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Parliaments for Gender Equality: Priorities for Beijing +20 and beyond

The Parliamentary meeting on the occasion of the 59th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, jointly organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, brought together close to 200 members of parliament from some 40 countries to discuss the theme ***Parliaments for Gender Equality: Priorities for Beijing +20 and beyond***.

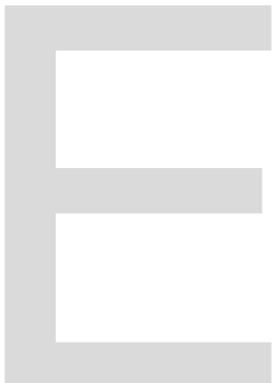
This report reflects the main findings of the Parliamentary meeting with regard to the role of parliaments in accelerating implementation of the Beijing Commitments, addressing remaining challenges and setting the post-Beijing priorities.

The parliamentary meeting observed that while much progress had been made since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, no country had yet achieved gender equality at all levels or in all areas. Challenges persisted in all countries at multiple levels, including unequal power relations, discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes, financial constraints, and growing conservative and extremist resistance to women's and girls' human rights.

Parliaments had a key role to play to help overcome those challenges and accelerate gender equality. Parliament's role was crucial not only to consolidate gender equality through strong legal frameworks, but also to transform the formal rights established by law into substantive rights, in order to make a real difference in women's lives and society as a whole. Efforts in that regard depended on parliaments' ability to act as a role model for society, changing engrained attitudes and addressing negative stereotypes. Parliaments must effectively use their oversight and budgetary functions to ensure that laws were implemented and enforced. Those objectives were more likely to be achieved if strong partnerships could be formed within parliament and between parliament and other stakeholders.

Accelerating gender equality through the law

"Achieving gender equality will require full respect for women's rights, equal participation by women in leadership positions, and strong parliaments and democratic governance."
Martin Chungong, Secretary General, IPU



Participants agreed that gender equality must be enshrined in strong legal frameworks if formal rights were to be established. All of the 166 countries that had reported on their implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had repealed or amended laws to eliminate discrimination and had passed new legislation to redress gender inequalities and eliminate violence against women and girls.

Despite those efforts, many policy areas, including family law and sexual reproduction, had not yet received adequate attention. Passing laws in those areas, especially when cultural and religious norms were at odds with those laws, could pose a challenge for parliaments. Furthermore, the pursuit of such legislation could sometimes be politically detrimental to champions of gender equality. Those challenges to the advancement of gender equality and discriminatory attitudes existed in developing and developed countries alike.

Testimonies were given by many participants of parliamentary efforts to pass such controversial laws. Kenya had changed its laws to allow women to own land and acquire loans. Indonesia had passed a culturally challenging Domestic Violence Act and was debating a Gender Equality Bill. Jordan had been the first country in the Middle East region to adopt a law on violence against women. Morocco had passed laws to enhance the rights of working mothers, increase the legal age of marriage, and allow consensual divorce. Canada had adopted a set of laws to address violence against women, especially within the immigrant community. Germany had set standards requiring the large companies to appoint women to 30 per cent of the seats on their non-executive boards, starting in 2016.

Several factors strengthened the ability of parliamentary champions to pass laws against the odds created by cultural norms. First, the increasing number of women parliamentarians allowed for stronger strategic alliances between women in parliament. As the share of parliamentary seats taken by women had grown from 11.3 per cent in 1995 to 22.1 per cent in 2015, women parliamentarians had become better equipped to advocate the discussion of gender-related issues through women's parliamentary caucuses and national and international forums.

Second, participants observed that the number of gender-related laws passed in recent years showed that partnerships between female and male parliamentarians had deepened, owing to the realization that gender equality was not a zero-sum game, but rather something from which the whole of society could benefit. Campaigns such as South Africa's "Not in My Name" campaign further contributed to awareness of the need for men and women to work together. Despite the many developments in that regard, men and boys should be made more aware of the benefits of gender equality for all. Ultimately, more men and boys must become role models for gender equality.

Third, partnership with civil society had helped parliamentary champions of gender equality to effectively pursue legislation. A well-resourced and autonomous feminist civil society was one of the main predictors for strong gender equality policies. Participants reported on civil society's efforts to help women candidates win seats, especially in countries where there were no measures in place to ensure a minimum level of female representation in parliament. Civil society organizations could also provide evidence of the need and potential impact of legislation, to garner support in parliament. They were well equipped to collect disaggregated data, which contributed to finding effective solutions and allowed for a targeted policy approach. They could also help to ensure that laws were in line with international and regional mechanisms. In some instances, however, where civil society was not able to fulfill its potential to provide support and added-value, civil society organizations needed greater support to act in an effective, transparent, accountable and effective manner.

Implementation and enforcement of laws: transforming formal rights into substantive rights

Participants concurred that for women's formal rights to be turned into substantive rights, laws were not enough: policies must be implemented and enforced.

Efforts to achieve gender equality required effective State infrastructures, which must be financed. Parliaments, through their budgetary function, were responsible for allocating the necessary funds for the implementation and enforcement of policies. Data generation was a particular area in which investment was crucial: qualitative and quantitative data were necessary to identify gaps in policy implementation and assess the impact of policies on different groups of women. Those data were also important to show the link between gender equality and the betterment of society as a whole.

Allocating funds for projects related to gender equality was a difficult balancing act for many parliaments, especially given the lingering effects of the global economic crisis. Parliaments must therefore also re-examine their role in revenue generation through tax laws and ensuring that businesses lived up to their most important social responsibility of paying adequate taxes.

“There is a need for strong States in order to go from projects to policies.”
Nicole Ameline, Former Chairperson of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Member of Parliament, France

Governments must be held accountable for their actions regarding gender equality at the national and international levels. At the national level, parliamentary oversight was the State’s strongest accountability mechanism. Parliaments should work in tandem with civil society organizations to oversee and evaluate government action. Civil society organizations were well equipped to monitor the impact of that action on different sectors of society and the performance of officials in the law enforcement and judicial sectors. They could also help to audit budgets.

“The realization of substantive rights requires a multiplicity of voices through an autonomous civil society, a strong State, and an effective parliament.”
Shahrashoub Razavi, Chief, Research and Data Section, UN Women

Of the several important accountability mechanisms for States in place at the international level, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was among the most effective, as it allowed for an ongoing and structured dialogue with States on their progress towards gender equality. States were encouraged to involve parliaments and civil society in the compilation of their reports to the Committee. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on promoting the political participation of women in all aspects of peace and security was another important mechanism providing a platform for States to allocate funding for gender equality.

Mechanisms of accountability for non-State actors, however, remained weak. Those actors, which included multinational corporations, often used practices that exacerbated gender inequalities. They also undermined gender equality efforts through tax evasion and by encouraging governments to lower taxes. Governments had thus far failed to establish global mechanisms to ensure that those actors upheld their responsibilities to the countries in which they operated. Parliaments had a responsibility to exert pressure on their governments to demand such accountability mechanisms at the global level.

“In Rwanda, 60 percent of MPs are women and we have the support of men parliamentarians. We pass the laws that we want to pass. The real challenge lies in our relationship with civil society where the patriarchal culture still reigns strong.”
Member of Parliament, Rwanda

Representatives agreed that other stakeholders could help parliamentarians reach out to the general population, and shared their experiences with regard to the ways in which civil society organizations informed and educated the general population about policies and specific laws, described the role of the media in spreading the word, and the impact of celebrities in garnering support for change.

Transforming society to overcome negative attitudes and stereotypes

“The normative landscape has been changed, but attitudes that laws are supposed to affect have not: the stereotypes remain, male dominant culture remains and women’s skills are underutilized.”
Dr. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngucka, Executive, Director, UN Women

The fact of passing laws on women’s rights had not yet generated tangible change in societal attitudes and stereotypes. As a mirror of society, parliaments must be role models for gender equality and demonstrate the positive contributions made by women. Parliaments could also play an important role in changing attitudes both from the top down, through their legislative function, and from the bottom up through their constituent work.

Gender-sensitive parliaments that embodied gender equality and had the power to defend gender equality through women’s representation in parliament, partnerships, and effective parliamentary structures, were a role model for society. They had the potential to change engrained attitudes and stereotypes, and could give young women incentives to take the lead.

Few parliaments had achieved gender parity as a true reflection of society. Parliaments must therefore continue to work towards gender equality within their own ranks. In the past two decades, as a result of political commitment and robust policies, such as quota and electoral systems that facilitated the election of women, parliaments had doubled the share of seats held by women. That said, developments in that regard had slowed, with the number of parliamentary seats held by women increasing by only 0.3 percentage points in 2014, which was cause for concern.

Numbers alone were not enough. Women parliamentarians must also be given leadership roles in parliament, for example as speaker or as chairperson of parliamentary committees. They should hold positions that were not just tied to issues traditionally associated with women's role in society, such as family or education, but also in other areas affecting society as a whole, such as budget and finance. Placing women in those positions would not only increase the chances of mainstreaming gender issues at all levels of parliamentary work but would also help to make women in leadership roles the norm. Women who took leadership positions would become role models for others and would thus contribute to preparing the next generation of leaders.

"Women in leading positions need to become the norm. Women need to appear strategically, with a voice, and on every level."
Farah Mohamed, CEO, G(irls)20

Parliaments could use their legislative function to ensure that women in leadership roles in the public and private sectors became the norm. Worldwide, 93 per cent of elected heads of State, 82 per cent of government ministers and 85 per cent of corporate executives were men. Parliaments could set quotas for women's participation on the boards of private corporations. Several parliaments had taken such measures, and the results demonstrated the positive impact of quota systems in the corporate sector. Similar measures could be considered for the media, where women still held a small proportion of decision-making positions. Parliaments could also exert pressure on governments to place more women in executive leadership roles.

"Holding women back does not only hold back women but society in its entirety. Those with privilege are willing to give power away if they feel it is not a zero-sum game, but that sacrifices will pay off for everyone."
Gavin Shuker, Member of Parliament, United Kingdom

The top-down approach to changing attitudes must be complemented with efforts from the bottom up. Parliamentarians were well equipped to talk to their constituents about issues related to gender equality. They were also well placed to communicate with local and religious leaders to address incongruent messages of local and national laws.

Under-representation of women in the international sphere

Women must be adequately represented in international organizations to ensure gender mainstreaming in international policies. Many of the challenges discussed at the international level, including climate change and water, had a significant impact on women and may require different or additional solutions.

As at the national level, women's representation at the international level should reflect women's diversity: marginalized women, including representatives of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, must be given access to decision-making processes. The example of the United Nations showed that even where there was the political will to include marginalized groups in decision making, lack of funding prevented those initiatives from being effective. Parliaments should therefore exert pressure on their governments to provide the necessary funding for marginalized women to participate in decision-making processes at the global level.

“We need to mentor young and marginalized women and let rural and young women claim their place at the United Nations.”

Hon. Margaret Mensah-Williams, Vice President of the National Council and President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians

The fact that only a few women held leadership positions in international organizations, in turn led to entrenched negative attitudes and stereotypes. That situation must be rectified.

Recommendations

The meeting issued the following recommendations:

- parliaments should continue their efforts to increase the number of women parliamentarians in order to reach parity as soon as possible;
- parliaments should ensure that women take leadership roles within parliament, use their legislative functions to impose quota systems in the private sector and exert pressure on governments to demand greater representation of women within national government and international organizations;
- parliamentary gender champions should build partnerships with a variety of stakeholders in and outside parliament, including female parliamentarians, male parliamentarians, civil society, and the media;
- parliaments should allocate adequate resources and help generate revenues through re-evaluating tax systems, in order to implement and enforce laws and policies to achieve gender equality; and
- parliaments should be more effectively involved in international decision-making processes to ensure greater accountability at the global level, and should advocate, in particular, representation of women, especially marginalized women, in international decision-making.