

AFGHANISTAN

Increasing women's representation in parliament through quotas

The ousting of the Taliban in 2001 was heralded as offering Afghan women a chance to reclaim their place in public life and participate in the country's development after years of systemic exclusion. Since then, there have been a number of progressive resolutions and policies calling for the inclusion of Afghan women in peace and reconstruction processes, as well as for the protection of women in Afghanistan.¹ The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), for example, was signed without reservations in 2003.

Afghanistan's new constitution, adopted in 2003, guaranteed women equal rights and their formal inclusion in political decision-making processes. According to Article 83, at least two female candidates from each province should be elected to parliament. In 2007, and following results from the 2005 elections, sixty-eight women, representing about 27 per cent of the 249 members of the Wolesi Jirga, were elected. In addition to parliamentary quotas, the establishment of a Ministry of Women's Affairs, the commitment of substantial donor assistance to programmes targeting women and, most critically, the return of women to universities, schools, and government offices all herald a new era. Examples also exist of efforts to include women in decision-making at the community level—such as the creation of Community Development Councils as part of the National Solidarity Programme.

Although the new constitution has enhanced Afghan women's rights, both socially and politically, there is still a long way to go before these rights are translated into practice, implemented and enforced. The Afghan Parliament is still in its infancy and there are numerous obstacles to women's political mobilisation, participation and influence. It is difficult for women to place issues on the political agenda and to get access to those forums where actual decision-making takes place.² The leadership role of women within the parliament is insignificant and female Members of Parliament receive little support from their male colleagues. While female Members of Parliament are often invited to meetings to talk about the situation of women in Afghanistan, they are rarely asked about public finance, counter-narcotics, security or terrorism.³

To address such shortcomings, a number of programmes have addressed the need for women's inclusion in legal reform, economic empowerment, and national and local governance. Such programmes include training of women in management and technical skills, providing opportunities for women to take part in income-generating activities, and opportunities for women's voices to be heard through consultations.⁴

1 International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan: Women and Reconstruction" (ICG Asia Report No.48, Brussels/Kabul, 2003).

2 Kaja Borchgrevink, Helga Hernes, and Ingeborg Haavardsson, *Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: How to Reach the Women* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 2008), 7.

3 Borchgrevink, et al., *Peacebuilding in Afghanistan*, 8.

4 UNIFEM, "Gender Advocacy in Afghanistan," UNIFEM Newsletter September and November 2005, <http://www.ravalnet.org/ravalmedia/radialnet/veudones/cosillas/Women%20War%20Peace%20-%20Gender%20Profile%20-%20Afghanistan.htm> (accessed March 9, 2009).