



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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134th IPU Assembly

Lusaka (Zambia), 19 - 23 March 2016



Standing Committee on
Democracy and Human Rights

C-III/134/4-Inf.1
24 February 2016

The freedom of women to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference: Building partnerships between men and women to achieve this objective

Interactive debate

Monday, 21 March 2016
9.30 a.m. - 12.30 p.m.

The IPU has long recognized that there can be no true democracy without the full and equal participation of men and women in all political processes. This principle is at the heart of the IPU's Universal Declaration on Democracy and underpins all of the Organization's work.

Meanwhile, States' obligations to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women to participate in political processes are recognized in a number of international instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs).

Women's full participation in political processes leads to better decision-making and better societies, for the benefit of all – men and women alike. However, progress toward full participation is painstakingly slow. Even today, only 22 per cent of parliamentarians are women.

The responsibility for progress has traditionally been placed on the shoulders of women. Discourses, rightly or wrongly so, have emphasised the need for “women to vote for women” or “women to support women”. The IPU, in the outcome document of its 131st Assembly, has recognized that men and women share the responsibility:

“Achieving gender equality and ending violence against women is the responsibility of both men and women. The potential is there, and men are part and parcel of the solution; they should take an active part in the debate and stand up for women's rights. The silent majority of non-violent men must speak out now and assume their responsibilities alongside women”.

The Standing Committee on Democracy and Human Rights has decided to prepare a resolution that will give concrete guidance on forming partnerships between men and women to ensure that women are free to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference.

The debate at the 134th Assembly will enable parliamentarians to share good practices in building effective partnerships between men and women, and to provide suggestions for the resolution that will be debated at the 135th Assembly in October 2016.

#IPU134

The measures required to increase women's political participation are widely known. They include strong political commitment, robust policies such as quotas and electoral systems that facilitate the election of women. Yet such measures must also address the legal, societal and cultural barriers that limit the freedom of women to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference.

In many societies, legal discriminations against women persist, including those affecting financial autonomy and freedom of movement, thus limiting women's capacity to take part in political processes. Gender norms and traditional values frequently still associate women with the private sphere of home and family, and men with the public sphere of the politics and the economy.

Challenges to entrenched discrimination are often met with resistance. Women's greater inclusion in politics has been accompanied by discrimination and acts of pressure, threats, harassment and violence aimed at preventing or restricting their political participation as voters and candidates in elections, as well as their ability to carry out their public or political mandate for which they have been chosen.

The debate at the 134th Assembly is expected to focus on three main barriers: entrenched social and cultural resistance to women's inclusion and participation in the political arena; political parties, which remain the main gatekeepers for women's access to running as candidates, campaign funding, endorsements and leadership positions; and the increasing level of harassment, intimidation and violence that women have encountered as voters, candidates, members and leaders of political parties, elected leaders, MPs, community leaders or advocates.

Parliamentarians will be invited to discuss the following key questions:

- What examples exist of effective partnerships between men and women in challenging harmful social and cultural mindsets and discriminatory practices? How did these partnerships come into existence, how do they work and what have they achieved?
- Which policies have proved to be effective in increasing women's political participation, especially among young people?
- How to build and maintain support for women's political participation among political parties?
- What resistance has been observed to efforts to increase women's political participation and how can it be overcome?
- As parliamentarians, what actions can you take to ensure that electoral processes and public and political life are safe and free from violence against women?
- In parliament, what specific solutions and strategies should be adopted to ensure that the institution is a safe and secure place for both women and men and, in particular, to prevent and address any sexist attitudes, sexual harassment and gender-based violent acts?