

In this regard, PTE realized that there needs to have an evidence-based study targeting to polling station members to learn their practical experiences during election process in order to develop an advocacy plan to the relevant stakeholders. The study, commissioned by the PTE focuses on and collects the voices and experiences of polling station members during By-Election 2017. This study is expected to be an evidence-based advocacy to the UEC for taking the necessary action so as to better prepare for the upcoming 2020 general election.

2. Objectives, Methodology and Limitation

2.1 Objectives

The objectives of the study are to collect the evidence based information through voices and experiences of polling station officers, and to provide the recommendations for the future elections to be more gender responsive.

2.2. Methodology of the study

In order to obtain the objectives, the following three stages of activities were undertaken by PTE:

- 1) Resource mobilization and a hands-on training on gender, election process, and data collection method

⁷ Report on Observing Women's Participation in Myanmar's November 2015 General Election, Phan Tee Eain(Creative Home)

⁸ Concept note on By-Election Observation, Phan Tee Eain, 2017

- 2) Conducting Election Observation particularly on the work of polling station officers on election day
- 3) Conducting focus group discussions and key informant interviews with polling station officers and Election Commission after the by-election

The methodology is comprised both desk review and primary data collection. It was carried in 4 States/Regions- Hpruso, Kayah State; Chaungzon, Mon State; Monywa, Sagaing Region; and Hlaingtharya and Hlaing, Yangon Region.

The primary data collection mainly stressed on two groups: 1) 41 polling station members and 2) 26 sub-commissioners from ward and village tract. The data collection included 13 Key Informant Interviews (KII) and 9 Focus Group Discussions (FGD).

Four sets of semi-structured interview questionnaires were developed for the polling station members and sub-commissioners from ward and village tract. The questionnaire is divided into three parts:

- 1) the roles and responsibilities encountered;
- 2) the challenges and lesson learnt during election process (pre, during and post-election);
- 3) the specific challenges that women encountered as Polling Station Members;

Suggestions were sought for each stage of election period to better perform in future elections.

2.3. Limitation of the study

Organizing the FGD was not an easy task since interview was not able to conduct on the Election Day, and it was hard to re-organize after election, thus data collection was not able to carry out in Naung Lay Pin (Bago Region) as planned.

It was observed that some polling station members as well as sub-commissioners were in fear and unwilling to participate in the interview and FGD as they don't want to criticize on 'the duty of state'.

Since it was a qualitative study covered the opinions of 67 respondents based on their experiences, the challenges and barriers revealed in the study have limitations to represent all stakeholders involved in the election process.

This study did interview all types of polling station members⁹ except Polling Station Security and Ink Marker.

⁹ Generally a polling station has the following members: Polling Station Officer; Deputy Polling Station Officer; At least (3) Voter List Checkers; At least (3) Ballot Paper Issuers; Polling Station Security; Ink Marker-totaling at least 10 members.

3. Respondents Profile

The Chapter 3 portrays the personal information of respondents; sex, age, marital status, education qualification, occupation, role in the by-election, and study area.

3.1 Respondent by sex and study area

The primary data was collected by employing KII and FGD with 67 respondents in which 41 were Polling Station members (in which 80% are female), and 26 sub-Commissioner (in which 85% are male), as shown in Table.3.1.

Table 3.1: Respondent by sex and study area

Study Area	Polling Station Staff			Sub-Commissioner			Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Hpruso, Kayah State	5	4	9	2	-	2	11
Monywa, Sagaing Region	-	9	9	4	-	4	13
Hlaingthaya, Yangon Region	2	5	7	6	-	6	13
Hlaing, Yangon Region	-	7	7	7	-	7	14
Chungzon, Mon State	1	8	9	3	4	7	16
Total	8	33	41	22	4	26	67
%	20	80	100	85	15	100	

3.2 Profile of Polling Station Members

3.2.1 The Role at Polling Station

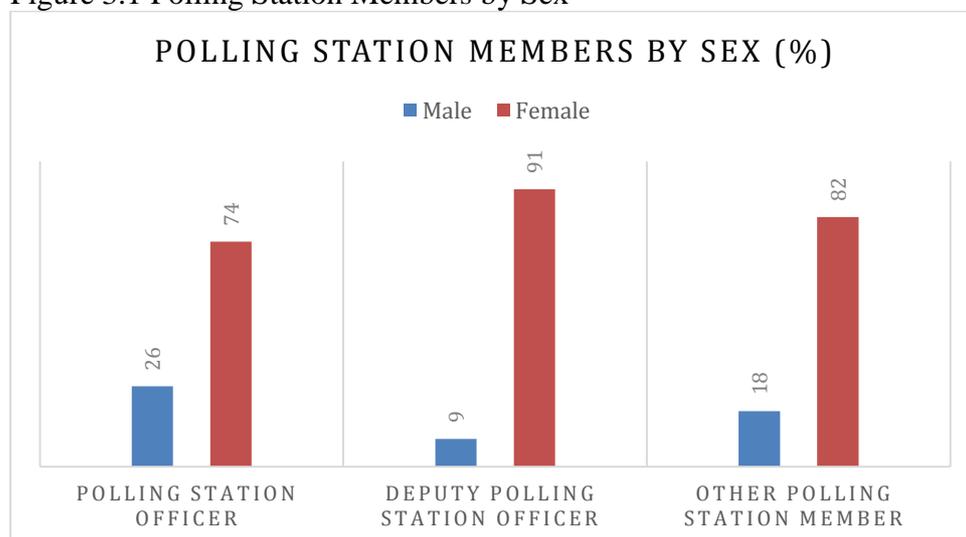
The study comprises 41 Polling Station members of which 45% are Polling Station Officers, and 27.5% Deputy Polling Station Officers, thus, the study reflects the views and experiences of the most responsible persons of the polling stations on Election Day.

Table 3.2: Role of Polling Station Members by Sex

Polling Station Members	Male	Female	Total	%
Polling Station Officer	5	14	19	45
Deputy Polling Station Officer	1	10	11	27.5
Other Polling Station members	2	9	11	27.5
Total	8	33	41	100

Of all polling station members staff, women are out number- 78% of Polling Station Officers, 91% of Deputy Polling Station Officers, and 82% of other Polling Station members. The study, therefore, reveals the reflections and experiences of women Polling Station members.

Figure 3.1 Polling Station Members by Sex



3.2.2 Age Group

The age groups of Polling Station Officers and Deputy Polling Station Officers are mentioned in Table 3.3. It showed that 57% of total polling station officers are in the age group of 45-64, and 20% in the age group of 35-44. This study, therefore, mainly represents the opinion of people who are in the 45-64 age groups.

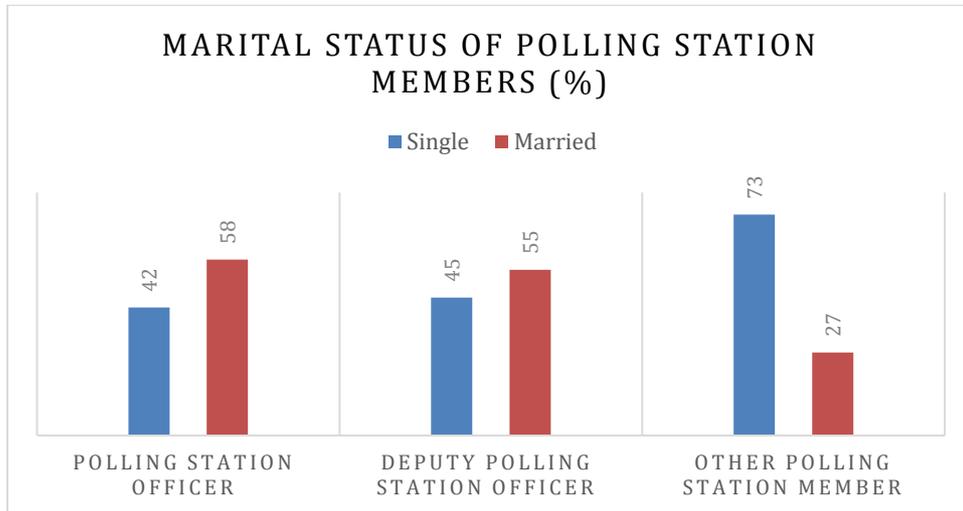
Table 3.3: The Polling Station Officers and Deputy Polling Station Officers' Age Group

	Age Groups					Total
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	
Polling Station Officer		4	3	8	4	19
Deputy Polling Station Officer	2	1	3	0	5	11
Total in number	2	5	6	8	9	30
%	7	17	20	27	30	100

3.2.3 Marital Status

Of total 41 Polling Station Members, 46% (19 out of 41) are married. 58% of total Polling Station Officers and 55% of Deputy Polling Station Officers are married while 73% of other Polling Station members are single.

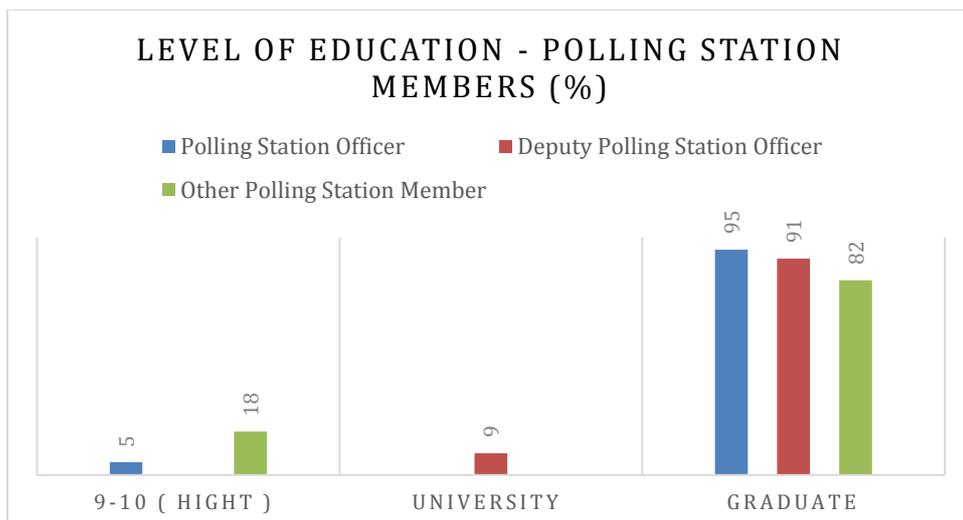
Figure 3.2 Marital Status of Pooling Station Members



3.2.4 Level of Education

The majority of Polling Station members especially the Polling Station Officers and Deputy Polling Station Officers possess graduate level of education.

Figure 3.3: Level of Education-Polling Station Members

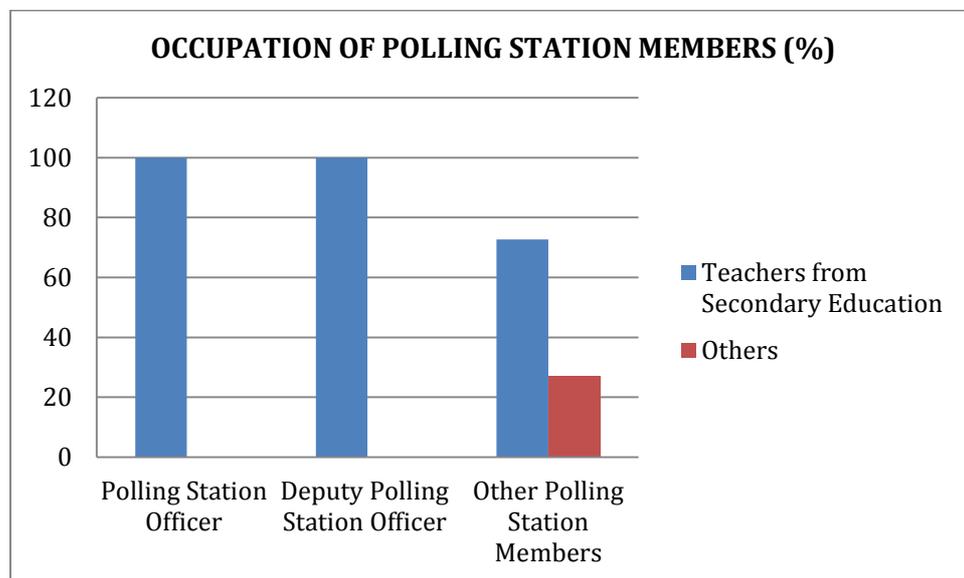


3.2.5 Occupation

To manage polling stations in each constituency, the township sub-commission must appoint suitable civil servants as polling station members; the township sub-commission could appoint appropriate civil servants for Polling Station Officers, Deputy Polling Station Officer and polling station members on preferential basis.¹⁰ Township sub-commission has an authority to appoint Polling Station Officers and as per guideline for Ward and Village Tract sub-commission 'School teacher shall be given priority to assign as Polling Station Officers.'¹¹

All the Polling Station Officers and Deputy Polling Station Officers of the study are teachers from secondary educations of Ministry of Education. It was found that, in the study, none of civil servants from other Ministry except Ministry of Education was assigned as polling station members.

Figure 3.4: Occupation of Polling Station Members



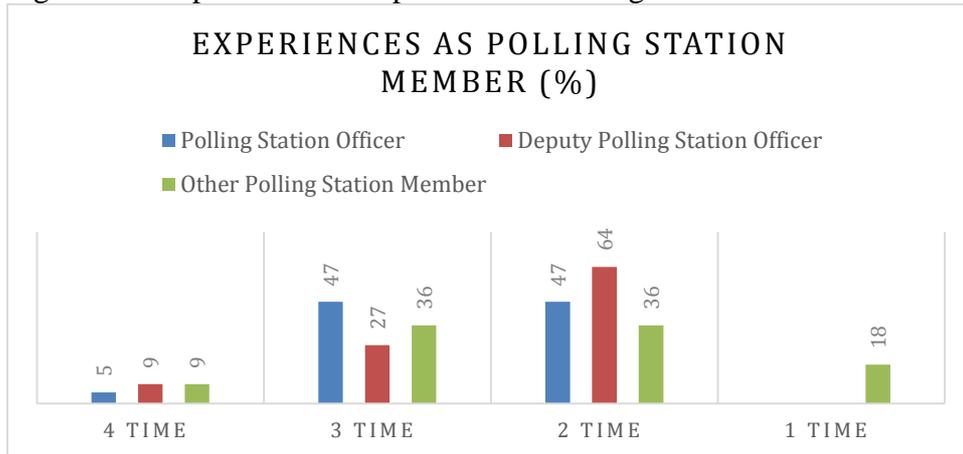
3.2.6 Experience of Respondents as Polling Station Members

For almost all Polling Station members in this study, the by-election 2017 was not their first experience. All Polling Station Officers and all Deputy Polling Station Officers have had such experience in 1990, 2010, 2015 general election and 2012, 2017 by-election. The by-election 2017 was new to only 18% of other polling station members.

¹⁰ Myanmar General Elections "Polling Station Officer, Deputy Polling Station Officer and Polling Station Members' Manual", 2015 Chapter 1 "Issues related to Election and Polling", 1.3 Appointment of Polling Station Officer and Members

¹¹ Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Union Election Commission, Ward and Village Tract Sub-Commissioner' Guideline (revised), 2014 November, Art. 47 p.28

Figure 3.5: Experience of Respondents as Polling Station Members



3.3 Profile of Ward and Village Tract Election Sub-Commissioners

The study comprises 26 Ward and Village Tract Election Sub-Commissioners of which 85% are male, only 27% are graduates and the majority (58%) possesses secondary level of education. Of all 96% of sub-commissioners have had sound experiences as sub-commissioner in previous general elections and by-elections in Myanmar.

Figure.3.6: Level of Education- Ward and Village Tract Sub-Commissioners (%)

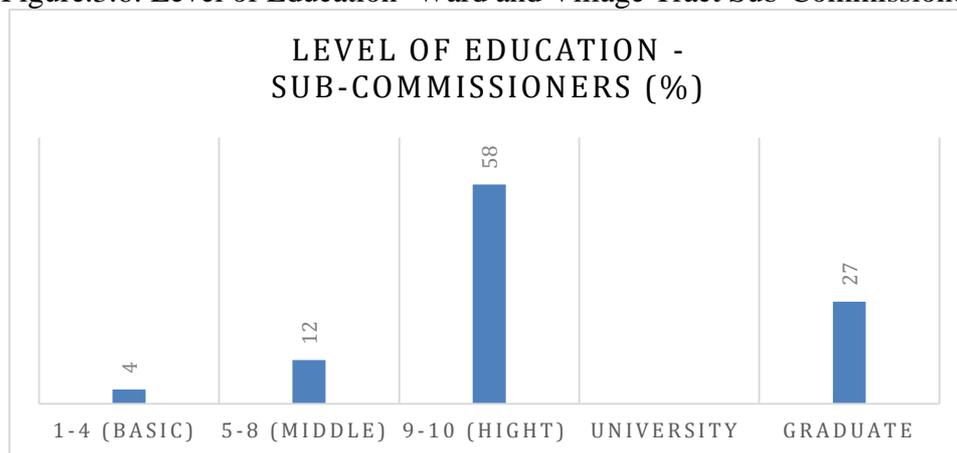
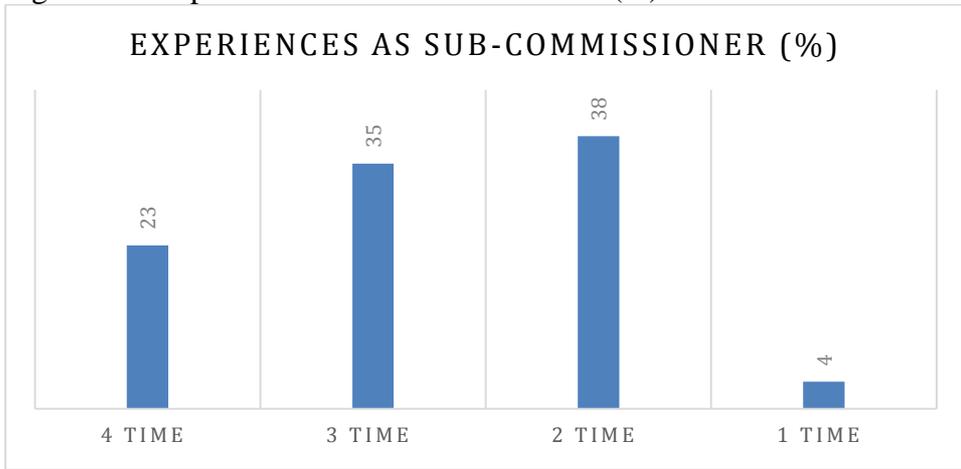


Figure 3.7: Experiences of Sub-Commissioner (%)



4. Main Findings of the study

The Chapter 4 reveals the main findings of the study particularly exploring the challenges and barriers that the Polling Station members experienced throughout the election process. The challenges were drawn not only from the by-election that recently held but mainly from the 2015 general election so as to cover a wider scope. Seeking the suggestions for challenges exposed would enable the decision making stakeholders to take actions and induce measures for gender responsive operation in the future.

4.1 Recruitment and Capacity Development of Polling Station Members:

Top down modality of assignment: Respondents were asked ‘the perception on the assignment as Polling Station member’ in FGDs and KII. Teachers were assigned by township education officer and township sub-commissions¹² as per Code of conduct of Polling Station Officers¹³ it has mentioned that ‘All ward/village tract sub-commission staff as well as polling station members must understand that performing the duties at the polling station is performing the duty of the state.’

- a. All Polling Station Officers and Deputy Polling Station Officers said that they are proud of being Polling Station Officers and being part of the country’s importance transition effort to democracy.
- b. Some of the assigned teachers as polling station members of the study, however, felt that the modality of assignment was rigid and top down without informed consent.
- c. While some teachers were assigned as Polling Station Officers who were assigned for the matriculation exam at the same time were exhausted due to heavy workload and hard to properly manage the tight schedule between professional task and the assigned task as polling station officers.
- d. When teachers were assigned to the polling stations of different townships where they are not residing made them difficult in commuting, cost ineffective, and time consuming.

“When township sub-commissions appoint polling station officers, school teachers’ consents were not sought. Since the polling station officers were assigned with lack of willingness, old, not in good health, and being physically incapable, may create unhealthy working environment and may also have negative impact on the quality of work.” (FDGs and KII with polling station members)

Insufficient hand-on trainings of Polling Station Members: As per the FGDs at all study areas, polling station members especially for polling station officers revealed that existing hands-on training to polling station members was not sufficient and inadequate.

- a. There was an inconsistent delivering the training to polling station members as one-day training in some areas and two-day in some areas.

¹² As per instruction from UEC (August, 2010), Art 39 C, township sub-commissions are given authority to assign suitable persons as polling station staff.

¹³ Myanmar General Elections "Polling Station Officer, Deputy Polling Station Officer and Polling Station Members' Manual", 2015 Chapter 1 "Issues related to Election and Polling", 1.2 Code of Conduct of Polling Station Officers and Polling Station Members issued by the Union Election Commission (h) All ward/village tract sub-commission staff as well as polling station members must understand that performing the duties at the polling station is performing the duty of the state

- b. Training usually in lecture type was not enough for thorough understanding to perform competently their tasks on Election Day.
- c. The training did not cover for ‘handling practical issues’ and ‘how to solving problems’ during election process including the Election Day.
- d. Some polling station officers of the study felt low self-esteem with insecurity and lack of confidence to perform their tasks on Election Day.

“There was no demonstration; just lecture type with one side discussion in training was I think the result of our limited understanding. It was really a great challenge especially for newcomers.” (FDG with polling station member and KII with Polling Station Officers)

‘In 2015, I was afraid to take responsibility as deputy polling station officers. I have doubt myself whether I can handle well the assigned tasks. I even don’t know at that time that Form-17 is the form for unqualified vote.’ (KII with Deputy Polling Station Officer)

‘I saw teachers were very nervous on Election Day, they seem lack of confidence, so we encouraged them.’ (KII with sub-Commissioner)

4.2 Challenges in translation the guideline of Manual into practice: In all study areas, respondents mentioned at the FGDs that there are challenges to follow the guideline mentioned in Manual into practice particularly on 1) ‘assisting people with disabilities to access the polling station and cast their votes such as having ramps for wheel chair’¹⁴; and 2) ‘taking photos and recording videos at the polling station’¹⁵.

- a. It is mentioned both in manual and guideline that it has to have measures for vulnerable population such as people with disability and elder people to access the polling station and cast their votes; however, respondents from FGDs and observations conducted during Election Day confirmed that there was lack of such measures.
- b. There is article in manual ‘prohibiting using equipment inside the Polling Station’ such as taking photo or video. In reality it is difficult to follow as polling station members could not manage to control if observers or voters brought their cameras or recorders inside the polling stations and took pictures or video.

4.3 Challenges in Administration

Lack of clear procedure and plan in Manual on HOW to ‘sending the ballot boxes to township sub-commission’: After counting the votes on the Election Day at the polling station, ‘The Polling Station Officer will take the final large tamper evident bag, Form (16) and Form (16-A) envelopes to the respective township sub-commission quickly’¹⁶. The procedure and plan on how to send ballot boxes to township sub-commission are not mentioned specifically in the manual.

¹⁴ Myanmar General Elections "Polling Station Officer, Deputy Polling Station Officer and Polling Station Members' Manual", 2015 Chapter 2 "Preparing for Election Day", 2.1.2 Voting for People with Disabilities and Need of Assistance

¹⁵ Myanmar By-Elections 2017 "Polling Station Officer, Deputy Polling Station Officer and Polling Station Members' Manual", Chapter 1 "Issues related to Election and Polling", 1.8 The Role of Observers and Candidate Agents, Polling Station Agents/Assistants: (e) the rights to use equipment to record the election process (except inside the polling station)

¹⁶ Myanmar By-Elections 2017 "Polling Station Officer, Deputy Polling Station Officer and Polling Station Members' Manual", Chapter 4 "Issues related to Election and Polling", 4.1 Closing the Polling Station (14) / 4.4 Procedure after Counting (8)

Limited Financial Support for transportation: As per FGD with Polling Station Officers, the challenges included limited or lack of financial support particularly for ‘transportation cost’ for to/from polling station and township election sub-commission on sending the ballot boxes on Election Day. (This issue was raised in 4 study areas among 5, one area said only one way cost was provided but majority mentioned that polling officers had to settle the transportation cost with their own expenses.) Thus, some Polling Station Officers felt insecure as there was no security arrangement.

- a. Likewise, in KII with the sub-commissioner stated that the sub-commission did not provide any security measure for sending the ballot boxes. One sub-commissioner said that the transportation fees were provided by township sub-commission to Polling Station Officer, but only for one way.
- b. KII with Polling Station Officers reveal that it became more in trouble if the Polling Station Officer is a woman especially those whose polling station was quite far from the township sub-commission, who has to go back home quite late due to taking times for counting votes.
- c. Inconsistently in the study, some polling station members reported that they were not provided for any meal allowance on Election Day.

“It was a long queue at the township election sub-commission for sending ballot boxes. I arrived back quite late about 2:00 AM to the respective polling station and had to stay overnight on the desk of polling station.” (KII with Polling Station Officer)

“Township sub-commission already provided transportation fees for sending the ballot boxes, but just for one way, thus it would be difficult for Polling Station Officers if it gets late. It would be good if there is transportation arrangement in future.” (KII with sub-commissioner)

No contingency plan for Electricity: The Polling Station Officers encountered the electricity cut off while counting the votes and managed for lighting with their mobile and candle lights. The Polling Station Officers from where there is no electricity also pointed out that there should be special plan for the area where there is no electricity.

“There was no electricity at the polling station where I was assigned. We were encountering difficulties in counting votes. We had to manage using candle light. I would suggest providing lamp or mini-generator because it is very important and sensitive especially during the time for counting votes.” (KII with Polling Station Officer)

“I was given Form-16 with no extra copy. You know! No electricity, no photocopier. If something wrong, there is nothing to substitute and I was so stressful!” (KII with Polling Station Officer)

4.4 Challenges lie in weak Cooperation and Accountability: It is observed that some challenges mentioned in FGDs and KII by both Polling Station Officers and sub-commissioners lie in weak cooperation and accountability between them.

- a. Both parties disclosed in KII that there was only one time coordination meeting between Polling Station Members and sub-commissioners organized by township sub-commission and majority thought that it is not sufficient for effective cooperation.
- b. Some Polling Station Officers in this study indicated that they did not receive prior information, clear messages from the sub-commission in pre-election period (e.g. meeting dates, monitoring visit to polling station, etc) and it gave extra burden and workload unnecessarily.

While raising the following challenges during KII and FGDs, Polling Station Officers wanted to highlight on the fact that there is unclear role and responsibility, uneven and unfair distribution of workload, and limited cooperation and financial support from village and ward sub-commissioners:

- a. Selection the location and setting up the polling station venue without sufficient financial and human resource support, so Polling Station Officers had to spend own expenses (A1 FGD)
- b. Polling station officers themselves carry materials to the polling station such as chairs and tables and cleaning the stuff after Election Day (A2, A4)
- c. Polling Station Officer was assigned to stay overnight for preparing polling station for senior official monitoring visit (A1, A3 KII)
- d. In some study areas, the Polling Station Officers expressed that they send the ballot boxes by themselves (not accompanied by sub-commissioners).

“I don’t feel that there is equal division of labour between sub-commission and polling station staff, so, I don’t feel that we have equal rights.”(FGD with Polling Station Officers at A1, A2, A5)

Limited knowledge on role and responsibilities of Polling Station Officers and sub-commission: As per guideline and manual, it was mentioned that Ward and Village Tract sub-commissioner in collaboration with Polling Station Officers, are responsible for the following tasks- having sufficient rooms for voting at polling station including arranging for person with disabilities, and setting up the polling station as instructed in the guideline.^{17 18} Polling Station Officer will take the final large tamper evident bag, Form (16) and Form (16-A) envelopes to the respective township sub-commission quickly accompanied by Ward and Village Tract sub-commissioners’.¹⁹

It was observed that understanding of both parties on ‘sending ballot boxes’ is solely responsible for the polling station officer alone. Likewise, in FGD with polling station members, ‘setting up the polling station is the solely responsibility of sub-commission.

“I think that setting up the polling station is the role of Sub-Commission, however, in reality, I had to involve in selecting and preparation the polling station venue. There was no assistance. I had to spend with my own expense.” (FGD polling station members)

¹⁷Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Union Election Commission, Ward and Village Tract Sub-Commissioner’ Guideline (revised), 2014 November, Art. 45 (c, e), p-26-27

¹⁸Union Election Commission, 2015 Myanmar General Elections, Polling Station Officer, Deputy Polling Station Officer and Polling Station Members’ Manual, 1.8 Issues Related to Elections and Polling, b: Preparation (2,7)

¹⁹ Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Union Election Commission, Ward and Village Tract Sub-Commissioner’ Guideline (revised), 2014 November, Art. 76, p-50

Performing Beyond Assigned Role: It was found that in some study areas, Polling Station Officers have performed tasks beyond their assigned role mentioned in the guideline and manual.

- a. The FGD with Polling Station Officers in one study area, in 2015 General Election and 2017 By-Election, Polling Station Officers had to collect door to door voter list, developing voter list, checking several times the accuracy of the voter list. (A1 FGD)
- b. From the FDG and KII with Polling Station Officers, they had to report to township general administration office on the number of voter bi-hourly. (A1 FGD; A3 PSO KII; A3 EC KII)

According to the guideline, regulation said “not to leak information except if UEC HQ allows dissemination of this information”.²⁰

4.5 Low Public Awareness on Election

Limited awareness by community on voting exercises and election process: Three study areas in FGD revealed the need of public awareness on election laws and guidelines, and role, duty and responsibility of polling station staff and election commission. The public’s limited understanding and knowledge on election creates misunderstanding, burdensome for the polling station staff, and it delays the process.

“In reality and in the ground, we are the one who meet voters and encounter the issues at the polling station. We were treated as if the most responsible person for inaccurate voter list by the voters. How can we explain that this is the duty of election commission? We also have no time to give long explanation during Election Day.”(FGD with Polling Station Officers)

4.6 Challenges experienced as women Polling Station Member

Among the respondents, majority serving as polling station officers are women. The specific challenges encountered by women were exposed at the FGDs mainly on lack of support for security, no consideration for women’s reproductive role, responsibility, and lack of supportive measures.

- a. Lack of security measure and support for women are the key challenges all women raised because polling station members come very early to the respective polling station on election day and going back very late at night; some women had to stay overnight at the polling station in Pre-Election and on Election Day.
- b. All FGDs and KII had same strong voice on the fact that ‘pregnant and lactating women polling station staff encountered were more difficult than those who are not’. The difficulties were for standing long hours almost the whole day, for not able to breast feed, and for not able to properly eat due to stress.

²⁰ Myanmar General Elections "Polling Station Officer, Deputy Polling Station Officer and Polling Station Members' Manual", 2015 Chapter 6 Miscellaneous 6.1 Regulations to follow p.45

- c. Women regardless of marital status mentioned their struggles and workload between their assigned tasks (productive role) and their reproductive responsibilities. They felt stressful and tired.
- d. Women have specific health issues such as menstruation for example. But things especially during Election Day kept everyone busy, and there no one to replace, women are more vulnerable. Polling Station members were not able to leave their desk and had to wait until people are gone for going to the bathroom.”

“As no one care about my security, I have to care myself. If you ask me in which ways, I have to answer like this. I dare not open the window how hot at night in the room is. I felt insecure and afraid while I was alone at school at night. I encouraged by saying myself that I can scream if someone come into my room. Though windows are closed, it can be get into the room from roofs” (KII with Polling Station Officers)

5. Recommendation

The findings mentioned above lead to propose a set of recommendations to better support the election process and the election process to be gender responsive.

1. The UEC and concerned ministry should seek informed consent before assigning the polling station member, instead of employing top down modality. When assign, it is suggested to appoint interested individuals who are young, energetic, and living nearby. The UEC should play a proactive role in engaging youth and other ministries. It will enable cost effective, solve (to certain extent) security issue, reduce time consuming for commuting, and avoid burdens for the elders.
2. The role and responsibility of sub-commissioners and polling station members (especially polling station officer) needs to be reviewed and revised with relevant stakeholders. The revised one should include, not limited to, clear division of labour, demarcation of authority, and financial and human resource arrangement. It would enable for effective functioning of their tasks in election process and for responding practical needs.
3. The UEC needs to make sure delivering hands-on training for polling station members to perform their roles competently. It needs to ensure incorporation gender considerations and inclusion responses into the training manual or curriculum. Based on the previous election experiences, the training should include how to handle practical issues and demonstration. It also needs to ensure having an adequate preparation time.
4. The UEC and concern authority should ensure strong coordination mechanism for effective cooperation.
5. It should have a mechanism for review after election and make complaint and/or suggestion, and protection for making working environment safe, for encouraging to voice out.
6. Measures to increase public awareness on voter education/civic education to be roll out ‘dutiful citizens’ image.

- a. It needs to ensure that the development of election specific gender sensitive Code of Conduct, the messages, manual, curriculum, and materials do not reinforce stereotypical roles for either women or men.
 - b. Aiming for 2020 general election, a nationwide comprehensive communication strategy should be considered to device and implement.
 - c. It should be included in the Regulatory Framework that both state owned and private media outlets allocating time to create awareness regarding how to vote, why to vote etc.
 - d. The communication efforts for community mobilization should be long-term, targeted, result-based, and involvement of important stakeholders and actors such as local social elite and local government representatives.
7. Since the polling station member majority are women with traditionally and socially assigned roles, in addition to their productive role as teachers, as mothers, wives, and daughters, the study should see the polling station staff's societal roles and workloads which are normally excluded and there is no consideration for appropriate measure for work life balance. It needs to make sure provision the special measures that reflect women's practical and strategic needs.
 8. Encourage reporting of violence including harassment, and take prompt action and establish positive examples of complaints being investigated and addressed.

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