

**Conference on “Women and Politics”
in Kabul, Hotel Intercontinental, on 7th April 2004**

With “Women and Politics” the conference put a topic on the agenda that is new and very sensitive in Afghanistan. In the past, women have been effectively excluded from politics. The majority of Afghans still believes that access to the political sphere should be reserved for men. However, the new constitution guarantees a 25% quota for women in parliament. Therefore, the implementation of this and other women’s rights were the main foci of the conference, which was jointly organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in cooperation with the Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs) Afghan Women Network (AWN), the Afghan Women Council (AWC) and the Afghan Women and Children Development Organization (AWCDO).

The conference was opened by the Minister of Women’s Affairs, Dr. Habiba Sorabi. In her speech she called for a new definition of politics, seeing that many Afghans understood politics as immoral and inappropriate for women. Further, she stressed that the exclusion of women from politics itself was an active political act and not an outcome of tradition as suggested by many.

In two panel discussions the potentials, obstacles and concrete strategies for women to take an active role in politics were discussed. Among the panelists were personalities from Afghan civil society such as Dr. Sima Samar, Head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and Fatana Gailani, Head of the Afghan Women Council.

As special guests two foreign female parliamentarians were invited. The member of German Parliament Angelika Graf spoke about the experiences of German female politicians with quotas and inter-party-networks. Fauzia Wahab, Member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, spoke about the difficulty of female candidates to acquire funding for their election campaigns.

Around 400 members of political and civil society groups as well as from the government and international organizations participated in the conference in the Ballroom of Kabul’s Hotel Intercontinental. More than 30% of them were men. The aim of inviting a huge number of men was to raise their awareness for the topic “women and politics” and to promote cooperation between politically active men and women.

The need to improve cooperation and build networks (with liberal men as well as amongst women themselves) was acknowledged by most speakers. It became the guiding theme of the conference. Many panelists complaint about envy and competition between women’s organisations and their lack of willingness to work together.

Furthermore, many speakers stressed the need for civic education and political awareness campaigns as a first step towards encouraging women to participate in politics. Other suggestions for concrete empowerment strategies included: to convince party leaders that women candidates can win women’s votes, to raise the media’s awareness for the topic, to train women in campaigning skills and to call for a women’s quota in the administration.