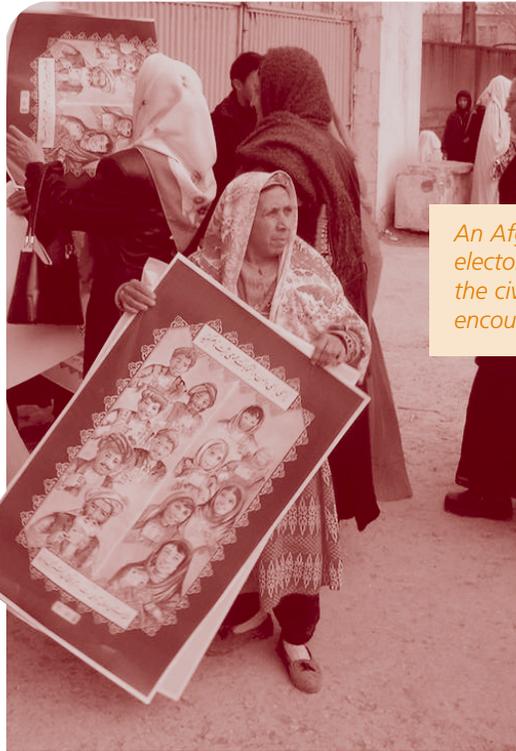


# Women Prepare for First Elections

Afghanistan

"Enemies of women must be defeated." These are the words spoken by the sister of one of the women killed in Nangarhar Province of Afghanistan, to the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, after an incident which killed two women and wounded 13 others.

*Husai Fazel Qadir was a student from the eastern city of Jalalabad who, according to her sister, wanted to use her vacation as an opportunity to earn additional income for her family. One of Husai's three brothers sells drinking water in the street, providing the main income for the family. Husai also wanted to help other women in Afghanistan, and thought that by participating in voter registration she was doing just that.*



*An Afghan woman outside an electoral registration site holds one of the civic education posters which encourage women to register to vote.*

*Because of religious and cultural sensitivities, voter registration in Afghanistan is strictly segregated by sex, as the voting will be. Officials struggled to find enough literate women who were willing and capable of staffing booths. Husai was an officer working at one of the registration sites established only for women. The women's registration sites have their own specific rules: the staff must be women, and if a woman does not want her photo taken and put on her registration card, staff should respect this.*

*A bus carrying Husai and other female workers of the Joint Electoral Management Body was the target of a bloody bomb attack on 26 June 2004.*

# Electoral Processes

## FACES

Despite constant threats and dangers, undaunted Afghan women have begun to assert their rights and are often taking a lead in peace-building and reconstruction processes.

Since the electoral process began in 2003, Afghan women and men have demonstrated extraordinary commitment and courage to work towards and to participate in Afghanistan's first free elections. As of August 2004, more than 40 per cent of the 10.5 million current voter registrants are women. No one expected this from a very conservative society, where traditional and cultural norms in some parts resisted the re-emergence of women into public life and, even more, their active participation in fledgling democratic processes that preceded these elections.

In Afghanistan, women seldom leave their homes, going out as little as once a week to shop or visit neighbours, family and friends. In spite of these limitations, the number of women registering to vote has been steadily increasing, and Afghan people are very proud of this. There are still areas of the country that lag behind. According to Fareeda Hameedy, Director of the Women's Affairs Department in the southern province of Nimroz, husbands and brothers have sometimes stopped women from receiving voting cards. However, it is often the case that when they learn that the election registrars are women, they allow and even encourage the women to register.

*A group of Afghan women proudly display their voter registration cards.*



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Other evidence of women's participation in the political process can be seen in the fact that women constituted some 12 per cent of approximately 2,000 delegates who attended the Emergency Loya Jirga in June 2001 to elect a transitional President and Government. Eighteen months later at the Constitutional Loya Jirga, which convened to decide the new

supreme law of the land, twenty per cent of the delegates were women. This is higher than women's representation in many Western democracies.

Importantly, the country's new constitution adopted earlier in 2004 guarantees equal rights to men and women. The constitution also requires that women fill at least 68 of the 249 seats in the Wolesi Jirga, the Lower House of the Parliament that will be elected in 2005.

Ensuring respect for the human rights of women and girls in a country's constitution and the electoral system is one of the aims of UN Security Council resolution 1325. The courage and undaunted determination shown by Husai and other Afghan women since September 2001 are what will enable this goal to become a reality.