



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

CHEMIN DU POMMIER 5
1218 LE GRAND-SACONNEX / GENEVA (SWITZERLAND)
TELEPHONE (41.22) 919 41 50 - FAX (41.22) 919 41 60 - E-MAIL postbox@mail.ipu.org

IS PARLIAMENT OPEN TO WOMEN? AN APPRAISAL

Seminar for chairpersons and members of parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality

Geneva, 28-29 September 2009

SUMMARY OF THE SEMINAR

Rapporteurs: Ms. L. Kilimo (Kenya) and Mr. M. Affey (Kenya)

The meeting brought together some 80 members of parliament and parliamentary staff from 38 countries to discuss and assess progress made in terms of women's parliamentary participation.

The theme of women's access to and participation in parliaments was timely in the run-up to the 15th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. Under the Beijing Platform for Action, States undertake to promote gender equality and to increase women's participation in decision-making bodies. The seminar therefore appraised progress made in terms of women's parliamentary participation across the world since the Beijing Conference, took stock of special measures that have been taken to open parliaments up to the participation of women and identified remaining challenges.

The objective of the meeting was to answer an apparently simple question: is parliament open to women? The seminar first began by considering the question from a quantitative point of view. Despite incremental progress over the past 15 years, the average of 18 per cent women members of parliament remains well below the 30 per cent target established in the 1990s. It also recognized that the pace of progress was too slow, and that with an average increase of less than one percentage point per year, the 30 per cent target would not be reached for another 15 years.

From a numerical point of view, yes, parliament is open to women. Compared with other spheres of political decision-making - where for example 16 per cent of ministerial posts were held by women and just 4 per cent of Heads of State were women in 2008 - parliaments are more open. However, progress needs to be stepped up and the many challenges that women face in accessing parliaments need to be addressed in order to respond to them in the most concrete and effective way.

In the discussions about **challenges** faced by women, a key point raised was that regardless of region, level of development and cultural background, women face similar challenges in running for parliament in all countries. It was also recognized that women running for election were usually held to higher expectations from society and were often scrutinized far more closely than men seeking election. This pressure often results in women having to work harder and more than men, which nevertheless ultimately serves them well in their careers.

One of the overarching challenges highlighted was the prevailing **cultural attitudes** regarding the roles of women and men in society. These affect the nature and forms of women's political participation and impact their levels of success in seeking positions of power. Cultural attitudes affect not only how women are perceived by the electorate, but also by political party leaders and the media. Some participants even noted that women were seen as intruders in the field of politics. Others underscored that the electorate often overlooked the specific and valuable contribution that women could bring to politics. Cultural attitudes also impact on how women see themselves, affecting their confidence and resolve to pursue a political career. Discussions highlighted the importance of challenging stereotypes

and mentalities by promoting different forms of **education**, including providing education for women and girls, implementing civic and voter education programmes and promoting gender equality in the school curricula and within the home.

Participants also discussed the challenges of balancing **public and private** responsibilities, which was one of the main perceived deterrents identified by women. Although it was noted that both women and men have multiple commitments that are time-consuming and can make it difficult to pursue a political career, the challenge of balancing family and public responsibilities was often felt hardest by women. The support of the family was seen as crucial for women with political ambitions.

Political parties were identified as the main gatekeepers to elected office, but often did not seem to be doing enough to promote and support the candidatures of women. Political parties were largely seen as operating as men's clubs where women have yet to make their way. They were criticized for often overlooking the value of women candidates, and opting for the safety of male incumbents rather than taking the perceived risk of supporting women aspirants.

Running for election is increasingly costly and women are affected by a shortage of **financing** and campaign support. Some participants highlighted that societal roles often mean that women are not in charge of family resources and often do not have access to money to fund their campaigns. Discriminatory laws in some countries limit and even forbid women's access to property and land ownership. Combined with women's lesser earning power, banks often do not grant them loans, adding a further challenge to women seeking office. This has an even more pronounced impact on women running as independent candidates.

The **media** and the stereotypes it perpetrates constitute a challenge to those seeking election, both men and women. However, the mainstream media was particularly prone to cultivating a negative and stereotypical portrayal of women politicians, with a tendency to put them down and not focus on their political achievements. Participants recognized that it was necessary to learn to work with the media, and use it as effectively as possible, with a "don't get angry, get smart" approach.

Other factors that were highlighted as impacting on women's political participation included the role of **civil society movements**, which can be an important political support. Violence against women in politics and in campaigning was also underscored as an increasing challenge in some countries.

Having identified the main challenges, the participants then focused their attention on the possible responses. On an encouraging note, over the past decade solutions have emerged and a variety of special measures have been implemented. Electoral **gender quotas**, for instance, have become an increasingly used policy measure to promote women's participation in parliaments. Of the 25 countries to have reached 30 per cent or more women members of parliament, 22 have applied quotas in some form or another. Quotas are a simple and effective answer to the complex historical problem of inequality in decision-making. Gender quotas can also be framed in a gender-neutral way, thereby safeguarding the participation of both women and men.

For quotas to be effective, they have to work with the **electoral system** in operation. Proportional representation systems, which are recognized as the most favourable for supporting the election of women, are also the easiest under which to implement candidate quotas. For quotas to be successful, they must have strict enforcement mechanisms, which include placement mandates, financial sanctions and the rejection of lists that do not comply with the law. They also need to be understood by the electorate. Quotas are not a miracle solution but by levelling the playing field they can fast track women's participation in parliament. They can also facilitate more internal party democracy by formalizing and making recruitment rules more transparent.

In terms of other special measures, the seminar also discussed other incentives to promote women, such as **political finance**. Funding can be used as an incentive to encourage women's participation, whether it is public, private or a combination of both. Finance legislation can include incentives for political parties to earmark specific allocations to support women's candidacies. Spending limits can also be implemented as a way to level the political playing field. The option of including a gender-sensitive finance component in laws and policies on political participation was also mentioned.

Political parties can do much more than implement quotas to promote women's candidacies. Internal party democracy leads to more inclusiveness and can thereby favour women increased participation. Parties should be encouraged to implement specific training programmes (such as communication or leadership training) that specifically target women. Mentoring between women can also serve as an important way to cultivate new leaders. Political parties should work with women not only during elections, but also keep them engaged between elections.

Another potential entry point for enhancing women's participation in national politics is experience gained in **local government**. Local government may serve as a launching pad for women to become national leaders and a stepping stone for accessing national parliament. Furthermore, measures adopted to encourage the higher participation of women at the local level can open the way to implementing such measures at the national level. It was recognized that this is an area that requires further research.

The question of whether parliaments are open to women was then considered from a second point of view, moving beyond the question of numbers. The participants assessed the extent to which parliaments are including the contributions of women and how parliaments are addressing gender equality issues.

Participants noted that when women take up their seats in parliament, they usually enter a male domain with a potential set of new challenges. Parliament's **rules and procedures** were typically established by men, and "men's clubs" still in operation in some parliaments by nature exclude women. It was underscored that women need to learn and use these rules, but it may also be important to revise and rewrite the rules of parliament for the benefit not only women, but also for men.

Given the low numbers of women members in most countries, parliaments were by and large viewed as enduring male bastions. Participants noted that the **critical mass** of women, of at least 30 per cent, was important for several reasons. In parliaments with low numbers of women members, there sometimes are not enough women to take part in all parliamentary committees, or women have to spread themselves thinly taking on several committee assignments. A critical mass of women members is also needed to begin to change political priorities and place women's concerns on the parliamentary agenda.

Women must display **solidarity** and support each other. Participants highlighted the advantages and benefits of acting together and uniting for change, even across party lines. The importance of cross-party caucuses of women parliamentarians was underscored as carving out a space for women to cooperate closely and define common priorities in pursuing gender equality. Establishing a clear mandate and defining rules for the operation and structure of women's caucuses is vital for them to function effectively and contribute substantively to the work of parliament.

In addition, the importance of engaging and collaborating with **men** as partners for change was noted and participants called for greater efforts to be made to involve men in gender equality work.

Parliamentarians have a crucial role to play in the promotion of gender equality and in overseeing the implementation of policies and programmes to ensure that they meet the standards and goals set. Much of the detailed policy work and oversight is done in **parliamentary committees** and it is here that gender equality strategies need to be implemented. Specialized parliamentary committees on gender equality are an important mechanism for gender mainstreaming. To be effective in their work, they

require sufficient funding and support. However, in some parliaments, monitoring and implementation is not done in specialized gender committees, but through mainstreaming gender equality in the existing committee structures. There is, however, no single model - it varies from country to country depending on parliamentary practice. A particular challenge was ensuring that mainstream committees are also accountable for gender equality issues, and that they do not become systematically relegated to specialized gender committees.

The achievement of gender mainstreaming also depends on **coordination** with other committees in parliament. The example was cited of convening common sittings with other parliamentary committees to debate the contents of a bill and ensure the inclusion of a gender perspective. Other gender mainstreaming mechanisms could include alternating positions of power in the parliament between women and men, such as ensuring that committees Chairs and Vice-Chairs are of either sex. Including the Chair of the gender equality committee as a member of the bureau of parliament was also suggested.

The third aspect it examined was related to the institution of parliament itself. How gender-sensitive are these institutions? The participants began by defining the notion of **gender-sensitive parliaments**. A gender-sensitive parliament responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and in its work as a nation's primary legislative institution. When looking at gender-sensitive parliaments we need to consider two components: (1) gender mainstreaming, as in parliament's ability to mainstream gender in policy development and the work of parliament, and (2) parliamentary working arrangements, including parliament's operational and institutional culture.

Participants heard about a very interesting initiative at the **Swedish Parliament**, where an internal process to assess the gender sensitivity of the Parliament was instigated. The results of the assessment highlighted that women faced several challenges in parliament: they usually struggled to reach high positions within the parliament; they viewed themselves and their work as being invisible; they were often subject to ridicule and belittling, and they often did not have access to full information about parliamentary work. This resulted in a document with "15 proposals for gender equality in Parliament". A gender equality plan must be adopted for each parliamentary session, which requires reporting and follow-up, falling under the responsibility of the Secretary General of Parliament.

The meeting also highlighted the importance of **partnerships** in order for parliament to fully contribute to national efforts to promote gender equality. Parliamentarians can be isolated and need to develop cooperation with government and civil society. There is a need to work closely with national women's machineries and women's ministries, as they have complementary roles to play. Cooperation with ombudspersons and the judiciary was also highlighted.

Finally, the importance of **disseminating the findings** of the seminar to all members of parliament was noted, and delegates agreed to report back to their parliaments to ensure that members are aware of the meeting and its summary and recommendations. It was also noted that it is important to share country experiences, especially in countries undergoing constitutional and political reform.