

**PANEL TO LAUNCH**  
**HANDBOOK ON WOMEN AND ELECTIONS**  
*The Participation of Women in Post-Conflict Elections*

The Department of Political Affairs' Electoral Assistance Division and the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women are organizing a panel discussion to launch *Women and Elections*, a handbook they co-produced.

The handbook drew on the expertise from the January 2004 Glen Cove Expert Group Meeting organized by OSAGI and EAD, with the support from different entities, on "Enhancing women's participation in electoral processes in post-conflict countries" (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/meetings/2004/EGMelectoral/index.html>)

That meeting brought together electoral and gender experts to identify problems and best practices for increasing women's participation in elections. Among the findings from the Glen Cove meeting was that, while obvious obstacles to the political participation of women exist in post-conflict societies, a number of opportunities are also present. In particular, major political transitions provide the potential for creative thinking that can open the door to new possibilities for women's participation. According to an October 2003 study carried out by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, only 15 countries in the world have legislatures in which women have more than 30 percent representation — of these 15, three are post-conflict countries. One question asked at Glen Cove was whether the international community, through its involvement in implementing post-conflict peace agreements, was taking full advantage of the opportunities inherent in post-conflict situations.

As the United Nations has been increasingly called upon to organize and monitor national elections as part of conflict settlement agreements, and recognizing the central role of women in elections and the need for their equal participation, UN peace operations, governments and civil society organizations expressed an interest in following up on the conclusions of the expert group meeting and having a guide on women and elections. Given this interest, DPA and OSAGI commissioned the handbook on *Women and Elections*. It describes best practices and policies on how to increase the participation of women through specific elements of the electoral process. While the focus of the handbook is on post-conflict elections, the practices described are valid for elections in general. It addresses many components of electoral processes, including the legal framework, political participation, voter registration, voter education, electoral administration, and observation. It examines what specific measures can be taken within each of these areas to improve women's representation. The analysis is informed by recent electoral exercises in which the United Nations has participated.

The United Nations has played an important role in strengthening women's political participation starting with the Convention on Political Rights of Women (1953). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which has been ratified or acceded to by 180 States parties, provides the basis for

establishing equality between women and men in political and public life, including the right to vote and stand for elections (articles 7 and 8).

It is expected that this panel will build on the experience to date in the participation of women in elections, identify a variety of critical factors affecting equality of opportunity for women, and make practical recommendations on how to enhance women's role and make elections a more effective instrument of peace building. It provides a wide array of perspectives on the question of women's participation in post-conflict elections, including from experts in the United Nations system and civil society organizations. Each panelist will have five minutes to present their views and personal experience in their respective fields of work on major challenges and opportunities faced by the international community and women in promoting women's participation in elections; the role – positive or negative – these elections have played for peace processes in the countries concerned; describe obstacles and ways to overcome them, as well as draw attention to success or failure stories in promoting the participation of women. The panel will then take questions from the audience. In planning their presentations, panelists might wish to consider the following issues and questions:

- **The substance of women's participation:** Historically, the debate on women's participation has presented two concepts of women in politics: first, women as individual political actors, where attaining the right to vote also meant attaining a unique and individual political identity; second, women as representatives of certain common values and interests (such as development and education) that are often not considered priorities by male politicians. Confusion on this question has led to disappointment when women politicians do not act on these issues as expected.
- **Quotas:** Of the 15 countries that have attained 30 percent representation of women (the level at which, according to UNDP, women can exert a meaningful political influence) all use some form of quotas. Quotas were also inserted in the Afghan and Iraqi post-conflict electoral laws. Supporters of quotas note that these work best in combination with other factors, including training and capacity building for different groups of stakeholders. Some, however, oppose quotas on the grounds that they become institutionalized, and stunt the development of women as political actors capable of competing on equal terms with men. The type of electoral system plays a key role in enhancing women's representation (women tend to do better in proportional systems than in majority types). What are some of the arguments that strengthen or weaken the case for quotas?
- **Stereotypical attitudes:** Culture and tradition are often used as arguments against women's participation in elections. On the other hand, women's turnout in post-conflict elections is almost invariably high, and often higher than men's. How have cultural arguments been disarmed? Which strategies work best to overcome obstacles to women's participation?

- **Local-level vs. national-level participation:** Much attention is focused on participation of women at the national level. Yet many decisions are also taken at the local level that have a direct effect on quality of life, and particularly on issues traditionally considered as “women’s issues” (education, health, etc.) In addition, local politics are excellent training grounds for national politics. In post-conflict situations, however, the international community often plays a much smaller role in local elections than national elections. Does this have a negative effect over the long term in enhancing a sustainable and real participation of women in politics? Is it important? If so, what should be done?
- **Long-term problems:** In half of countries existing today, women were granted the right to vote only in the second half of the 20th century. What are the prospects, in post-conflict countries, of sustaining women’s participation once international attention flags? What measures can be taken to ensure that women’s representation is more than the quota? How can women as politicians effectively promote policies that address their common interests?
- **The UN role:** Through its involvement in peace-making, peace-building and electoral activities, the UN is often in a position to exert considerable influence over issues that can affect women’s participation in elections. How can the UN improve its performance in this field? What specific measures should it take?

Panelists are encouraged to raise questions and provide concrete examples of their experiences.