The significance of the elections in Afghanistan cannot be overestimated. They mark the first time in Afghanistan's history that power will be handed from one democratically elected government to another. More importantly, they will determine to what degree the gains of the past decade for women's rights will be safeguarded both during the transition and by the new government. Women are looking with hope for positive change.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) has undertaken a significant voter registration campaign, nearly reaching its target of 40% of eligible female voters. Since registration began last year, the IEC has registered 3.6 million new voters, of which a third, 1.2 million, are women. UN Women applauds the efforts of the government to ensure sufficient female staff in the polling stations as this will encourage more women to vote.

Adding Volume to the Voice – Supporting the Game Changers

There is consensus that the elections must be an Afghan-led and Afghan-managed process. The role of the UN is mainly to provide support to the electoral institutions and Afghan authorities. UN Women has focused its support on civil society engagement and coordination to ensure that the issues that blocked women from voting during the 2009/10 elections are mitigated in this round of elections. To that end, UN Women facilitated the creation of the Civil Society Exchange, bringing together civil society representatives and individual women’s rights activists to coordinate efforts in raising awareness through joint advocacy and information sharing... Continued on page 4
Together with Afghan Women

Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity, Picture it!

Nearly 20 years ago, the world came together in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women. There, 189 governments adopted a visionary roadmap for gender equality: the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. More than 17,000 delegates and 30,000 activists pictured a world where women and girls had equal rights, freedom and opportunity in every sphere of life.

While much progress has been made in the past two decades, no country can claim to have achieved equality between men and women. It is time for the world to come together again for women and girls and complete this journey.

UN Women is launching a year-long campaign to re-energize the vision laid out at the Beijing Women’s Conference. Our goal is straightforward: renewed commitment, strengthened action and increased resources to realize gender equality, women’s empowerment and human rights. We call it: Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity: Picture It!

The Beijing Declaration laid out actions to address 12 critical areas of concern for women and girls across the globe. Governments, the private sector and other partners were urged to reduce women and girls’ poverty, ensure their right to access education and training, safeguard their health – including their sexual and reproductive health, protect women and girls from violence and discrimination, to ensure that technological advances benefit all, and to promote their full and equal participation in society, politics, and the economy.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action remains the most comprehensive global agreement on women’s empowerment and gender equality. If only it had been implemented!

Notwithstanding, today we can celebrate progress. More girls are going to school. More women are working, getting elected, and assuming leadership positions. But in all regions of the world, and in all countries, women continue to face discrimination because they are female.

We see it every day. In pay inequity and unequal opportunities at work... in stubbornly low representation of women leaders in the public and private sectors... in the continuing scourge of child marriage, and in the pandemic of violence experienced by one in three women globally – a number greater than the population of Europe.

Perhaps even more startling is the fact that if the Beijing negotiations occurred today, they would likely result in a weaker agreement. We all have a responsibility to keep pushing ahead for full implementation, because every time a woman or girl is held back by discrimination or violence, humanity loses.

Since the Beijing Conference, irrefutable evidence has accumulated showing that empowering women empowers humanity.

Picture it!

Countries with higher levels of gender equality have higher economic growth. Companies with more women on their boards have higher returns to shareholders. Parliaments with more women consider a broader range of issues and adopt more legislation on health, education, anti-discrimination, and child support. Peace agreements forged by female and male negotiators last longer and are more stable.

Studies show that for every one additional year of education for women, child mortality decreases by 9.5 per cent. Equalizing access to resources and services for women farmers would boost output and eliminate hunger for 150 million people. A billion women will enter the world economy in the next decade. With equal opportunities, their impact on our future prosperity will be a global game-changer.

We can and must turn this picture to reality. Right now, every country is working to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, and to define a new global development plan.

We must seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to position gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment firmly at the centre of the global agenda. It is the right thing to do, and the best thing for humanity... Continued on page 4
Promoting Gender Equality and Women’s Rights in Islam

Hosted by the office of the UN Women in Afghanistan, 15 Afghan women rights activists participated a five-day training on “Gender in Islam” conducted in New Delhi, India from 24-28 April, 2014.

With support from Musawah – the knowledge building initiative of Sisters in Islam (SIS), the workshop provided a forum to analyze the Islamic jurisprudence in relation to women rights in Muslim communities. It introduced and helped participants understand how knowledge is produced in the Muslim tradition and the dynamic interaction between Qur’an and the Islamic legal tradition and the rights framework. “Human rights and Islamic Law are not mutually contradictory. Islamic law is founded on a dynamic process of legal reasoning and reform. It introduced reforms challenging mistreatment of women in pre-Islamic societies. Islamic law has been continuously responding to social needs” said Professor Ziba Mir Hossaini, Specialist in Islamic Law.

The training was facilitated with support from two resources persons from Musawah. Professor Ziba Mir Hosseini, a legal anthropologist, specializes in Islamic law, gender and development. Dr. Amina Waduda, Professor Emirita of Islamic Studies, specialises on Qur’anic exegesis from a gender inclusive perspective.

Participants expressed that the teachings of the Qur’an, the objectives of the Shari’ah, universal human rights standards, fundamental rights and constitutional guarantees, and the realities of our lives in the twenty-first century, all demand that relations between Muslim women and men in both the private and public spheres be governed by principles and practices that uphold equality, fairness and justice. They all declared that “As Muslims and as citizens of modern nations, equality and justice in the family are both necessary and possible. The time for realizing these values in our laws and practices is now.”

CSE highlights the importance of women’s participation in the elections

The Civil Society Exchange (CSE) appreciated the widespread participation of men and women in the historical Presidential and Provincial Council elections. Speaking to a press conference on 6 May the CSE members praised the electoral bodies, security forces, media and the civil society organizations for their significant efforts which led to greater participation of people. CSE believes that the elections and casting of votes was an informed choice by the people of Afghanistan.

“Participation of people in the run-off is key to the legitimacy of future political government. All eligible citizens are requested to understand this duty and make history as did in the first round,” said Kulsoom Satarzai, CSE member while reading the recommendations to journalists. “Media, civil society organizations and citizens are requested to continue their observations of ballot counting and addressing elections complaints process.” Continued on page 4
Afghan Women’s Voices in Elections: Changing the Game ... Continued from page 1

Working with the New Leadership

But is it enough, and what guarantees are there? During the past twelve months, tensions have risen on issues such as negative provisions proposed within the revised Eliminating Violence Against Women Law and the Criminal Procedure Code, as well as reduced quotas for women under the revised Election Law. Only through heavy consultations between civil society, parliament, the Ministry of Justice and the President’s Office as well as advocacy by the international community, have these regressive initiatives been brought to the public eye and alleviated to the degree possible. These challenges highlight the fact that there remain many in Afghanistan’s power structures and society who fail to see the need for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Afghanistan has a number of international obligations and national commitments aimed at ensuring that the rights of women are protected. Aside from its own Constitution, the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provides Afghanistan with the essential foundation for building a new national ethos that celebrates human rights and the full participation of all its citizenry in decision-making, and provides the political and economic frameworks to deliver on its commitments to all. If Afghanistan were to fulfill all of its obligations under CEDAW, the rights of women and girls would be guaranteed.

Afghanistan cannot afford to ignore its women, to slip back into the past and hideaway half the productive population. Most importantly, Afghanistan cannot afford to lose the gains of the past decade, for to do so would mean it has lost its place in the global arena and its regional sphere of influence. No matter who wins the elections, Afghanistan must guarantee that its women win in the long run. UN Women together with the rest of the UN system remains committed to supporting the new leadership as well as civil society and women’s rights activists to change the game so women can participate on a level playing field.

CSE appreciates women’s Participation...Continued from page 3

The CSE which is a group of activities and advocates for human rights voiced concern over polling stations in numerous parts of the country running out of voting papers, lack of sufficient female body searcher, as well as long distance between polling stations leaving some women unable to cast their votes. They presented their recommendations to the relevant bodies to address such violations in a serious manner in the run-off elections due on 14 June. Establishing more polling stations, voter education, creating online complains form, and the deployment of female body searchers were among the key proposals.

Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity...Continued from page 2

Men and boys, who have been silent too long, are beginning to stand up and speak out for the human rights of women and girls through initiatives like UN Women’s #HeForShe campaign. We call on all men and boys to join us!

Nearly 20 years after Beijing, I believe the world is ready to implement its vision of equality for men and women. Today we launch a Beijing+20 campaign that will focus on progress, highlighting champions and effective work being done for gender equality. Every country will produce a report on the state of their women and girls, 20 years on. The campaign calls upon leaders and ordinary people alike to recommit and act to turn the vision of the Beijing platform into reality.

From Sweden, where in June people will gather to protect the human rights of women and girls, to September’s Climate Summit in New York, where women heads of State and activists will assert women’s role in protecting our environment, to India, where men and boys will make a show of force for gender equality in November. And on International Women’s Day on 8 March 2015, people in every country will make their voices heard for a better world.

Together we must achieve equality between women and men.

There is no time to waste!

Empowering women, Empowering humanity. Picture it!

UN Women thanks the Government of Belgium for its recent generous funding in support of UN Women’s Afghanistan Country Office programme

CSE appreciates women’s Participation...Continued from page 3

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