



## DEMOCRACY AND THE UNITED NATIONS

Democracy is one of the universal and indivisible core values and principles of the United Nations. It is based on the freely expressed will of people and closely linked to the rule of law and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms.<sup>i</sup>

### ***Democracy in international law***

Although the United Nations Charter includes no mention of the word “democracy”, the opening words of the Charter, “We the Peoples”, reflect the fundamental principle of democracy, that the will of the people is the source of legitimacy of sovereign states and therefore of the United Nations as a whole.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, clearly projected the concept of democracy by stating “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government.”<sup>ii</sup> The Declaration spells out the rights that are essential for effective political participation. Since its adoption, the Declaration has inspired constitution-making around the world and has contributed greatly to the global acceptance of democracy as a universal value.<sup>iii</sup>



**An Afghan woman exercises her right to vote in the Presidential and Provincial Council Elections.**

UN Photo/Eric Kanalstein

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) lays the legal basis for the principles of democracy under international law, particularly:

- freedom of expression (Article 19);
- the right of peaceful assembly (Article 21);
- the right to freedom of association with others (Article 22);
- the right and opportunity to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives (Article 25);
- the right to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors (Article 25).



The Covenant is binding on those States that have ratified it. As of 8 July 2010, the number of parties to the Covenant was 166, which constitutes approximately 85 per cent of the United Nations' membership.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women stipulates that its 186 States parties (July 2010) shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right to vote and stand for elections, and participate in public life and decision-making (Article 7).

### ***Supporting democracy around the world***

United Nations activities in support of democracy and governance are implemented through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), among others. Such activities are inseparable from the UN's work in promoting human rights, development, and peace and security, and include:

- assisting parliaments and decentralized local governance structures to enhance the checks and balances that allow democracy to thrive;
- promoting human rights, the rule of law and access to justice by helping to strengthen the impartiality and effectiveness of national human rights machinery and judicial systems;
- ensuring freedom of expression and access to information by strengthening legislation and media capacities;
- electoral assistance and long-term support for electoral management bodies; and
- promoting women's participation in political and public life.



**Electoral officers from the United Nations Mission in Nepal prepare ballot boxes and other polling materials for distribution throughout the country.**

UN Photo/Ky Chung

Approximately \$1.4 billion each year is provided through UNDP alone to support democratic processes around the world, making the United Nations one of the largest providers of technical cooperation for democracy and governance globally.

The political work of the United Nations requires that it promote democratic outcomes; the development agencies seek to bolster national institutions like parliaments, electoral commissions and legal systems that form the bedrock of any democracy; and the human rights efforts support freedom of expression and association, participation and the rule of law, all of which are critical components of democracy.



### ***The UN General Assembly and democracy***

Since 1988, the General Assembly has adopted at least one resolution annually dealing with some aspect of democracy. Democracy has emerged as a cross-cutting issue in the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits since the 1990s and in the internationally agreed development goals they produced, including the Millennium Development Goals. Member States at the World Summit in September 2005 reaffirmed that “democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives.”<sup>iv</sup>

The Summit Outcome Document also stressed that “democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing,” and pointed out that “while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy.” Member States resolved to promote increased representation of women in Government decision-making bodies, including to ensure their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process (para 58g).

World leaders pledged in the Millennium Declaration to spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They resolved to strive for the full protection and promotion in all countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all and to strengthen the capacity of all countries to implement the principles and practices of democracy and respect for human rights.<sup>v</sup>

#### **International Day of Democracy**

On 8 November 2007, the General Assembly proclaimed 15 September as the International Day of Democracy, inviting Member States, the United Nations System and other regional, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to commemorate the Day. The International Day of Democracy provides an opportunity to review the state of democracy in the world. Democracy is as much a process as a goal, and only with the full participation of and support by the international community, national governing bodies, civil society and individuals, can the ideal of democracy be made into a reality to be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.



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<sup>i</sup> World Summit Outcome Document, A/RES/60/1, paragraph 119

<sup>ii</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21

<sup>iii</sup> *In Larger Freedom*, A/59/2005, paragraph 148

<sup>iv</sup> World Summit Outcome Document, paragraph 135

<sup>v</sup> General Assembly resolution A/RES/55/2





## FOSTERING DEMOCRACY THROUGH ELECTIONS

The spread of democracy around the world has been a significant achievement of our times. Elections sit at the heart of this, making possible the act of self-determination envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations. The Organization's history is interwoven with elections extending back to shortly after its founding, when, in the late 1940s, it observed elections on the Korean Peninsula. During the subsequent era of trusteeship and decolonization, it supervised and observed plebiscites, referenda and elections worldwide. Today, the United Nations continues to be a trusted impartial actor, providing electoral assistance at the request of Member States.

The provision of electoral assistance by the United Nations is a team effort involving a number of agencies and departments and is closely regulated by the General Assembly. Electoral assistance is based on the principle established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the will of the people, as expressed through periodic and genuine elections, shall be the basis of government authority, while also recognizing the principles of state sovereignty and national ownership of elections. To ensure compliance with these principles, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs serves as the UN Focal Point for Electoral Assistance Activities, advising the Secretary-General on electoral matters.



**A citizen from Côte d'Ivoire displays his election registration.** UN Photo/Ky Chung

The Electoral Assistance Division, within the Department of Political Affairs, supports the Focal Point in ensuring system-wide coherence and consistency in the provision of UN electoral assistance. Other UN actors involved in providing electoral assistance include the United Nations Development Programme, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations Volunteers, United Nations Development Fund for Women, United Nations Office for Project Services, United Nations Democracy Fund and Department for Economic and Social Affairs. In the last 20 years, the United Nations has provided electoral assistance to over 100 Member States.

The United Nations Development Programme, for example, provides electoral assistance in an average of 30 Member States annually, to develop sustainable electoral management capacity, foster inclusive participation in elections, particularly of women and other underrepresented groups, and coordinate donor support to electoral processes.



The United Nations also has established relations with governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations involved in electoral assistance, including the European Union, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the African Union, International IDEA, the Carter Center and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. These relationships provide opportunities for collaboration on electoral support activities as well as for sharing lessons and experiences.



**Ballots and voting materials are loaded onto a helicopter provided by the United Nations Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS). Delivery of election materials to remote areas was one way in which UNMIS provided technical and logistical support to Sudan's National Elections Commission in April 2010.** UN Photo/Tim McKulka

UN electoral assistance has been a crucial and successful component in peacekeeping, peace-building, and establishing democratic governance. As democracy has spread, so has the role of elections as the means to establish legitimate government. The United Nations has been engaged in elections in all regions of the world, with assistance provided in: Afghanistan, Burundi, Cambodia, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Timor Leste and Yemen – to name a few. Elections in each country are unique, and reflect an individual country's political and historical

characteristics. While no single electoral system is equally suited to all countries, the electoral process should adhere to obligations and commitments outlined in international human rights instruments. The United Nations therefore carefully addresses each request following a series of steps: official request; assessment; design and implementation.

It is recognized that addressing the capacity of an electoral management body in isolation will not necessarily produce free and fair elections. There also needs to be a focus on the overall political environment in which the elections take place. The United Nations therefore also makes efforts to build capacity outside the electoral authorities. This involves working with voters, the media and civil society, as well as other actors and institutions of democratic governance. The United Nations is also placing greater attention on the issue of elections and violence, and is in the process of developing additional steps that can be taken by the Organization to reduce the potential for this to occur.

The main goal of United Nations electoral assistance is to support Member States in holding periodic, credible and genuine elections and establishing nationally sustainable electoral processes. Ultimately, the United Nations aims to ensure that Member States have the national capacity to organize future elections with little or no external help.





## DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY The United Nations Democracy Fund

### *Background*

At the 2005 World Summit, Governments reaffirmed that democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives. They stressed that democracy, development and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. They renewed their commitment to support democracy and welcomed the establishment of a Democracy Fund at the United Nations.

The United Nations Democracy Fund, UNDEF, was established by the UN Secretary-General in 2005 as a United Nations General Trust Fund to support democratization efforts around the world. UNDEF supports projects that strengthen the voice of civil society, promote human rights, and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes.



**UNDEF backs a project in Afghanistan to train community development councils, civil society groups and government representatives on gender, advocacy and vulnerability**

The large majority of UNDEF funds go to local civil society organizations -- both in the transition and consolidation phases of democratization. In this way, UNDEF plays a novel and distinct role in complementing the UN's traditional work -- the work with Governments -- to strengthen democratic governance around the world.

UNDEF subsists entirely on voluntary contributions from Governments; in 2009, it surpassed \$100 million in contributions and now counts 37 countries as donors, including middle- and low-income States in Africa, Asia and Latin America.





**An UNDEF-supported initiative for human rights and freedom of expression in Sierra Leone.**

The Fund provides grants of up to \$500,000. In four rounds of funding so far, UNDEF has supported more than 330 projects in 115 countries.

Applications are subject to a highly rigorous and competitive selection process, with an average of three per cent of all applications approved for funding. Projects are two years long and fall under one or more of six main areas:

- Community development
- Media
- Rule of law and human rights
- Tools for democratization
- Women
- Youth

### ***Democracy in Action I: Building support for the African Charter of Democracy***



In 2007, Member States of the African Union adopted the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, marking a significant step forward for the AU as an actor promoting good governance. To take effect, the Charter requires at least 15 AU States to sign and ratify. By June 2010, only three had ratified the Charter, while 30 had signed with the intent to ratify.

With UNDEF support, a consortium of African CSOs supported by the African democracy institute, Idasa, are building constituencies of support for the Charter in 10 countries. The initiative aims to advance efforts by all stakeholders, including civil society and policy-makers, to promote and improve democratic practices on the ground and to build sustainable

democratic institutions throughout the continent. It seeks to create national movements as well as international solidarity to promote dialogue and awareness of the Charter.

### ***Democracy in Action II: Training future leaders of Palestine***



In Palestine, UNDEF funds a project to build leadership among youth and establish forums for them to participate in democratic processes while advancing democratic principles in their communities.

With UNDEF support, the Ramallah Center for Human Rights Studies has developed a programme to

improve democratic dialogue among youth in both the West Bank and Gaza City. The meetings include leaders, facilitators and youth representing a variety of perspectives, making the workshops a valuable opportunity to network and gain understanding of various cultural, traditional, and religious backgrounds. Participants organize group visits to each other's locations, design campaigns to advance youth participation in the political process, and organize peaceful demonstrations to advocate democratic rights. They are able to meet with the Prime Minister, President of the Legislative Council, and Members of Parliament to discuss constructive measures for youth contribution to the legislative process.

### ***Democracy in Action III: Empowering communities in the Caucasus***

In the Northern Caucasus, UNDEF backs an initiative to advance democracy at the community level by training civil society leaders in leadership, advocacy, project management and resource mobilization. The overall initiative works through training sessions, conferences and workshops in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and North Ossetia to unite the region's



NGOs in a wide and vibrant network able to promote democracy and advocate positive change in their communities. The project is implemented by the FOCUS-MEDIA Foundation in Moscow, which works for healthy, tolerant and prosperous communities through enlightening, educating and involving people and organizations in improving their living conditions and health.

#### ***Democracy in Action IV: Strengthening youth leadership in Myanmar***

In Myanmar, UNDEF supports an initiative by ActionAid International to train youth in leadership and civil society engagement with the overall objective of rebuilding communities and livelihoods. The project also has a media training component. The project is situated among the minority Shan, Kachin and Kayah groups, and one of the ancillary objectives is to reconcile differences between groups. The project involves training in capacity development as well as organization of self-help groups. In one case, six villages from the Shan and Kachin communities agreed after discussions organized by the project to work together to rebuild the bridge that linked them all to the market. In another case, youth leaders decided to stage a football match to bring people together and raise the money needed to repair the local school. These are examples of project's main aim -- to teach young people how to discuss, mobilize and take action to solve community problems.



***For more information, please visit [www.un.org/democracyfund](http://www.un.org/democracyfund) or call +1 212 963 3399.***





## DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

### *The human rights normative framework*

The values of freedom, respect for human rights and the principle of holding periodic and genuine elections by universal suffrage are essential elements of democracy. In turn, democracy provides the natural environment for the protection and effective realization of human rights. These values are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further developed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrines a host of political rights and civil liberties underpinning meaningful democracies.



**Women in Juba, Sudan, vote in their country's national elections, the first to take place in almost 25 years.**

UN Photo/Tim McKulka

The link between democracy and human rights is captured in article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

*"[t]he will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."*

The rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and subsequent human rights instruments covering group rights (e.g. indigenous peoples, minorities, people with disabilities) are equally essential for democracy as they ensure an equitable distribution of wealth, and equality and equity in respect of access to civil and political rights.

For several years, the UN General Assembly and the former Commission on Human Rights endeavored to draw on international human rights instruments to promote a common understanding of the principles, norms, standards and values that are the basis of democracy, with a view to guiding Member States in developing domestic democratic traditions and institutions, and in meeting their commitments to human rights, democracy and development.

This led to the articulation of several landmark resolutions of the former Commission on Human Rights.



In 2000, the Commission recommended a series of important legislative, institutional and practical measures to consolidate democracy (resolution 2000/47); and in 2002, the Commission declared the following as essential elements of democracy:<sup>1</sup>

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of expression and opinion
- Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law
- The holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people
- A pluralistic system of political parties and organizations
- The separation of powers
- The independence of the judiciary
- Transparency and accountability in public administration
- Free, independent and pluralistic media



**Marchers in Wat Phnom, Cambodia, highlighting freedom of expression. OHCHR/James Turpin**

### ***Addressing democracy deficits***

Democracy deficits and weak institutions are among the main challenges to the effective realization of human rights. OHCHR seeks to address these challenges through its advisory services and technical cooperation programme, which focus on *strengthening the legal framework for human rights protection (institutional and legal reform); capacity building; empowering vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of the society; advocacy, awareness raising and human rights education.*

### ***Promoting democratic governance***

The Office continues to promote democratic governance by providing sustained support to democratic institutions, including national actors and institutions involved in the administration of justice; enhancing the capacity of parliamentarians to engage in human rights protection, supporting civil society and facilitating electoral and constitutional building processes.

<sup>1</sup> Commission on Human Rights resolution 2002/46



## ***Supporting transitional democracies***

In transitional democracies and countries emerging from conflict, OHCHR collaborates with national governments and other actors to confront the past in order to rebuild public confidence and restore peace and the rule of law. With a focus on combating impunity, OHCHR has actively supported transitional justice programmes in more than 20 countries around the world over the past decade. Its support includes ensuring that human rights and transitional justice considerations are reflected in peace agreements; engaging in the design and implementation of inclusive national consultations on transitional justice mechanisms; supporting the establishment of truth-seeking processes, judicial accountability mechanisms, and reparations programmes; and enhancing institutional reform.

## ***Guiding national and regional efforts towards consolidating democracy and upholding the rule of law***

Two expert seminars organized by OHCHR in 2002 and 2005 shed light on the main challenges to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, including:

- Deepening poverty
- Threats to human security
- The infringements of individual rights and impediments to the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms
- Erosions of the rule of law in contexts such as counter-terrorism
- Illegal occupation involving the use of force
- The escalation of armed conflicts
- Unequal access to justice by disadvantaged groups
- Impunity

The reports of these seminars<sup>ii</sup> stand as a *guide* for developing national and regional frameworks and strategies for the realization of democracy *as a holistic concept* based on a strict adherence to human rights and the principles of the rule of law.

Moreover, OHCHR has published a compilation<sup>iii</sup> of relevant documents and texts, which serves as a reference and analytical tool for constitution-making, the revision/drafting of national legislations and strategies to consolidate human rights and democratic foundations.

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<sup>ii</sup> E/CN.4/2003/59 and E/CN.4/2005/58.

<sup>iii</sup> The *Compilation of documents and texts adopted and used by various intergovernmental, international, regional and sub-regional organizations aimed at promoting and consolidating democracy* is available at [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/compilation\\_democracy/index.htm](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/compilation_democracy/index.htm).



OHCHR participates with other parts of the UN system in developing a coherent system-wide approach to democracy and constitutional assistance. OHCHR also seeks to partner with intergovernmental democracy-promoting organizations such as *l'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and regional intergovernmental organizations. The Office also provides dedicated support to the UN Democracy Fund, advising the decision making process on programme funding criteria and on project proposals.

**For more information, contact: OHCHR Geneva, Tel: +41 (0) 22 928 9787 or visit:  
[www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)**

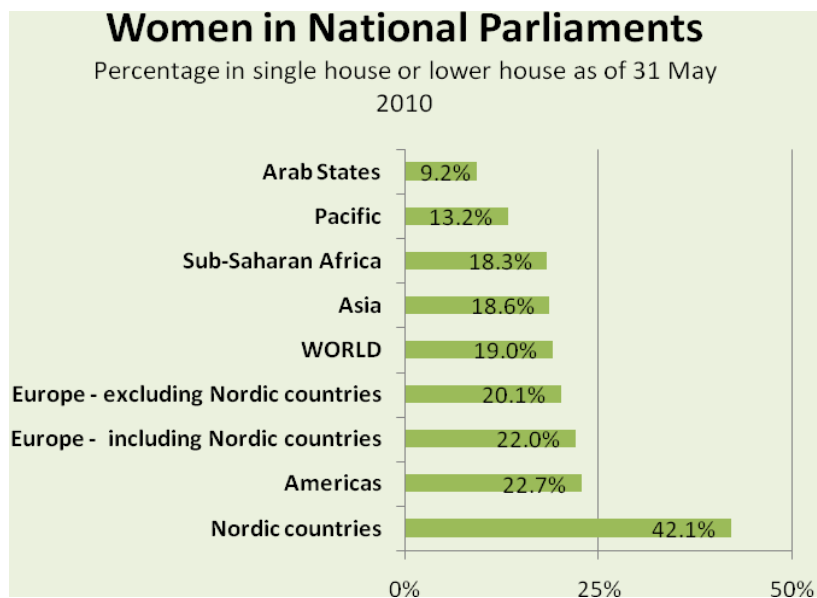




## WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY

From epic struggles to obtain their voting rights, to continued efforts by countries to introduce quotas and reservations increasing the number of women elected representatives, women have always maintained a strong stake in democracy. They have recognized that democratic participation is the key means by which women's interests can be represented and receive a socially legitimate and sustainable policy response.

The strikingly low number of women in public office, currently at a global average of just 19% in national assemblies, has been acknowledged as a deficit that must be redressed. Women's increased participation at all levels of democratic governance - from the local to the national and regional - diversifies the character of democratic assemblies and enables public decision-making to respond to citizens' needs that may have been neglected in the past.



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union

### ***Elections and meaningful participation of women in politics***

Around the world, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) supports efforts to increase the share of women that are elected into office, including building women's capacity as effective legislators once elected. However, the challenge of securing gender equality in political participation goes beyond achieving better quantitative ratios between men and women during an election year. UNIFEM also supports initiatives to increase women's political effectiveness before



and after elections, including adopting “temporary special measures” in line with Article 4 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Although several countries - including Albania, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Egypt and Senegal - adopted quotas or reservations in 2008-2009 through constitutional amendment, electoral law reforms or the introduction of equality laws, the number of countries with such measures in place remains low. This is despite the fact that quotas and reservations have been shown on average to produce a higher representation of women, regardless of the electoral system.

UNIFEM supports campaigns by women’s civil society organizations to advocate for temporary special measures and provides technical assistance to Governments to implement such measures.

Recognizing that the challenge of securing gender equality in political participation goes beyond achieving better quantitative ratios between men and women during an election year, UNIFEM also seeks to build women’s capacity as effective legislators once elected. Strategies such as building cross-party caucuses at the parliamentary and local levels can work to provide the peer support necessary to promote a gender equality legislative and policy agenda. In Afghanistan, Burundi, Kenya, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda UNIFEM has supported the establishment of women’s parliamentary caucuses, peer networks among local women councilors, capacity building of women’s caucuses to analyze legislation from a gender perspective and the elaboration of implementation strategies.

### ***Constituency building and civic education***

One critical element for ensuring effective and meaningful participation of women in politics is to develop a “gender equality constituency.” For this reason, UNIFEM is supporting initiatives in Bolivia, Cameroon, Nepal and Sudan aimed at building nationally agreed political agendas for gender equality. UNIFEM continues to provide technical assistance to ministries of women’s affairs, gender observatories and commissions, to enable them to play a leading role in the efforts of governments to integrate gender considerations. Such efforts include elaborating national gender plans, mainstreaming gender into processes related to planning and the elaboration of national development strategies, national security plans and environmental policies.

### ***Democratic governance and accountability***

UNIFEM also works to improve gender-sensitive democratic governance and improved accountability for women. UNIFEM is partnering with UNDP on a multi-year global initiative aimed at improving the quality of governance from the perspective of women’s capacity to access public services. In Morocco, the initiative is working with the Ministry of Justice to ensure that women have improved access to the family courts. In Rwanda, support has been extended to the gender observatory to improve its capacity for monitoring the delivery of agricultural services to women.



At the local level, UNIFEM works with devolved authorities in Colombia, India, Mali, Namibia and Tanzania to ensure that planning and budgets reduce gender inequalities for women in the community.

### ***Gender-sensitive legislation and policies***

UNIFEM seeks to aid, consult with, and support developing democracies in the enactment of gender-sensitive legislation and policies, primarily dealing with gender equality in law and governance, violence against women, labor, health and poverty. UNIFEM pays particular attention to the removal of discriminatory provisions from existing legislation and policies, as well as to the inclusion of gender equality provisions in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In Costa Rica, UNIFEM supported the work of the Association of Domestic Workers (ASTRADOMES), to advocate for reform of the country's Labor Code which was approved in June 2009. In Burundi, UNIFEM's support contributed to amendments to the Penal Code to increase penalties for perpetrators of violence against women and punishment for marital rape in Burundi.

### ***Women in peace-building processes***

UNIFEM's priority in post-conflict societies has been to build women's voices and influence in peace-making and peace-building, especially policy-making and funding allocations, to adequately address women's and girls' needs in post-conflict planning. UNIFEM often plays a convening role, bridging the relationship between women peace activists, high-level UN representatives and the world's leaders. As part of the events to commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, UNIFEM convened "Open Days" on women and peace in multiple countries in June 2010. The Open Days gave women activists from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Nepal, Pakistan and Somalia access to leading members of UN missions and government.

### ***Women Deepening Democracy: Transforming politics for gender equality***

UNIFEM, in association with the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and the Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), convened twenty-one civil society leaders from eighteen countries working on deepening women's engagement in democratic political competition



and governance for a workshop in New Delhi in January 2010. The Workshop on Gender and Democracy set out to provide a platform to discuss achievements and challenges in implementing innovative grassroots pilot projects; to analyze challenges to women's political participation and to make a contribution to the UN's system-wide efforts to promote democracy.



