



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION
OFFICE OF THE PERMANENT OBSERVER TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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Third Committee of the General Assembly

Item 64: Advancement of Women

Item 65: Implementation of the outcome of the Fourth World Conference On
Women and of the twenty-third Special Session of the General Assembly

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

A few months ago we finished reviewing progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is sad to note that today we cannot account for significant progress - discrimination and inequality are persistent on a wide scale. There remains a lot to do on the legal, political, economic, social and cultural fronts.

In the collective effort that is needed to meet the Beijing objectives and the Millennium Development Goals, and more specifically Goal 3 on gender equality, I wish to highlight here the specific role of parliaments. As you know, the question of gender equality has long been one of the Inter-Parliamentary Union's priorities. Our organisation has followed and contributed to all the World Conferences on Women, placing particular emphasis on parliamentary action and follow-up. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Conference, the 141 Member Parliaments of the IPU reviewed progress and setbacks, and adopted a resolution on this topic.

Underpinning this resolution is the fundamental role of parliaments in the fight for gender equality. We need strong parliaments and sustained parliamentary action to ensure respect for women's rights. Two issues must be addressed: the very low presence of women in decision-making bodies - only 16% of members of parliament worldwide are women - and the enhancement of parliaments' capacities to address gender issues.

This very topic was the subject of the parliamentary forum organised last March here at the United Nations by the IPU and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW). More than 200 women and men parliamentarians got together to discuss women's access to the political process and ways and means of enhancing parliaments' capacities to facilitate women's contributions and to meet the Beijing objectives.

The debates were lively. Parliamentarians shared their experiences regarding mechanisms aimed at facilitating women's access to parliament. Needless to say, the question of affirmative action measures was greatly debated but it was also made clear that quotas were not a panacea, and that other measures were necessary - ranging from changing mentalities, to enhancing women's capacities, to providing financial support to women candidates. It was also clear that improving women's participation in politics would entail improving a far larger framework of rights and combating poverty, HIV/AIDS and violence of many kinds.

While the question of increasing women's presence in parliaments remains essential, it is just as important to ensure that parliaments have the capacity to address gender issues. On that subject, recommendations were made regarding the establishment of parliamentary committees on gender equality and the development of an environment supportive of women in parliaments, with

gender-sensitive standing orders, rules and codes of conduct, and with the development of family-friendly working hours.

The two tiered approach developed during the meeting, that is to say: (1) assisting women in making it to Parliament and (2) strengthening Parliament's capacity in defending gender equality issues, is an approach which the IPU follows as well in its own work programme.

It is important to support women in their endeavour to take part in politics and decision-making processes. In many cases, women face an additional challenge than just electors' scrutiny. They have to address their own fears, often their lack of confidence, experience, and support and overcome them. They have to seek the support of their families and challenge stereotypes that exclude women from the public sphere. They have to gain campaign skills, develop their leadership potential and build support in their communities and constituencies. Women also need to be aware of the challenge ahead and what their role should be as representatives of the people.

Aware of the challenges faced by women running for election, the IPU was very glad to organise in cooperation with the Supreme Council for Women of Bahrain and with the support of the British Embassy, a two-day training seminar this September for women candidates in the upcoming 2006 elections. Some 60 women candidates got together for an exchange of views and experiences with members of parliaments and experts from the United Kingdom, Kenya, and Morocco.

The seminar aimed to provide women candidates with a composite picture of their role as future representatives, dwelling in particular on the concrete ways of carrying out an electoral campaign and the unique challenges women candidates may face in a political environment traditionally dominated by men.

Although women parliamentarians are still a small minority in the Arab region, there are encouraging signs of a gradual shift toward greater inclusiveness of women in politics. Today women parliamentarians in the Arab world account for more than 8% of MPs in the region - a record never reached before. Bahrain offers a wonderful example of this transformation. At the first elections in 2002, there were only eight women candidates for the Lower House and none of them made it into office. The larger number of women candidates for next year's election increases the chances that some of them will be elected for the first time in the history of their country. There is room for hope.

But the presence of women is not enough to ensure that parliaments take into account both women and men's needs on an equal basis. As part of its work aimed at engendering political processes, the IPU organized this September a regional seminar on *Parliament and the budgetary process, including from a gender perspective*. Organized jointly with the Legislative Assembly of EI

Salvador and UNIFEM, the seminar brought together parliamentarians from Latin American countries to debate ways and means to strengthen their role in the budgetary process and to develop gender-sensitive budgets. Accountability and transparency mechanisms were discussed, as were concrete measures to ensure that national budgets take into account both the needs and contributions of men and women on an equal footing. Addressing women's concerns and needs through the budgetary process is not only a matter of social and economic fairness but also a way of increasing the overall effectiveness of public expenditures.

Support to women in decision-making processes remains one of the IPU's priorities. In view of the upcoming 50th session of the CSW which will address this very question, the IPU is preparing yet another parliamentary event to contribute to debates in New York. This will be complemented by the production of a survey on men and women parliamentarians' contribution to the promotion of gender equality.

Lastly, allow me to end with some positive news. The IPU will be holding its 113th Assembly starting next Monday. For the first time ever, more than 30% of parliamentarians in attendance will be women. We are actually expecting 170 women accounting for 32% of participants. With the growing presence of women at the IPU we have noticed a change in our organization's work and priorities. It is this same change that we hope to achieve in Parliaments worldwide. It is democracy in the making.

Thank you.