



# INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

General Assembly Thematic Debate on the Promotion of  
Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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Madam President,

Thank you for giving the Inter-Parliamentary Union the opportunity to take part in this important debate on the promotion of gender equality and on women's empowerment.

A key measure of women's empowerment in society at large is their participation in politics. A quick look at the IPU's statistics of women in politics over the past ten years gives ground for cautious optimism.

- In 1995, women accounted for 11.3% of parliamentarians worldwide. Today they represent nearly 17% of legislators – that is a gain of 50%.
- In 1995, Sweden topped the ranking of women in parliament. Today Rwanda is in the lead with nearly 49%.
- In 1995, just five parliaments had reached a 30% representation of women. Today there are 19.
- In 1995 there were 24 women presiding officers of parliament. Today there are 35.

All in all, the gradual progress over the past ten years is fairly encouraging. But we are far from parity. If current rates of progress continue, the Beijing Platform for Action target of 30 per cent women in parliament will not be reached until 2025, and parity would have to wait 50 more years.

But this global increase does in fact conceal significant contrasts from region to region. The Nordic countries continue to lead the field with the highest number of women in Parliament. In 2006, their regional average rose to an all time record of nearly 41%. They are followed by the Americas that have reached a 20% average of women in parliament.

In contrast, women have continued to be the least adequately represented in the parliaments of the Arab States and the Pacific Island States. There is however some progress to report in the Arab States, much of which is attributable to stronger political will in favour of women's participation in politics. Men and women voted for the first time in the United Arab Emirates in 2006; women stood for election for the first time in Kuwait; and in Bahrain a woman was elected to the Lower House of Parliament for the first time. Gains for women in these countries brought the average for this region to a high of 8.6 per cent in 2006.

Madam President,

What these figures tell us is that women continue to face persistent challenges to their participation in politics. These are many and varied. They include cultural challenges, unsupportive family and personal situations, competitive political party politics, lack of financing for campaigning, lack of training, and the deterrent of the environment of politics itself.

These many challenges have prompted parliaments and political parties to explore ways to increase women's access to parliament. As a result, several countries have implemented candidate quotas and other special measures to guarantee a minimum presence of women.

There are around 90 countries with their own types of electoral quotas. Experience has shown though that quotas are just a trigger and must be supplemented with other measures, such as training or awareness raising campaigns.

All in all, the overall increase in the number of women in decision-making bodies has been the result of strong political will; the adoption of electoral quotas and reserved seats; a sustained women's movement and political party commitment at the national level.

Madam President,

The first challenge for women in politics is gaining access to decision making foras. The second challenge is making a difference.

Indeed, women's political participation is not only a question of numbers. It is also a question of efficiency and ensuring that women who have made it to decision-making positions are afforded the opportunity to participate and make a difference.

Once women enter politics, they are faced with many new challenges. Parliament is traditionally a male-oriented domain where the rules and practices have been written by men. Transforming parliament into a gender-sensitive environment and ensuring that gender is mainstreamed throughout the legislature is an on-going challenge. We therefore need to continue to pay close attention to the functioning and structures of parliament.

Madam President,

The empowerment of women and their participation in decision-making processes is regarded by many as a necessity if not a priority. It is not only a question of rights but a question of effective and representative political functioning: a parliament's action is enhanced when it benefits from the input of both men and women.

The IPU works for the strengthening of parliamentary democracy. In so doing, it has placed particular focus on the question of gender equality in politics.

We pursue three objectives in this field: (1) increasing the number of women in parliament; (2) supporting women parliamentarians' input into the work of parliament; (3) and enhancing parliament's capacity to address and defend women's rights and equality between men and women.

The IPU supports actors on the ground, by working directly with women and political parties, by providing training to women candidates seeking election and those already in parliaments, and by setting up technical assistance projects. We are committed to pursuing our action in this field to support change in favor of gender equality in politics.

Looking to the future, we will continue to monitor and track changes, highlighting progress and challenges faced by women in politics, and hope to share with you a more encouraging picture in 2008.