

SRSG TALKING POINTS
NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AND ELECTIONS
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I am pleased to be at this important event drawing together women from across Afghanistan.

The Presidential and Provincial Council elections, scheduled for 5 April, represent a historic political transition. Participation as candidates, electoral workers, observers, and voters is a key democratic right of all women. For Afghanistan, your participation in the civic life and decision-making of the nation strengthens its representative institutions and is vital to accelerating economic and development progress.

The legitimacy of any elections hinges on a widely accepted result based on credible technical conduct of polling and inclusive participation. I would go so far as to say that women's participation will be a key measure of success in Afghanistan's upcoming polls.

I need to emphasise that these elections are fully Afghan led and Afghan managed. My fellow panelists (Ministry of Interior, Independent Election Commission and Independent Electoral Complaints Commission) represent the Afghan institutions that will administer, adjudicate, and secure these polls under, for the first time governed by an agreed legislative framework.

In the decade since the overthrow of the Taliban regime your electoral management bodies and security institutions have grown and matured. They are now fully in the lead. I am pleased that for the first time one of these institutions, the Media Commission, has a female chairperson. Together with the deputy chairperson of the

Independent Electoral Complaints Commission and the three female members of the Independent Election Commission, such prominent women remind us just how far Afghanistan has come and strengthen governance through diverse perspectives.

I similarly commend the Ministry of Interior's recent appointment of Afghanistan's first district police commander and the Minister's personal commitment to increasing, and retaining, female personnel.

Actively safeguarding civic participation and human rights are critical elements of any democracy. Specific measures by the Ministry of Interior for these elections to encourage and secure women's participation include deployment of 13,000 female searchers at polling centers and assistance to those of the 308 female Provincial Council candidates who may feel under threat.

The Independent Election Commission's provision of logistical assistance to female candidates and decision to return the deposits of those who do not secure a minimum number of votes are important in encouraging greater participation by female candidates, many of whom do not have the financial resources of male counterparts.

The United Nations stands for certain values – including the promotion and protection of human rights and civic rights. The right to vote and the equality of men and women are central to this with Afghanistan being a signatory of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

More specifically, for these elections the United Nations' role is mandated by the Security Council. We work with the different institutions and parties involved to encourage the inclusiveness and integrity of the polls. We provide technical advice to the electoral institutions, but on a far more limited scope than previously given

increased experience and capacity of Afghan personnel. We also help ensure greater cohesion and coherence between the international community.

One of the most striking changes in Afghanistan over the last 12 years has been women's increased engagement in civic life with over a quarter of MPs and senators being female. This is a higher percentage than many long-standing democracies, and is because of the organization and advocacy of women's activists at the time of the Constitutional Loya Jirga. These elected representatives have had a strong voice not just on specifically "women's" issues but important perspectives, and leadership, on everything from reconciliation to economics.

Women's voices need to be heard at every level of Government and, like you, I was disappointed when the quotas for women's seats on Provincial Councils was reduced last year. This was a wakeup call to us all of the need to protect and promote the gains of recent years. And indeed was a call to get out and vote in local body polls – the quotas are a minimum, not a ceiling for women's aspirations!

Last week at a high-level meeting between the Government of Afghanistan and the international community the need for accelerated progress on a rights-based agenda was emphasized. An important element of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework – the focus of discussion - is implementation of the law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

I am sure many of you had much to do with shaping this landmark law and we all look forward to the report by the Ministry of Women's Affairs assessing progress to date. For my point here is that it is the implementation and realization of rights that is ultimately important.

Laws must not just stay on the page, rights are not simply nice words. Having been won they must be exercised.

As prominent activists you have an important role to play in promoting awareness of the electoral process and democratic rights amongst women – and men. We all need to work together in encouraging women’s participation on polling day itself, and in every stage of the process.

Women are needed as candidates, campaigners and electoral workers. I would in particular highlight the need for far greater numbers of female election observers in safeguarding women’s votes.

I have been greatly encouraged that in my meetings with all presidential candidates women’s rights, addressing women’s issues and seeking women’s perspectives have been a recognised part of their platforms.

These elections will not be perfect but they are another important step in building Afghanistan’s democracy. Participation as voters and as candidates provides women a voice in public life and can help ensure that issues of importance to you receive prominence in the country’s civic life.