



# **Equality in Politics**

A Survey of Women and Men  
in Parliaments

## **An Overview of Key Findings**

The booklet contains an overview of key findings from the full-length publication *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments*, Report and Documents No. 54, published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2008, written and compiled by Julie Ballington.

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## Equality in Politics

### A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments

#### Overview of the Report

Parliament is the place where a country's policy direction is set. A democratic parliament reflects the views and interests of the society from which it is drawn and allows those perspectives to shape the society's social, political and economic future. When women are involved in all aspects of political life, including as members of parliament, societies are more equitable and democracy is both strengthened and enhanced. Although the number of women in parliaments around the world has been increasing steadily over recent years, women still occupy a disproportionately smaller percentage of parliamentary seats than do men. Fewer than one out of five parliamentarians are women.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments* presents insights from both men and women in parliament into what shapes decision-making. This Report highlights the factors that

For the past decade, the IPU has based its work on the principle that there is a fundamental link between democracy and a genuine partnership between men and women in the management of public affairs. One of our core aims is to improve women's access to, and participation in, parliament and to build real political partnerships between men and women. Our efforts are informed by the collection and analysis of data on the subject. This report is our most recent contribution to the ongoing discussion about how to achieve full partnership between men and women in parliament. The report collates the views and experiences of parliamentarians from all regions of the world that has been gathered through survey research.

influence entry into politics, assesses how the political priorities of women and men differ and identifies the ways in which women are making their presence felt in parliament. The Report also addresses the different mechanisms that may be employed to promote gender-sensitive parliamentary institutions.

The survey, conducted between 2006 and 2008, finds that prejudice and cultural perceptions about the role of women, together with a lack of financial resources, are among the greatest obstacles to women's entry into politics. Yet once they do become involved, women bring different views, talents and perspectives to politics. While not a homogenous group, women's shared experiences affect how they prioritize issues politically. Women parliamentarians are the most ardent supporters of women and have been responsible for putting women's concerns and issues on the parliamentary agenda.

The survey also finds that women's progress in parliament has been patchy, with most parliamentarians agreeing that gender equality is only "occasionally" or "rarely" mainstreamed in parliament. Few political parties actively promote a gender-equality agenda, and few women hold the top decision-making positions in parties. While some parliaments and political parties have implemented reforms to make them more gender-sensitive, in many ways, the study attests to the fact that gender equality in parliaments remains an ideal, not yet a reality.

# 1. Executive Summary

## An Overview of Key Findings

This study, *Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments*, aimed to elicit concrete examples of how parliamentarians are working to attain gender equality in politics at the national level. During the two years of the research, the IPU received responses and conducted interviews with nearly 300 parliamentarians in 110 countries in every region of the world. Significantly, 40 percent of the respondents to this survey were men, making this a unique report.

Among the main findings:

- **Women face great obstacles entering politics.** Overall, respondents believe that prejudice and cultural perceptions about the role of women, together with a lack of financial resources, frequently hinder women's access to political life. Most women respondents cite domestic responsibilities as the single most important deterrent to entering a life in politics, an obstacle rated much lower among male respondents.
- **More than 90 percent of all respondents agree that women bring different views, talents and perspectives to politics.** Women parliamentarians are at the forefront of efforts to combat gender-based violence, and have been instrumental in ensuring that issues such as parental leave and childcare, pensions, gender-equality laws and electoral reforms that enhance women's access to parliaments appear on the legislative agenda.
- **Numbers do matter.** When there are few women in parliament, their lobbying strength and their availability to participate in committee work is limited. Women parliamentarians often spread themselves too thin by taking on too

many committee assignments and thus end up burdened with heavier workloads than their male counterparts.

- **Partnership is the key to real change.** Women cannot do it alone. As men hold the majority of decision-making positions they are central to achieving change. Women and men must work together to promote gender equality within political parties, within the institution of parliament, and as part of the policy-making process.
- **Political parties matter.** They are fundamental in supporting the candidacies of women, and provide a central link between the institutions of governance and civil society. Political parties set policy priorities and can be key drivers for positive change.
- **Parliaments are not gender-sensitive institutions.** More than half the respondents believe that gender equality is only “occasionally” or “rarely” mainstreamed in parliament. While there have been sporadic attempts to modernize some parliaments, by and large much more needs to be done to improve the gender sensitivity of parliaments by changing cultural mores and modernizing operational arrangements.

## 2. The Road to Parliament Less Travelled by Women

Women comprise more than 50 percent of the pool of those eligible to stand for election and hold political office in most countries, but that proportion is not reflected in the composition of decision-making bodies. While the percentage of women in parliament has grown in recent years, the pace of improvement has been slow; parity between men and women in parliament remains a long way off.

While both men and women confront obstacles to entering politics, the particular deterrents differ in great degree between men and women:

- Male survey respondents identify lack of support from the electorate as the single most important deterrent, followed by a lack of financial resources.
- For women, domestic responsibilities top the list as the greatest obstacle to a life in politics, followed closely by prevailing cultural attitudes regarding the role of women in society.
- Not surprisingly, male respondents cite prevailing cultural attitudes as one of the least important factors affecting their participation in politics.

**Chapter 2** provides an overview of the participation of women and men in parliaments around the world. It examines the factors that motivate women and men to enter parliament, and that deter them from doing so, and highlights the challenges that parliamentarians face in being elected. It also identifies some of the mechanisms that are being introduced to promote more equal representation of women and men in politics.

Influence of the different factors that deter men and women from entering politics

Deterrents for women	Aggregate score	Deterrents for men	Aggregate score
Domestic responsibilities	3.4	Lack of support from the electorate	2.9
Prevailing cultural attitudes regarding the roles of women in society	3.3	Lack of finances	2.7
Lack of support from family	3.2	Lack of support of political parties	2.7
Lack of confidence	3.2	Lack of experience in "representative functions": public speaking, constituency relations	2.7
Lack of finances	3.1	Lack of confidence	2.6
Lack of support of political parties	3.1	Lack of education	2.5

The score indicates the aggregate level of influence that respondents attached to each of the factors on a four-point scale, where a great deal was scored as 4 and none as 1.

Respondents offer several suggestions for facilitating women's access to parliament. Implementing electoral quotas for women is considered to be the most effective way of increasing the number of women candidates. Quotas can and should be supplemented with other measures, respondents suggest, including sensitization, education and public awareness-raising programmes, and funding mechanisms that specifically target women's candidacies.

Since political parties maintain firm control over the selection of candidates to contest elections, some respondents recommend working with political parties to encourage them to promote women's participation in politics, such as by adopting voluntary party quotas or by placing women in winnable positions on party lists. Others note that political parties should recruit more women into their ranks and support their candidatures, including by providing financial support. Training women candidates in campaigning and communication techniques is also seen as highly valuable.

### 3. Women and Men in Parliament Competing Concerns or Complementary Agendas?

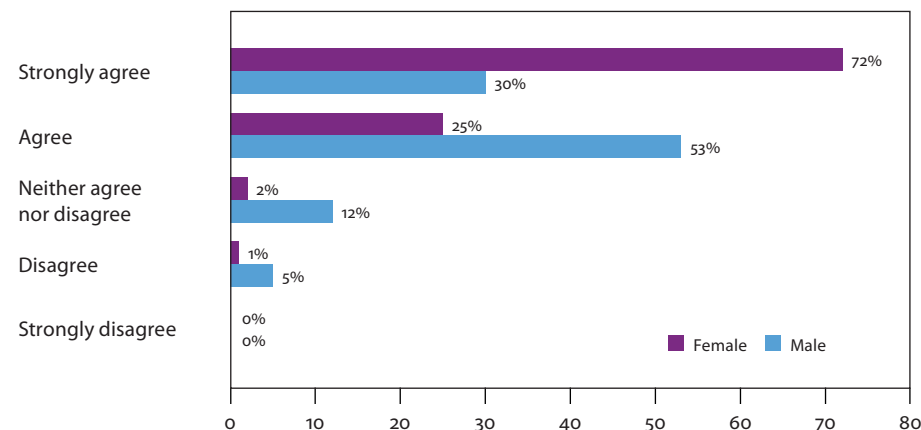
Some 90 percent of respondents to the survey agree that women bring different views, talents and perspectives to politics. While by no means a homogenous group, women tend to highlight women's concerns. The concerns that women tend to prioritize include:

- **Social issues:** childcare, equal pay, parental leave and pensions
- **Physical concerns:** reproductive rights, physical safety and gender-based violence
- **Development concerns:** human development, poverty alleviation and service delivery

When asked whether women parliamentarians have a responsibility to represent the interests of women in society, 85 percent of women respondents and 60 percent of male respondents agree. Half of the women surveyed do not believe that men in parliament can sufficiently represent the interests of women, while just 43 percent of male respondents say they can. Although women are predominantly

**Chapter 3** examines the interests, perspectives and priorities of women and men in parliament. It reports on parliamentarians' perceptions about whether women bring different perspectives, values and styles, and if indeed they are shaping a new political agenda. It also explores, for the first time comprehensively, men's views on these issues, and whether men and women are allies in shaping a gender-equality agenda.

Women bring different views, perspectives and talents to politics



responsible for highlighting women's concerns, several of the women surveyed emphasize the need to move beyond what is perceived to be a women's agenda and to contribute to a broad range of political discussions.

Respondents also acknowledge the difference in style, as well as substance, that women bring to parliament. The survey asked whether the presence of women in parliament had resulted in changes in behaviour in the institution. More than two-thirds of respondents believe that there has been some change: for example, parliamentary language and behaviour has become less aggressive since women entered parliament in greater numbers.

## 4. Policy Development

### Women Making their Presence Felt

Men and women parliamentarians who participated in the survey identify themselves as engaged in different policy areas.

- Men claim to be most active in foreign affairs, economic and trade issues, education and constitutional affairs, while they report low levels of activity in gender equality, labour and women's issues.
- Among women, the reverse is true: nearly half of all women respondents note that they are very active on women's issues and gender-equality matters, but less active in economic and trade matters, finance and defence.

When asked what effect the presence of women has had on drafting and passing legislation in specific policy areas, both men and women agree that women parliamentarians have the greatest influence on legislation related to domestic violence, childcare and parental leave.

But what level of representation is required for women to make a difference in shaping policy? The *critical mass theory* suggests that women are substan-

**Chapter 4** examines how the different perspectives and views that women bring to politics have translated into policy initiatives by women and men in parliament. It identifies some of the specific policy areas that parliamentarians have focused on and highlights examples of how women and men are working together for gender equality. It addresses some of the obstacles that women may come up against in broadening the political agenda, such as the role of political parties and whether the number of women representatives affects their ability to make a substantive difference in policy making.

Level of activity in different policy areas

Among women respondents	Level	Among male respondents	Level
Women's issues	4.5	Foreign affairs	4.0
Gender equality matters	4.4	Economic and trade matters	3.9
Social and community matters	4.2	Education	3.7
Family-related matters	4.1	Justice and constitutional matters	3.7
Education	4.1	Social and community matters	3.6
Health care	3.9	Infrastructure and development	3.6
Foreign affairs	3.7	Public administration	3.6

The totals indicate the average level of activity that respondents attached to each of the policy areas on a five-point scale, where very active was scored as 5 and not at all as 1.

tively represented when institutions and policies begin to be transformed. That is, the more women representatives there are, the greater the chances that the female perspective will be presented and considered. Over half of respondents “strongly agree” and one-third “agree” with the statement that the more women there are in parliament, the greater the influence they will have on political priorities and policy. Since women have different life experiences and prioritize issues differently, an increase in the number of women in parliament would provide a broader spectrum of views, not just on women's issues, but on all policy matters.

Numbers *do* matter. Much of the detailed policy work is done in parliamentary committees. Respondents from countries with low representation of women in parliament complain that there are just not enough women to participate effectively in committee work. Women are either left out of policy discussions or they are overloaded with committee work and stretch themselves too thin to dedicate sufficient time to that work. The best solution is to increase the number of women in parliament to ensure that a gender perspective is incorporated into *all* policies.

In addition, a stronger partnership between women and men in parliaments needs to be created. As men form the majority of parliamentarians and dominate leadership positions, they are important strategic partners for change. Respondents also identified political party support to be the most influential factor in the adoption of gender-related legislation.



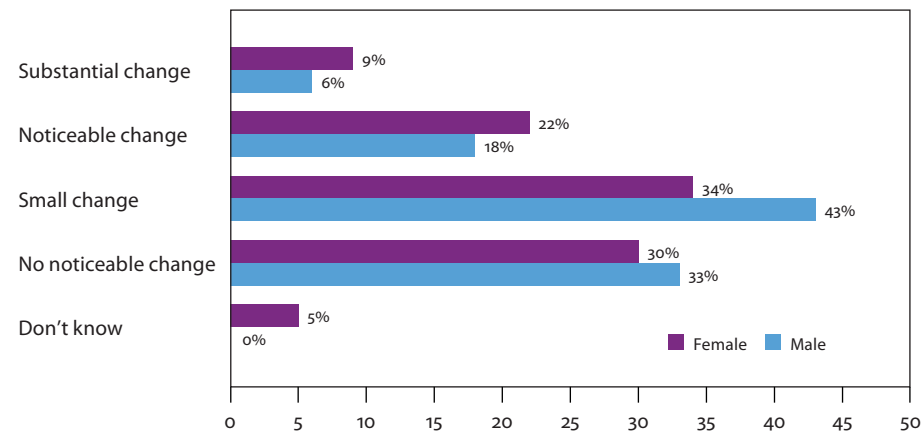
## 5. Institutional Change Gender-Sensitive Parliaments

Parliaments are organized and operate according to established rules, processes and norms that have historically been determined by men. The research finds that parliaments are not gender sensitive institutions. More than half the respondents believe that gender equality is only “occasionally” or “rarely” mainstreamed in parliament. While there have been sporadic attempts to modernize some parliaments, by and large much more needs to be done improve the gender sensitivity of parliaments by changing cultural mores and modernizing operational arrangements.

For instance, half of the women respondents, and 40 percent of the male respondents, admitted that they face difficulties in balancing their family and political commitments. Some parliaments have instituted “family-friendly” reforms, such as changes in sitting times, in response to the greater number of women parliamentarians. However, changes to help both men and women parliamentarians balance their family responsibilities—such as changes in sitting times or the provision of on-site childcare—are characterized as modest. Different legislatures approach the issue with different, usually piecemeal, mechanisms for improvement—if they approach it at all.

**Chapter 5** focuses on the institution of parliament. When women enter parliament, they typically enter a male domain where the vast majority function according to rules established by men. This creates another set of potential challenges for women—challenges that they have already begun to confront. This chapter highlights some of the initiatives that have been taken and the changes introduced to improve the gender sensitivity of parliaments.

Changes in the rules and practices of parliament brought about by the presence of women



Survey respondents identify four factors that can improve gender balance, both in the institution of parliament, and in the policies parliaments draft and approve:

- Political parties are key, particularly the support of the ruling party.
- The work of parliamentary committees, particularly in mainstreaming gender, needs to be bolstered, including in, but not limited to, committees that specialize in gender equality.
- The work done by women’s parliamentary caucuses, where they exist, needs to be enhanced.
- Rules and practices that guide the functioning of parliament need to become more gender sensitive and family-friendly to accommodate the needs of parliamentarians with families.

Reorganization and improvements are needed in all areas of parliamentary life—both in the evolution of cultural mores so that parliament is more welcoming to men and women from diverse backgrounds, and in the institutions of parliament, allowing more effective committee work on gender issues, the emergence of women’s caucuses and more visible roles for women in parliamentary leadership. Gender equality needs to become one of the measures of institutional performance. This work must be done by women and men as they develop a genuine partnership.

## 6. Conclusions

### Defining a Future Agenda

Although the number of women in parliament is growing in most regions of the world, the current level of women's representation in the world's parliaments amounts to a democracy deficit. Increasing the number of women in parliament is a primary concern; but it is equally important that women, once in parliament, develop and use their positions of influence to participate substantively in decision making. While women parliamentarians have proven to be the most ardent promoters and defenders of women and have redefined political priorities to include women's concerns and perspectives, those roles are not exclusively women's.

Survey respondents identify several priority activities for making parliaments more sensitive to the needs of both men and women. These include:

- Bolstering the capacity of existing committees on gender equality or caucuses of women parliamentarians;
- Making parliamentary processes and facilities more family-friendly, such as by providing childcare and revising parliamentary timetables;
- Engaging in research, training and networking on gender equality and related matters, including through international organizations; and
- Developing closer relationships with constituents and providing more funding for support services and outreach work.

Developing parliament-specific indicators or benchmarks for measuring performance in terms of gender mainstreaming would help in designing and evaluating any and all of the above actions.


In many ways, this report attests to the reality that equality in parliaments remains a long way off. Women parliamentarians continue to face difficulties in their work—perhaps none greater than seeking change in political structures developed, and still dominated, by men. In most parliaments, the mainstream is the “male-stream”—institutions in which networks and clubs that have traditionally excluded women still operate.

It is all too apparent that women who want to act on behalf of women often face constraints in their work: they lack the support of their parliamentary colleagues or they may find that the gender-based policies they wish to pursue are at odds with the policies of their political parties.

Political parties are important arenas for policy development and for setting political priorities, and are therefore one of key institutions through which gender equality should be promoted. However, far from all political parties that promote gender equality uphold their manifesto pledges in practice, and few women hold the top decision-making positions within their ranks. This research found the support of the ruling party to be the most important factor in introducing and enacting gender-related legislation, making change vital at this level.

The basis of any significant change in women's access to parliament is political will and a real partnership between men and women. Men and women must acknowledge and agree that women's inclusion and equal participation in parliamentary processes not only benefit societies and the global community, but are also necessary for legitimate democracy. In essence, what parliaments need most is more women and a new cadre of gender-sensitive men.





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