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## The role of Parliaments in enforcing gender equality and women's rights: 15 years after Beijing

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A parliamentary event organized on the occasion of the  
54th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

### REPORT

#### Opening

**Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams (Namibia), Vice-President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians**, welcomed the participants, noting that they comprised some 200 representatives from over 40 parliaments. She explained that the day's discussions were intended to lead to conclusions and recommendations that could be presented as the IPU's input to the plenary session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) the following day. In the 15 years since the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, much had been achieved but much still remained to be done.

#### Keynote address

**Ms. Rachel Mayanja, Assistant Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women**, gave the following thoughts on "Fifteen years after Beijing, how much progress has been achieved in terms of gender equality and women's rights?"

In preparation for the CSW's 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the five regional commissions of the United Nations have produced reports based on responses from Member States to a common questionnaire. These reports suggest that there are some areas in which significant progress has been made:

- Major gains have been made in education, particularly primary education. There is also a good understanding of the measures that support girls' access to and retention in schools.
- It is increasingly recognized that women's access to economic and financial resources has positive multiplier effects for a range of development goals.
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has reached almost universal ratification. There has been progress in legal reforms resulting in improved *de jure* equality between women and men.
- Eliminating violence against women is increasingly addressed by many States through comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks.
- Gender mainstreaming strategies are being refined and applied in many sectors, supported by new tools, capacity-building, monitoring and evaluation.
- Budgetary processes are increasingly scrutinized to ensure that resources are made available for gender equality

programmes.

- Gender equality committees and women's caucuses in the parliament play a key role in supporting, and monitoring the implementation of gender equality legislation, plans and programmes.
- Women parliamentarians have promoted laws to end discrimination against women.

However, the reports also show that progress in eliminating discrimination and achieving equality has been uneven across regions and within countries.

- Every year, 536,000 women and girls die as a result of pregnancy or childbirth. Almost all of these deaths could be prevented. MDG 5 on improving maternal health is the goal where the least progress has been made.
- Women are more likely than men to be living in poverty, but we still do not have sufficient information on the extent and depth of women's poverty.
- Women account for nearly two thirds of the illiterate adults in the world, a proportion that has not changed in 20 years.
- Many women work in vulnerable and low-paid jobs without social protection. Occupational segregation and gender wage gaps persist in all parts of the world.
- Violence against women and girls remains a global pandemic. Impunity for perpetrators persists. The use in armed conflicts of sexual violence against women continues on a large scale.
- Discrimination in law has not been eliminated. In most countries, gaps remain between legislation and its effective implementation.
- The global economic and financial crisis has created new hurdles to women's employment. Country responses to the crisis can have disproportionate impacts on women and girls, particularly through cuts in public spending on health and education and through inequitably designed safety nets.

The review process also identified a number of cross-cutting issues that hinder progress. First, gender stereotypes constrain the opportunities and choices of both women and men, leading to occupational segregation and the gender wage gap, and to limited involvement of men in family life. Second, violence against women lessens their ability to participate fully in all areas. Third, women remain underrepresented in decision-making processes, limiting their input on priorities to be set and resources to be allocated. Fourth, women continue to bear a large burden of unpaid work, which limits their participation in the labour market. Finally, a major constraint to progress is that the Beijing agenda has been pursued with little engagement of men.

What strategies need to be adopted to ensure progress?

The regional reviews indicate that comprehensive legal frameworks and action plans on gender equality, and the integration of gender equality perspectives in critical national instruments such as national development strategies, have worked well. Also, gender equality and diversity strategies enhance the role of women in government. Quotas and other temporary special measures; changes in selection and recruitment systems; elimination of gender stereotypes; and wide-ranging awareness-raising campaigns are essential. At the national level, parliamentarians play a key role in developing legislation and allocating resources in order to promote the implementation of the Platform for Action, as well as the gender-sensitive implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

How can progress be made on the unfinished agenda?

Participation of women increases the effectiveness of institutions such as parliaments or the United Nations and enhances their legitimacy. There is no democracy without women, and progress in development, peace and security is possible only if there is equality between women and men. Laws and practices that discriminate against women and girls need to be urgently repealed. National policies should systematically integrate gender issues in all sectors, through a mix of mandatory measures, incentives and awareness-raising campaigns. Financing mechanisms for gender equality should be strengthened. The economic empowerment of women requires action for decent employment, and increase in women's access to resources and social protection systems.

Campaigns to end violence against women will benefit from the *Handbook for legislation on violence against women*, developed by the Division for the Advancement of Women. Within the United Nations, the proposed consolidation of the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, the Division for the Advancement of Women, INSTRAW and UNIFEM into one strong composite entity will significantly enhance the UN's ability to assist countries in implementing

their gender equality goals and commitments. The Secretary-General is committed to moving forward expeditiously with the establishment of the new entity as soon as the General Assembly makes a decision.

In our different roles in parliaments, international organizations, and civil society, we can demonstrate strong and visible leadership and forge strategic partnerships to make the promotion of gender equality and women's enjoyment of human rights a central focus in all our endeavours.

### **Session 1: Women in parliament: The first step for progress**

*Progress and setbacks of women in politics over the past 15 years; Overview of mechanisms to promote women's political participation.*

Ms. Julie Ballington, Programme Specialist, Inter-Parliamentary Union, presented the statistical background to the day's discussions.

In 1990, a resolution of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) recommended a target of 30% of leadership positions to be held by women by 1995, and 50% by 2000. However, by the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, there had been very little progress towards the 30% target, with only seven parliaments having reached it.

The Beijing Platform for Action acted as a catalyst: after the Conference, the rate of increase of women's representation in parliament, while still small, almost doubled. Since then, women are continuing to gain ground, with a new worldwide average of 18.8% of women in parliament, but momentum is too slow. At the current rate, the target of 30% will be reached in 2025.

The overall average figure conceals wide fluctuations across the various regions. The Nordic region, currently at 42%, has been the top performer for several decades. The region is followed by the Americas, by Europe, and by Sub-Saharan Africa, while those falling below the global average include Asia which has had the slowest rate of increase since 1995, the Pacific islands and the Arab region. However, the Arab region started at a very low level but has doubled its proportion of women parliamentarians since 1995, now reaching almost 10%.

At the top of the scale, 44 parliamentary chambers worldwide, in 38 countries, have at least 30% women members. This is a sixfold increase over 1995, when just seven chambers had reached that goal. The 44 comprise 16 in Europe, 13 in the Americas, 11 in Africa and four in Asia/Pacific. Also, 11 chambers worldwide have more than 40% women members; in 1995 there was only one, Sweden.

At the bottom, 27% of all parliamentary chambers (71 in 50 countries) have under 10% women members, although this is an improvement on 1995 when there were 141 chambers in that category. Furthermore, in 2009 there were still 10 parliamentary chambers with no women members at all (almost no change from 1995, when there were 13). The 10 are mainly in the Pacific islands and the Arab region.

Ebbs and flows in the election rates of women are now commonplace. In a consistent trend over the past six years, every year the number of women in parliament increases in 60% of countries, and drops or remains stationary in 40% of them.

The situation of women in government is less favourable than that of women in parliament, probably because the government context lacks the special measures, such as quotas or affirmative action, which are employed to advance women's participation in parliament. In 2010, 16% of ministerial portfolios worldwide are held by women (a slight increase from 14% in 2005); in 30 countries, women hold more than 30% of ministerial seats (up from 16 countries in 2005); in four countries, (Cape Verde, Finland, Norway and Spain) women hold more than 50% of the ministerial posts (a doubling since 2005); while 16 countries have no women ministers at all (a slight improvement from 19 in 2005). Of the 151 Members of the IPU, nine have a woman head of State (6%), 11 have a woman head of Government (5.7%) and 35 have a woman at the head of their Parliament (13%).

Professor Drude Dahlerup, Stockholm University, presented the following ideas on women in parliament.

The picture is thus one of progress, but slow progress. Such change as there has been has resulted from several shifts away from outmoded ideas, such as that politicians are always men, or that there can be democracy without the participation of women. Today a country is not considered democratic if women are excluded or strongly under-represented. There has also been a shift away from the traditional view that a country first needs development, then democracy, and only after that will it be time to think about gender equality, and

***Male dominance is now seen as no more 'natural' than dictatorship, and we now know that we can do away with both.***

Professor Dahlerup

towards a realization that the empowerment of women is necessary for development and the process of democratization.

In the past, it was asserted that women were not qualified for political office, not committed enough to stand, although no similar assertions were made about men. Men are chosen for their adherence to a particular segment of society, or their popularity in a particular geographical area, but there is no discussion of whether or not they are actually qualified. Since Beijing, we have seen a change in this discussion: today, women are qualified and educated, which makes it time to stop blaming the women, and look elsewhere for a reason for their underrepresentation.

The underlying factors are that the political parties are the gatekeepers to the positions of power and authority and that women are not sufficiently strong in the parties, which have the power to place candidates in safe seats with good chances of being elected. Here, there is a further link between democracy and the inclusion of women, because too often the nomination of candidates is controlled by old boys' networks, which in many countries are untransparent and not formalized.

However, we now know how to change things; we no longer have to guess. Examples from throughout the world show that gender quotas do work. Of the top 15 countries in the world in 2010, in terms of woman's representation in the lower or single parliamentary chamber, 11 have some kind of gender quota. Worldwide, almost 50 countries have introduced electoral gender quotas in their constitution or electoral law, while approximately 40 more have political parties making use of voluntary party quotas.

There are many different types of quota. Three effective examples are the reserved seats system, used in Rwanda; voluntary party quotas, used in Sweden; and legislated candidate quotas, used in Costa Rica. The sanctions for non-compliance can vary, too. In some cases they are financial, but wealthy political parties may not be swayed by a financial penalty. Far more effective is the ultimate sanction of having the entire candidate slate rejected for failure to meet the rules on quotas. Further information can be found at [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org), which gives information about all the countries in the world using gender quotas. Additionally, ranking rules are needed: if a party obeys the letter of the law on its numerical quota, but then puts all its women candidates at the bottom of the list, not many of them are likely to be elected.

There is a need to reconsider the "critical mass" theory. While it is generally true that it takes at least a large minority of women in an assembly to change the political culture and increase women's effectiveness as politicians, there is nothing magical about the often-cited figure of 30 per cent. Thus women politicians should not hang back, until they number 30% of the total, before striving to change things. Everybody can make a difference, even one person. Also, whereas "critical mass" as a concept from nuclear fission betokens a moment when an irreversible momentum is reached, in terms of woman's representation the process is not irreversible – setbacks and backlashes can and do occur.

#### *General discussion*

In the ensuing discussion, many delegates described the successes achieved, and obstacles encountered, in increasing women's representation in their country's politics and more particularly in parliament.

In most countries described, the number of women in parliament or in positions of authority is increasing, although at rates that differ depending on each country's situation. There are thus grounds for cautious optimism, but at the same time frustration, because women have not yet succeeded in breaking through the obstacles to the level of representation that they deserve.

***We women are angels, but if they break our wings we'll just fly further on broomsticks!***

Eva-Britt Svensson,  
European Parliament

Some delegates reported that, in countries with deeply patriarchal societies, the ideas expounded in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had caused not only the expected anger amongst men but also bewilderment and doubt amongst women, who found it difficult to imagine a different world in which women took part in politics. Gradually, however, even in those traditionalist countries the ideas had taken hold, and now they too had successes to report in the advancement of women to positions of authority.

A major step in advancing the political participation of women is to persuade the government to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which stipulates that States shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country. Also beneficial are electoral laws which encourage or compel the political parties to facilitate the full participation of women in political

activities on a basis of equality, or stipulate that a certain percentage of the seats in the various elected bodies shall be reserved for women.

The conclusions from the debate included the following:

- Even in countries where gender equality is apparently enshrined in the Constitution, new laws may be needed to make that theoretical principle a reality.
- There is a need to examine political party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women;
- One way of increasing the participation of women is for the government to grant greater levels of resources to those political parties that have greater numbers of women candidates.
- Promoting the education of girls will, over time, also help them become active in politics.
- Another long-term strategy is to set quotas for women's participation in politics at the community rather than the national level. Required qualifications can be set lower than would be appropriate for national parliamentarians, and the experience of politics at the community level can provide an incentive for some women to go further and enter national politics.
- In some countries, women politicians reject the idea of quotas, preferring to make their inroads into the male-dominated world of politics on their own merits and without any special assistance based solely on their gender.
- Legally-mandated quotas have been successful in bringing clarity to unformalized recruitment processes governed by unwritten rules that have largely been created by men.
- In the light of the particular difficulty for women in parliaments with extremely low female representation, the IPU is developing a set of indicators and best practices for such scenarios.
- Quotas in themselves do not solve the problems related to campaign financing, electoral violence and prejudice against women. But by forcing the political parties to be more serious in trying to find and nominate women candidates, under certain conditions quotas can result in amazing historical leaps in women's political representation.

## **Session 2: Building a gender-sensitive national legal framework**

*Reviewing discriminatory legislation: How, and what mechanisms are available? Developing legislation to implement Beijing commitments.*

Ms. Rebecca Kadaga, Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Uganda, examined issues of reviewing and eliminating discriminatory legislation.

In reviewing discriminatory legislation, the first necessary step is to establish the minimum standards of measuring discrimination, as set out in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the goals of equality, development, and peace for the empowerment of women, as set out in the Beijing Platform for Action. It is also essential to take an audit of the country's compliance with CEDAW and similar instruments. It is particularly important to establish whether the relevant international legal instruments have been not only ratified, but also domesticated. If there are any reservations, it is important to begin to lobby for their withdrawal.

Once the shortfalls have been identified, parliamentarians then need to put in place a country-internal action plan to deal systematically with the discriminatory provisions. In the case of Uganda, for example, the Uganda Women Organization Parliamentary Association, an all-party women's caucus, identified seven discriminatory areas that needed to be dealt with as a priority. So far, three pieces of legislation have been enacted on the basis of private member's bills, namely the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act and the Domestic Violence Act.

Even when the laws are passed, compliance has to be monitored. To that end, Uganda is designing a certificate of compliance with CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, to be attached to each bill presented. There may also be a need to set up new bodies to oversee the engendering of legislation and holding government accountable. For instance, on the model of the Public Accounts Committees which all parliaments have to monitor government expenditure, it would be feasible to have a committee to monitor the government's performance relating to women's issues.

Parliaments need to approve and monitor engendered budgets. This might require, for example, allocating resources for the law enforcement and justice systems to do extra work on women's issues. It will also require collection of data on employment of women, on credit for women, unemployment, the right to vote and to be elected and more. This in turn will mean that each national parliament must have a strong research department with the mandate to continuously monitor such variables.

Ms. Youla A. Haddadin, Women's Rights and Gender Section, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, described procedures being developed within the United Nations system to eliminate discriminatory laws.

International human rights law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and includes guarantees to ensure that women and men enjoy their civil rights on a basis of equality. However, despite the pledge made at the Beijing Conference in 1995, repeated at its 2000 review by the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, to modify or abolish remaining laws that discriminate against women, many of them remain in force. In 2005 the Commission on the Status of Women reviewed implementation of commitments made by States and noted with concern the legislative and regulatory gaps as well as the lack of enforcement of legislation, after which in 2005 and 2006 the Secretary-General issued two reports on the advisability of establishing a dedicated mechanism to examine discriminatory laws.

In 2007 the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights commissioned a study on such laws, and on the compatibility of a new mechanism with the existing system. This report was presented to an informal panel in Geneva in 2008, and then to a session of the CEDAW Committee, the majority of which supported establishment of a new mechanism. The 12th session of the Human Rights Council in September 2009 adopted resolution 12/17 which requested the High Commissioner to prepare a thematic study on discrimination against women in law and in practice and on how that issue is addressed throughout the United Nations human rights system. This study will be presented to the September 2010 15th session of the Human Rights Council, which is expected to decide to establish a new mandate that will focus only on issues of equality before the law. Such a dedicated mandate will contribute to more action-oriented results in the endeavour to eliminate all discriminatory laws.

While such international mechanisms are very important, they have to operate hand in hand with national mechanisms. Here, parliaments play an important part, both as lawmakers and as overseers of the government's actions. In the first role, their task is to review legislation for compliance with the conventions to which their country is a party, and to take corrective action if necessary. In the second, it is their task to monitor the government's actions, such as the preparation of the budget: gender-sensitive budgeting is a very powerful tool for abolishing laws that discriminate against women.

#### *General discussion*

In the following discussion, it was suggested that it would be advantageous if each parliament was to debate its government's reports to United Nations treaty bodies, such as those to the CEDAW Committee, thus involving parliamentarians collectively in monitoring compliance with the country's treaty obligations.

Some delegates asked for suggestions on how to overcome unyielding opposition from their male counterparts to the concept of gender parity, particularly in countries that have a patriarchal society or where domestic violence is a major concern. It was pointed out that even if the great majority of male parliamentarians are opposed, it is usually possible to find a few who are sympathetic to the women's cause. Seeing some of their male colleagues take a stand can make others stop and realize that the matter under discussion is not just a trivial "women's issue."

Some delegates asked for advice on setting up a women's parliamentary caucus. Others whose parliaments already had such groupings stressed that a key factor was to make them all-party associations: women should come together as women, pursuing a women's agenda, not as party politicians following the party line.

The conclusions from the debate included the following:

- The ultimate safeguard is to have gender parity enshrined in the constitution.
- One useful approach is to set up national law commissions tasked with reviewing laws for discriminatory bias against women, such as those that restrict their right to own or inherit land.
- In time, parliaments should be able to make their own reports on compliance with international commitments such as CEDAW, as a complement to the report by the country's executive to the UN.

- Legislators have the duty to ensure that laws endorsed are actually implemented, and that the public is made aware of them, and must demand that adequate funding be given to enhance women's rights and development.
- It was suggested that in future meetings like the present one, delegations should submit written reports about their countries' achievements, rather than reporting from the floor. There was never enough time for everything that needed to be said, the more so as it was in the nature of parliamentarians to talk at great length!

**Senator Pia Cayetano (Philippines), President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians,** welcomed the participants to the afternoon session.

**Remarks** by H.E. Garen Nazarian, Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women

I commend the IPU for convening this event on the occasion of the 15-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, providing a unique opportunity for parliamentarians to contribute to the work of Member States.

Parliamentarians play an essential role in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women, as lawmakers, advocates for women's rights, and as those who approve a nation's budget. The importance of legislation has also been consistently highlighted by the Commission on the Status of Women, since when rights and responsibilities are established by legislation, they can be enforced and become a strong and reliable tool for change.

Over the past few years, there are many examples in the Commission's main outcome of necessary legal measures to remove inequalities and discrimination. For example, the Commission has called for legislation to close pay gaps and promote the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities through parental leave and flexible work arrangements, as well as for legislative reforms to give women full and equal access to economic resources, land ownership, credit, natural resources and appropriate technologies. It has also called for legislative measures to ensure women's equal participation in decision-making at all levels, including in peace processes. To that end, the Commission has recommended the use of temporary special measures and revision of electoral laws. The Commission has also highlighted the need for legislation for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.

These examples demonstrate the close link that exists between the work of the Commission and Parliaments. The latter should seek opportunities to review the outcomes of the annual session of the Commission for areas where new or updated legislation may be pertinent. The Commission has also called for performance of gender-sensitive assessments of existing or proposed new legislation to ensure that it is not discriminatory in purpose or effect.

The 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is the main item on the Commission's agenda. It provides an opportunity to assess progress made, and to exchange good practices to overcome remaining gaps and challenges. There have been noticeable gains for women and girls. Globally, the number of women in paid employment has increased, and women's participation in the labour force has reached a new high. Access to education has increased for girls at all levels; in some countries, women now outnumber men at the tertiary level. Policies to address HIV/AIDS increasingly place specific emphasis on prevention, treatment and care for women. A growing number of States have comprehensive frameworks in place to end violence against women and girls, and support services are increasingly available to victims. The Secretary-General's global, multi-year Campaign "UNite to End Violence against Women", has brought even greater visibility to this important issue – and the IPU has been a champion of legislation to address all forms of violence against women.

However, the task given to all of us in the Platform for Action is not yet completed. Greater efforts are needed across all the critical areas of concern. Strengthened political commitment and leadership, financing for gender equality and strategic partnerships among all stakeholders must be stepped up to close the gap between rhetoric and action, and parliamentarians are key stakeholders in our common endeavour.

### **Session 3: Respecting women's rights: From *de jure* to *de facto* equality**

*Implementation, monitoring and evaluation: what are the parliamentary mechanisms needed? What is the role of parliamentary committees? What is the role of members of parliament in overcoming cultural barriers and changing mentalities? Adopting gender-sensitive budgets and building gender-sensitive enforcement and accountability frameworks (including securing access to justice and redress).*

Senator Sabine de Béthune, Belgium, considered aspects of this topic as they related to her country.

In Belgium, Parliament carries out its function of oversight of the work of the executive, in the area of women's rights and gender equality, through two principal mechanisms set up in the aftermath of the Beijing Conference: a Senate Advisory Committee on Gender Equality, and a mechanism compelling the government to report annually to Parliament on its policies and actions pursued on the basis of the Platform for Action. The 17-member Advisory

Committee has the same standing as all of Belgium's other parliamentary committees, and is empowered to examine any and all subjects being dealt with by the Senate with reference to their gender aspects. Its way of operating, then, is a true reflection of the philosophy of mainstreaming. The work of the Advisory Committee has five main parts: firstly, it is naturally the main point of contact between the Senate and the Ministry for Equal Opportunities, and secondly it takes an active part in the legislative process, having delivered an opinion on the majority of the laws on gender equality passed in the years since Beijing. Thirdly, it plays an important role in parliament's task of monitoring the work of the executive, for example making recommendations on the Government's report to the CEDAW Committee. Its fourth function is to network with other relevant bodies, notably civil society organizations and the women's movement, and fifthly it reproduces that networking function in the international context.

The other major mechanism established after the Beijing Conference deals specifically with the follow-up on the outcome of the Conference, and places on the government the duty to deliver an annual report, coordinated by the office of the Prime Minister, from the ministries responsible for equal opportunities and for international cooperation. Over time, these reports have become a useful lever for ensuring that the follow-up to the commitments of Beijing have remained on the parliamentary agenda.

Recently, this reporting process has been subsumed under a new and wider law on mainstreaming, which has given the country an ambitious tool for incorporating gender equality into all national political structures and for introducing gender budgeting at the federal level. Under this law, all government ministries are required to set forth, at the beginning of each legislative period, a schedule of their strategic objectives for achieving gender equality as well as progress and final reports on the process. It is hoped that all the implementing legislation for this ambitious mechanism will be in place in the near future, after which some new parliamentary monitoring tools and procedures will need to be developed. There will also be a need to develop indicators to measure the impact of the work of the Advisory Committee on Gender Equality, and others to assess the gender aspects of each new piece of legislation.

Ms. Rachel Shebesh, MP, Kenya, gave some thoughts with particular reference to Kenya.

As the debate on affirmative action for women intensifies globally, it is becoming clearer that meeting the Millennium Development Goals in the area of gender equality in the political sphere by 2015 may not be an easy task. Addressing gender imbalance in decision-making lacks support from important political actors or meets opposition in societies that have strong patriarchal traditions, notably in Africa. As in the case of affirmative action, those opposed to quota systems say they discriminate against men.

Despite recent political, social and economic changes, women are still not accorded adequate facilities to participate in national elections on an equal footing with men. The main factors that have perpetuated this disadvantaged status are legal mechanisms that are unresponsive to women; attitudinal, cultural and societal impediments; economic disparities; the non-democratization of political parties and lack of practical policies to address gender parity; women's insufficient access to technology and media, and violence against women running for political office.

The Beijing Platform for Action's strategic objectives call for measures to ensure women's equal access to power structures and decision-making. This means that parliaments have to confront the "masculine model", in which political life is organized for male norms and values. This construct can only be changed by enforcing accountability mechanisms that will ensure that when women enter parliament, their impact is enhanced by structural mechanisms including the political context in which their respective national assembly functions; engendered rules of parliamentary procedures; support for advocacy strategies of women parliamentarians' political caucuses; strengthened mandates of gender equality and parliamentary committees on women's empowerment; and enhanced knowledge among women parliamentarians of legislative processes, most especially in matters surrounding the budget.

Among Kenya's key achievements relating to the aims of the Beijing Platform for Action, the following may be highlighted: the Women Enterprise fund was set up in Kenya in 2007 to empower women economically; the Social Protection Fund and Youth Enterprise Fund were set up in 2007 to support poor women and young people; the Work Injury Benefit Act of 2008 ensures insurance benefits for all employees, both male and female; a 2006 Presidential Directive requires that 30% of all appointments in the public sector be women; the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) Act requires that one third of the members of the CDF Committees be women; the Political Parties Act requires that one third of the National Executive Committee of each political party be women; the Gender and Education Policy of 2007 provided a framework for the implementation of gender-responsive education; the introduction of free primary education in 2003, of benefit in particular to girls, has significantly contributed to the achievement of gender parity in school enrolment; and the Sexual Offences Act of 2006 has reduced cases of rape and early marriage. Currently, with support from women parliamentarians, the government is refining and redrafting the Family Protection Bill, the Marriage Bill and the Matrimonial Property Bill.



### General discussion

In the discussion after the presentations, several delegates described their country's successes in eliminating discriminatory laws, in the areas of land ownership, inheritance, legal capacity, protection from sexual violence, banking, political participation, rights in marriage and the right to act as an independent businesswoman.

There was general agreement that, on their own, laws entitling women to seek positions of power and authority are not enough. There may have to be enabling regulations, and there certainly needs to be monitoring of compliance and effectiveness. Some delegates felt that it is also the responsibility of women to show their ambition, their determination

***No-one will go looking for you in the kitchen to award you the position you're entitled to.....***

Gisèle Laure Eyang-Ntoutoume Lanchais,  
National Assembly, Gabon

to succeed and their conviction that they can do a good job not because of their gender, but because they are qualified and diligent. Others, however, felt that that is an issue that varies from country to country, or by region: in some places, women are expected to be humble – while still having the right to aspire to elected office – and such local expectations need also to be respected.

Even in countries where women's parliamentary representation is at a reasonable level, further work may be needed to ensure that women achieve a proportionate number of places in the bodies actually managing the work of parliament. It is also essential to ensure that women are sufficiently represented on all parliamentary committees. Too often, women are concentrated in committees dealing with social, cultural or educational matters, but are absent from those dealing with the "hard" topics such as constitutional reform, or defence, or justice. Some women even find themselves blocked from joining any parliamentary committees at all. With no particular specialized responsibility, they have nothing new to learn, and rapidly become disillusioned, dropping out of parliamentary life after one or two terms.

The conclusions from the debate included the following:

- Parliamentarians must exercise oversight over the judiciary, not only over the executive. It is their duty to ensure that laws passed are indeed implemented and enforced by the judges and magistrates.
- All parliaments should have women's caucuses, and there should be exchanges between them, including internationally, because capacity-building and learning from each other is a priority for women parliamentarians, particularly in the third world, and especially in Africa.
- Women politicians must not allow their parliamentary duties to override their responsibilities as women, particularly as mothers. If they do so, they are succumbing to the rules created by men.

### Session 4: Building partnerships to achieve gender equality

*Parliaments and national machineries for gender equality; Working with civil society; Public-private partnerships for gender equality.*

Ms. Fatema Khafagy, Regional Consultant on Gender Issues, UNDP and ESCWA, examined issues of national women's machineries with particular reference to the Arab region.

The First World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in 1975, gave clear indications to governments on the need to establish national women's machineries, while in 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action brought such institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women to the forefront as one of the 12 critical areas.

National women's machineries take different forms in different countries: ministries for women's affairs, women's councils, gender commissions, gender equality departments, complaints offices, and so on. Over time their mandate has expanded and their role in legal reform for gender equality has become clear. These bodies work with parliaments to redress gender-discriminatory laws. In many cases it is the national women's machinery itself that takes the initiative of preparing the groundwork for tackling such laws. National women's machineries have also worked closely with parliaments to persuade countries to ratify the CEDAW Convention or to withdraw their reservations to it. In many cases, too, national women's machineries have formed pressure groups with members of parliament in order to lobby for gender equality laws. National women's machineries also support women parliamentary candidates by providing training and other help. After election, they continue to support the women parliamentarians by providing information on discriminatory laws, training in gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, and more.

In a large number of Arab states, national women's machineries have been able to bring about legal reforms leading towards gender equality. For example, the Lebanese National Commission for Women attended all parliamentary committee sessions on women's issues and formed pressure groups in parliament to pass an amendment to the law on

so-called “honour” crimes. The National Council for Women in Egypt succeeded in convincing parliament to redress gender discrimination in nationality law, tax exemption law and several other laws. The National Committee of Jordanian Women along with civil society persuaded parliament to raise the age of marriage and worked to establish dialogue between parliamentarians and women’s pressure groups in order to amend the family law and the penal code.

However, more needs to be done to strengthen the cooperation between parliaments and national women’s mechanisms. For example, together they need to continuously review all legislation to redress any gender discrimination in it; assess the gender impact of all items of national legislation; and collaborate to close gaps between *de jure* and *de facto* gender equality through changing gender stereotypes in education and the media, providing gender training to those who implement the law, monitoring the implementation of laws through mechanisms such as complaints offices; and involving civil society organizations in providing information about the implementation of laws or their impact on women.

Ms. Colleen Lowe Morna, Executive Director, Gender Links, South Africa, offered some thoughts on partnerships with civil society, with particular reference to southern Africa. :

There have been very few instances of progress for women without the involvement of civil society, and advancement of women into decision-making positions is no exception to that rule.

One important component of civil society’s work is in research and tracking in relation to the representation of women in parliament and local government. By providing the actual figures on what is really happening, NGOs both prove that having significant women’s representation is possible, and create a “name and shame” incentive for those countries still lagging behind.

In many respects the south is now leading the way in innovative approaches for increasing women’s participation, with some 140 countries, most of them in Africa, Latin America and Asia, adopting special measures of one kind or another. Meanwhile, the word is coming from NGO colleagues in the north that these are ideas that need to be thought about in some of the more developed countries also. The example of Rwanda, for example, should be studied by all stakeholders: what strategies have they used to achieve the highest percentage of women’s parliamentary representation in the world, and can those strategies be employed across the globe?

At the time of the Beijing conference 15 years ago, the generally-accepted target for women’s participation was held to be 30%. Then civil society began asking “Why not more? Why not parity?” In 2009, the heads of State of southern Africa adopted the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, which calls for equal representation of men and women in decision-making by 2015. Thus civil society has helped to push the agenda to where the goal is now gender parity.

Globally, women’s representation has only moved from 11% to 18%, but within that overall figure it is important to look at individual countries where there has been significant change. For example in South Africa prior to the advent of democracy in 1994, women in parliament totaled 2.7%. By the time of the last election, that proportion had increased to 44%, a remarkable change in less than 15 years. Rapid and dramatic change is possible, in our lifetimes, in all countries.

Seeking those rapid and dramatic changes, many NGOs have put time and resources into capacity-building for women politicians, but of late have started to question how appropriate these forms of support have been. Very conscious of the fact that most men do not receive training to become politicians, civil society organizations are beginning to ask whether that is the kind of support that women really need. Perhaps, instead, NGOs should be working with political parties to promote an enabling environment for women parliamentarians, or providing mentorship or help with research or with the drafting of legislation.

Civil society groups can also help women parliamentarians in handling the media, with which most politicians have an ambivalent relationship. Studies by the IPU indicate that 33% of women politicians are not happy about their relationship with the media. This comes down to two major issues. One is that for the most part women politicians are ignored by the media, as if they don’t exist, while plenty of coverage, is given to, and quotations published from, their male counterparts. The alternate problem is that where women politicians are reported upon, they tend to be demonized and portrayed as iron ladies, as if they have to be honorary men in order to be able to participate in politics.

As civil society comes to grips with parliamentarians’ problems with the media, useful data can be found in the reports of the Global Media Monitoring Project, the fourth of which is just being published. The reports reveal, for example,

that in 1995, women globally constituted just 17% of news sources. That figure has now risen very slowly to 24%, showing that even when there are women in decision-making, their voices are not necessarily going to be heard. Civil society and parliamentarians must use those statistics and data to work with the media and show them how they can be a force for positive change.

#### *General discussion*

In the ensuing discussion, many delegations considered it important that parliamentarians should work hand in hand with civil society. That means that there have to be institutional structures through which NGOs can make meaningful contributions to the work of decision-makers. Some delegates described measures taken in their country to facilitate the cooperation, such as the establishment of a national register of NGOs. In the discussions at the United Nations on the new composite body for gender issues, one of the major concerns is to ensure that civil society will be able to contribute usefully to its work.

Women parliamentarians can promote laws to benefit women much more effectively when they have the support of women from civil society associations. And women in civil society can do more, hope for more, when they have parliamentarians who will fight for them. While there might sometimes be tension, since parliamentarians and civil society view their objectives from a different angle, the important thing is to make that tension creative. Often civil society organizations are able to take positions that women parliamentarians are constrained from adopting, thereby advancing the common objective.

With regard to the media, some delegates reported that journalists waste the interview time by asking women candidates pointless questions about their husband or their children, while for a male candidate the whole time is spent on his political programme. In some countries, a female politician may even have to pay to obtain media coverage at all. When there is bad or unflattering news about women politicians it is on the front page; when there is good news or a female politician's achievements to report on, it is buried deep inside the newspaper. Even when there are serious matters to discuss - if the country is involved in armed conflict, for example - the journalists behave as if women parliamentarians could not possibly understand the realities of the situation. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, female parliamentarians have created an all-party group to combat this lopsided reporting. In Brazil, political parties are obliged to allocate 10% of their publicity to describing the work of outstanding women politicians.

***What does your husband think about you standing for parliament?***

Typical journalist's question, quoted by Senator Eve Bazaiba Masudi, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Some delegates agreed with the doubts expressed about whether all the training provided to female politicians was productive, pointing out that while women were attending training, men were spending the time networking, connecting to their constituencies. As a result, they went on being elected, while the unsuccessful women went back for more training! It might be that time spent setting up networks of contacts would be more useful in the long run than many formal training workshops. However, others felt that, while there might be too much training in the basic mechanics of running for office, some training offerings do cover some very complex topics - such as gender budgeting or how to make use of international instruments - and male parliamentarians, too, attend such training.

The conclusions from the debate included:

- It should be a responsibility of the media to represent women fairly, both in the portrayals of their appearance and in reporting about their ideas.
- When national women's machineries produce national plans for gender equality, an important component, often omitted, is the evaluation of the plan's success or failure after it is completed.
- Commissions on equal opportunities or equal rights need to see gender issues as cross-cutting, affecting many different spheres and topics.

#### **Closing session**

**Ms. Anita Vanden, iKNOW Politics Manager**, gave a presentation on the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, or iKNOW Politics. The system has been designed to meet the need for informal spaces where women in politics can talk to one another and share resources.

The newest version of the site, recently launched, contains a new forum specifically on elections. The site also features interviews with women in politics, and a library of over 1500 resources in four languages, to which women in politics can upload their own resources. There is also a news feature, to which five staff members on five continents contribute

regularly about successes and challenges of women in politics, and an events calendar to which any user can also upload. The site also makes use of experts from all around the world (some of them present in today's meeting), to whom anybody can ask questions.

A significant event was the launch in October 2009 of the Arabic version of the site, which already features six discussion circles and about 100 resources in Arabic, a number that is growing daily.

The online discussions are very successful, with a new one starting in April on the use of technology to support women in politics. In all, iKNOW Politics is more than a website: it is a community of political women, making use of shared resources to reach out and connect with one another.

**Ambassador Anda Filip, Permanent Observer of the IPU to the United Nations**, observed that the high level of participation in the meeting reflected the intense interest and commitment for issues of gender equality and the empowerment of women. There is a sense that very many of the good practices and solutions are within reach, and that what needs to happen is to close the gap between rhetoric and action. And in so doing, the role of parliamentarians, in forming opinions and building political will, is of crucial importance.

The current meeting was an expression of the growing recognition of the contribution of the IPU as an integral part of the CSW's session. The following day, the Chair of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians would be addressing the plenary of the CSW and bringing forward some of the conclusions and recommendations resulting from the day's discussions. In the light of growing recognition of the value of including parliamentarians in national delegations to major United Nations events, the IPU would continue to work with the United Nations and with the governments of its Member States to make sure that this recommendation of the United Nations General Assembly is acted upon.

The General Assembly in the autumn will include an agenda item on the relationship between the United Nations, national parliaments and the IPU, in preparation for which it is important that parliamentarians participating in the present meeting go back and begin discussions with national foreign ministries. In July there will be the Third World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments, which as always will have a strong gender component but will also provide an opportunity for examining aspects of the relationship.

**Senator Cayetano** gave an overview of the conclusions from the event that would be presented to the plenary session of the Commission of the Status of Women the following day. In addition to the specific bulleted items drawn from the lists above, she summarized the outcome of the day's deliberations by saying that 15 years after Beijing, follow-up and monitoring of the implementation of the measures approved is still a work in progress. It is clear that the role of parliaments in monitoring the executive and overseeing the implementation of legislation on gender issues must be pursued. Mechanisms such as committees on gender equality should be put in place and tools such as gender-sensitive budgeting developed to help their work. Also, parliaments should also look for a balance between men and women in all parliamentary committees, including with regard to leadership positions.

It is important to establish collaboration and partnership between parliamentarians and the various stakeholders, including national women's machineries, to monitor the implementation of laws and to work with civil society to support and promote the implementation of gender equality policies.

She closed the meeting by thanking the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women for partnering in the organization of the event, and the parliamentarians themselves for their contributions.