

# Report of the Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights

*Noted by the 134<sup>th</sup> IPU Assembly  
(Lusaka, 23 March 2016)*

**Summary of the debate *The freedom of women to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference: Building partnerships between men and women to achieve this objective.***

On Tuesday, 21 March 2016, the Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights held an interactive debate on the freedom of women to participate in political processes and how genuine partnership between women and men could contribute to that objective. The debate was a preparatory step towards a resolution that would be adopted on that subject at the 135<sup>th</sup> IPU Assembly. The debate was launched by an introductory presentation on the latest findings of the IPU on women's participation in parliaments, followed by a question and answer session with five panellists. The panellists were the resolution's co-Rapporteurs, Ms. S. Lines (Australia) and Mr. M. Kilonzo Junior (Kenya), as well as Mr. N. Erskine-Smith (Canada), Ms. M. Azer Abdelmalak (Egypt) and Mr. J. Zangpo (Bhutan). The session was chaired by Ms. A. King (New Zealand), Acting President of the Committee.

Participants addressed the obstacles to women's participation in politics and called for a paradigm shift within parliaments, political parties and society at large. Discriminatory stereotypes and patriarchal culture were still a predominant feature in many countries. Social norms and traditional roles were frequently invoked to suggest that politics was not a good career option for women. Political parties were concerned about whether seats were winnable with women candidates, and male politicians worried about losing access to elected positions. Reconciling family and political life was difficult and could make a political career less attractive to women. Women in politics were often the target of abuse on social media.

Quotas had had a determining effect in increasing the number of women in parliament in many countries. Quotas were only effective when they were adequately designed and implemented, and when there were strong incentives for political parties to respect them. Quotas and laws alone could not change a culture. Yet the increased presence of women in parliament was providing more role models for young women interested in politics and was contributing to changing mentalities.

Participants proposed many avenues for expanding women's political participation. Education was a vital first step to challenging stereotypes and discrimination. Parliaments and parties were increasingly aiming for parity between men and women in elected positions. Political parties needed to commit to gender equality, including in leadership roles. Parties also needed to demonstrate those commitments through their actions. There were signs that young party members and political activists were more favourable to gender equality; they needed to be encouraged and mentored.

Financial support for women candidates and for women parliamentarians to travel with their young children would lower some of the barriers to a political career. Cross-party agreement that women should be members of parliamentary committees in all policy areas, including "hard" areas such as defence and public finances, would help to change the current imbalance.

Penalties must be imposed against all attempts to intimidate women, whether in parliament, in their constituency or on social media. Parliaments needed to ensure a zero-tolerance culture towards violence, harassment and the intimidation of women by, for example, adopting a code of conduct or a policy on sexual harassment. Women parliamentarians were already starting to speak out about instances of harassment, and should be encouraged to do so without fear or shame.

For many years, the onus to work for gender equality had been placed on women alone. “Women should vote for women” was an often-repeated phrase. Young women had been told that they could do anything, but without any accompanying support from men. Gradually, the conceptual framework was shifting towards a genuine partnership between men and women that favoured gender equality. Men had to come forward and be vocal advocates for gender equality as well as women. It was noted that this was still a new idea in many countries, but it was happening, and it was the future.

### **Report on the interactive debate *Open Parliaments: Building an association on accountability***

At its sitting on 22 March, the Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights held a debate entitled *Open Parliaments: Building an association on accountability*. Acting President Ms. A. King (New Zealand) was in the chair. The panellists were Ms. L. Rojas (Mexico), Mr. N. Evans (United Kingdom), Mr. C. Chauvel (United Nations Development Programme) and Mr. D. Swislow (National Democratic Institute). A further 23 parliamentarians spoke from the floor.

Participants unanimously made the case for greater openness in parliament. The first Global Parliamentary Report had noted that: public trust in parliament was low; citizens expected parliamentarians to account for their actions more regularly than ever before; and because of their very nature, parliaments were resilient and able to adapt to society's needs.

It was observed that openness was no longer a choice, it was a necessity. Greater openness helped to break down perceived barriers between parliaments and citizens. Openness and transparency were the preconditions for citizens to be able to hold parliaments and their representatives to account for their actions. They helped to make parliament more effective overall, by facilitating greater public participation in parliament's work.

Participants shared numerous examples of initiatives to promote greater openness. Mexico had adopted a law on transparency that was prepared in partnership with a range of stakeholders, including those from civil society. In the United Kingdom, e-petitions automatically triggered a debate in parliament on the subject of the petition once a certain number of signatures had been reached. The Government Assurances Committee in Ghana broadcast its public hearings. It received submissions via text message and WhatsApp, so that the public could be involved in holding the Government to account for the promises it had made.

The movement towards greater openness was supported and catalysed by organizations such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP). OGP had been launched in 2011 to provide an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. Since then, OGP had grown from 8 to 69 participating countries. In all of those countries, government and civil society were working together to develop and implement ambitious open government reforms through action plans.

A Legislative Openness Working Group had been created within OGP in 2013 by parliaments and civil society organizations. Lessons learned included: the need for parliament and government to have separate action plans; for the commitment to openness to come not just from individual parliamentarians, but from the institution of parliament; and for that commitment to have ongoing multiparty support. The space for parliaments within OGP remained limited, but there were signs of change as more parliaments adopted action plans.

There had been an increasing number of examples of successful collaboration between parliaments and civil society organizations in terms of making parliamentary data available in reusable formats. Those examples built on the momentum of the Declaration on Parliamentary Openness. A network of civil society organizations had made the Declaration in 2012, and it had since been endorsed by parliaments including those of Serbia and Peru.

It was noted that openness in parliament was necessary but not sufficient. Citizens would not become interested in talking to parliament simply because additional communications channels were available. Greater openness encouraged more trust, but was not enough on its own. Parliaments needed to work on a range of fronts to strengthen relations with citizens and build trust. A free press and other core elements of democratic society were also vital.