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Report on the Parity debate on *Parliamentary oversight and political will*

Tuesday 20 October 2015

This, the first parity debate held by the IPU, was opened by Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams (Namibia) on behalf of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, and moderated by Ms. Marija Lugaric (Croatia). The panel comprised five senior parliamentarians: Mr. Peter Katjavivi, Speaker of the National Assembly (Namibia), Ms. Fawzia Koofi (Afghanistan), Mr. Philippe Mahoux (Belgium), Ms. Pia Cayetano (Philippines) and Mr. Juan Pablo Letelier (Chile). More than 100 delegates attended, with 22 countries contributing comments from the floor.

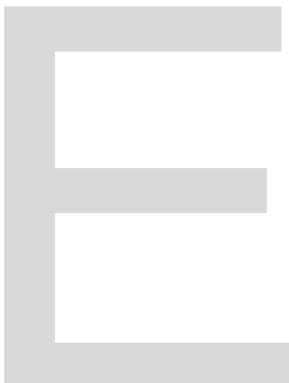
The debate will contribute to the second IPU-UNDP Global Parliamentary Report on *Parliament's power to hold government to account: Realities and perspectives on oversight*.

The moderator first invited the panelists to comment on key questions about the responsibility of parliamentarians for carrying out oversight, the level of citizen demand and input to oversight, and the degree of priority accorded to oversight of gender equality.

Namibia noted that oversight is the responsibility of all parliamentarians, not just those from the opposition. In practice, the personal interests and priorities of individual parliamentarians are perhaps the main determinants of their oversight activities. Chile raised the question of what parliamentarians do with the information they receive, and how accountable parliamentarians are for their oversight work.

The exercise of oversight is more effective when it is systematic and coordinated. Parliamentary rules that establish the role and power of parliamentarians, including from the opposition, to call government to account are necessary. Afghanistan observed that government ministers often perceive parliamentary oversight to be a personal attack, and that it is difficult to establish a constructive exchange. Clearly established "rules of the game" help to mitigate problems such as personalization of the oversight function and conflictual relations between parliament and the executive.

Oversight is strongly shaped by the particular political systems and institutional frameworks. The relationship between parliamentarians and Ministers is very different depending on the political system. In countries with parliamentary systems of government, Ministers are also members of parliament and therefore have very frequent exchanges with their parliamentary colleagues. In those with presidential systems of government, the relationship is different, with less direct contact but also, perhaps, a greater freedom to criticize the government. Meanwhile, upper and lower chambers often have different oversight roles and responsibilities.



Citizens place greater value on parliamentary oversight that raises issues that are of direct concern to them. Chile reported that citizens tend to take a personal view, valuing oversight of those government functions that deliver public goods and services, such as housing policy or pension benefits. In the Philippines, parliamentarians work closely with civil society organizations, who have a powerful voice in both demanding and supporting parliamentary oversight and follow-up of specific issues.

While, nominally, male and female parliamentarians share responsibility for oversight of progress towards gender equality, women parliamentarians are still widely expected to take the lead. It is not unknown for male parliamentarians who speak out in favour of gender equality to be derided by their male colleagues. Furthermore, the initiatives and demands of women parliamentarians may be treated differently than those of their male colleagues. Much depends on overall awareness in parliament of the gender dimension. Much work remains to be done to combat gender stereotypes and discrimination that persist in society.

The debate was then opened to the floor, from which a wide range of views and perspectives were offered.

Oversight may be a more systematic feature of parliaments that have a long experience of democracy. Some countries have stronger and more sophisticated oversight mechanisms than others. Parliamentarians from Bahrain and Namibia said the reality of oversight in new democracies should be acknowledged. In some countries, the ruling party may not value parliamentary oversight, or may not see an interest in collaborating on it. In Jordan, the strength of the majority party makes it difficult for the weaker parties in opposition to call government to account. Equatorial Guinea stressed the importance of ministerial collaboration with parliamentary oversight.

Institutional capacity is essential. Under Rwanda's organic law on parliamentary oversight, the Prime Minister must inform both parliamentary chambers of the key strategies and reports of every ministry, within eight days of decisions being made. In Kenya, select committees use their power to summon business leaders, for example, to provide evidence. Bangladesh emphasized the value of calling on academic and other expertise to supplement parliamentary resources. India identified access to research, support and capability as crucial to being able to cross-check government responses to oversight demands.

In Ecuador, part of the wider political project is to consolidate the power of citizens. In Zimbabwe, where women's representation is strong, a lack of resources, slow alignment of laws with the constitution and a lack of legal knowledge regarding gender issues are constraints on parliamentary oversight of gender equality.

The relative strength of political parties has a significant impact on how oversight takes place. When opposition parties are fragmented, this limits their potential to hold the government to account effectively. Working across party lines, with support from women's caucuses, can sometimes achieve results that might not otherwise be possible. Parties in government can themselves create procedures that allow for effective oversight to take place. In Japan, for example, the ruling party instigated the open screening of the budget, with 20-30 per cent of the screening committee being female parliamentarians.

Civil society has a central role in monitoring the government's programme. India, Ecuador, the Philippines and Tunisia all attested to the critical importance of parliamentarians having strong links with civil society. In Namibia, standing committees engage directly with stakeholders in their communities before tabling reports and recommendations in parliament. In Zambia, oversight of gender parity is mostly initiated by women parliamentarians supported by women's caucuses and gender activists in civil society. Botswana, supported by Namibia, made a plea for parliamentarians to speak out about the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. In this context, the UK noted that the mandate of its new Committee for Women and Equalities also covers LGBT rights.

The media play a critical role in holding government to account. Bahrain stressed that countries need a free and pluralist media to enforce and enhance transparency in government. It is through the mass media that many citizens are made aware of what parliamentarians do. The media sometimes disseminate parliament's oversight demands and government responses. Local media are vitally important to democracy, articulating the needs of ordinary citizens and providing information at community level.

By drawing attention to certain issues, the media stimulate oversight and accountability. Parliamentarians often give priority to the political issues of the day, particularly when they receive a lot of media attention. Yet, by influencing which issues are taken up in parliament, the media may divert attention away from other issues which may be more significant. India identified a real challenge in parliamentary business often being overshadowed by crises that tend to dominate media attention. Pressure from civil society helps to ensure that parliamentarians play their oversight role by following up on issues over time, even if they are not in the media spotlight.

Social media are increasingly significant and can make a great difference in holding government to account. Many parliamentarians rely on social media to bring issues to their attention. In the Philippines – surely not uniquely – it took some time before older MPs began to listen to the voices of the younger generation through social media. In Namibia, social media are greatly valued by parliamentarians – parliament is not a static institution, and innovation is required to ensure that parliaments can respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of citizens.

The fact that women parliamentarians are still outnumbered by men in a large majority of countries impacts on their oversight work. A gender-based division of tasks persists; women parliamentarians are frequently assigned to 'soft' policy areas such as children, health and education, for example. Women are perceived by some men as lacking credibility when questioning matters in portfolios such as finance, defence and intelligence. These gender stereotypes are slow to change.

There are particular obstacles to calling governments to account in such portfolios. In Tunisia, where women are well represented in parliament and there is overwhelming popular support for the new democratic constitution, it is difficult for parliamentarians to have access to state intelligence (e.g. to question the national strategy to combat terrorism). Bangladesh identified the need for training and capacity-building of women parliamentarians in areas such as defence and intelligence.

Gender equality cannot be achieved without freedom and peace. In Afghanistan, where war denied women the freedom to have education and work for many years, the power of social media provides alternative channels for oversight. Empowering women in the political sphere is instrumental in effecting oversight of government and a key condition of ensuring progress towards gender equality. Bahrain stated that it is critical that women enjoy the full range of fundamental rights, including the right to be well educated. Mexico noted that, if structural change is to come about, men must cede space to women.