



Gender Equality: Making a Difference through Parliament



New York, 1 March 2006
One-day parliamentary meeting on the occasion of the 50th
Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

FINAL REPORT

This parliamentary event at United Nations Headquarters was organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW) on the occasion of the 50th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Inaugural session

Senator Joan Fraser (Canada), President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians, welcomed the participants. Noting that the meeting was being attended by 180 participants from 64 parliaments, including for the first time that of Iraq, she explained that its objective was to contribute to the deliberations of the United Nations (UN) on the theme of equal participation of men and women in decision-making at all levels. She expressed her pleasure in once again chairing the parliamentary event on the occasion of the CSW and welcomed the excellent partnership that the IPU maintains with UNDAW.

Ms. Margareth Mensah-Williams (Namibia), Vice-President of the IPU Executive Committee, reported that its President, Mr. Pier Ferdinando Casini, was unfortunately unable to attend owing to very heavy responsibilities in his own country, and had asked her to convey his very best wishes for a successful meeting.

It gave her great pleasure to see so many parliamentarians present, attesting to the commitment that members of parliament, men as well as women, had to the promotion of gender equality. Being a member of Parliament was no easy job, but was a calling that women are fully prepared to heed. Unfortunately, in much of the world, women wishing to assume leadership roles had to face obstacles that men seldom encountered, whether cultural, social or economic. However, the picture was beginning to show some positive signs. More than 16 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide in March 2006 were women, a level never reached before, although progress was still not fast enough. The challenge for women now was to find ways to continue increasing and supporting women's participation in politics, while at the same time finding ways to ensure that parliament as an institution and its members played their role in promoting gender quality. That required the involvement of both men and women, working in partnership.

Ms. Mensah-Williams also highlighted the importance of the collaboration that the IPU had enjoyed with UNDAW over several years and looked forward to continued and enhanced partnership in the future.

Ms. Carolyn Hannan, Director of UNDAW, welcoming the distinguished participants from all regions of the world, thanked them for their commitment to such an important topic. She expressed her appreciation for the excellent and long-standing collaboration between her Division and the IPU, and drew attention to the importance of the work of the IPU's Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians.

Since its establishment in 1946, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) had given priority to increasing women's political participation. It had been instrumental in the establishment of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1952. At its 49th session, in 2005, the Commission carried out the ten-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Responses received from governments, and data collected by the IPU, indicated that despite political recognition of the fundamental right of women and men to participate in public life, the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality in decision-making spheres remained wide. The pace of change was still far too slow. Only 20 countries had reached 30 per cent representation of women in parliament, which had been established as a target for 2005.

It was encouraging that a number of post-conflict countries had recognized the importance of including women in reconstruction, writing their new constitutions in such a way as to ensure women's participation in new democratic institutions. As a result Burundi, Eritrea, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Timor-Leste and Uganda appeared in the top 30 countries with regard to women's representation in legislative bodies, averaging between 25 and 30 per cent, and Rwanda currently had the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world. It was important to ensure that those gains were maintained and improved upon.

The IPU already played a critical role in promoting women's participation in parliaments, collecting and disseminating statistics on their representation, and providing an excellent example of accountability for gender equality in its own procedures. At the national level, parliamentarians could significantly assist in promoting and monitoring implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as the gender-sensitive implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. Increasing women's representation in parliaments had been identified as one of the indicators for achieving Goal Three: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women. Action by parliaments was critical to the removal of constraints on women's involvement in decision-making, such as illiteracy, poverty, stereotypical practices, and violence.

Parliaments could also make an important contribution to implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including through reviewing the national reports to be submitted to the CEDAW Committee and monitoring the follow-up to the Committee's recommendations following its consideration of the report.

The day's parliamentary event provided an important opportunity to go beyond the issue of increasing women's numerical representation to address the ways in which parliaments could make a difference to gender equality, including through making their own work more gender-sensitive, strengthening the role of male parliamentarians in promoting gender equality and enhancing collaboration with women's groups and networks at all levels.

Session One

Gender Equality: Contribution of parliamentarians

The aim of this session was to provide an overview of the progress and setbacks of women and men in political life and special measures that were being adopted to bolster women's representation. It sought to examine how men and women can work together in partnership for change to affect decision-making positively and the particular contributions that presiding officers of parliaments have made, and can make, in parliament.

Ms. Pippa Norris, Harvard University; Mr. Anders Karlsson, MP, Sweden; Ms. Marie C. Wilson, President, White House Project, Ms. Anne Marie Lizin, President of the Belgian Senate; and Hon. Ntlhoi Motsamai, Speaker of the National Assembly of Lesotho, exchanged views with the parliamentarians.

Women in parliament

Three basic fast-track strategies could be considered to increase significantly the level of women's political participation and parliamentary representation.

The first option is that of reserved seats. Just as in many countries there are reserved positions for ethnic minorities that are underrepresented in parliament, so too can a case be made for having a guarantee, either constitutional or legal, that a certain percentage of seats be set aside in parliament for women. Many of the countries that had adopted that approach had been successful: Rwanda, for example, currently the world leader in terms of women's parliamentary representation, had 30 per cent of its parliamentary seats reserved for women. However, there may be some downsides to this approach, if women gaining their positions under reserved seats were viewed in a different light from those parliamentarians that were elected in open competition. In addition, consideration needed to be given to how the seats were filled, either by appointment or direct or indirect election.

The second option is to establish legislated quotas at the candidate nomination stage - when political parties select their candidates for election. Under this option, every political party is required by statutory law to field a certain percentage of women candidates. This option has been tried widely, although its effectiveness seems to vary from country to country. The desired effect cannot always be achieved simply by passing a law: there has to be good-faith compliance and political will, effective penalties and sanctions for non-compliance and a placement mandate system must be introduced so that women are not simply placed at the bottom of the party list with little chance of election.

The importance of these two strategies is that they make it possible to change the country's entire electoral landscape, and parliamentary composition, at a stroke. The third option differs in that the quota is implemented on a voluntary basis by political parties. These quotas allow political parties to make a voluntary choice to field a particular proportion of women candidates. This option is quite widespread in established or consolidating democracies, and can be effective provided that it is genuinely implemented in practice. It is important to guard against token gestures, with party leaders proclaiming quotas for women candidates that are never actually going to be filled.

Partnership in parliament: Women and men working for change

The panelists examined the situation of some specific countries with regard to women's parliamentary representation. Sweden, for example, has one of the most gender-equal parliaments in the world, with almost 45 per cent of its members being women, who are represented in all areas. Sweden does not have a specific parliamentary committee on gender equality, but instead uses the mainstreaming principle, with each of the committees being responsible for gender equality within its own particular field.

In the United States, while it was the goal of an organisation such as the White House Project to get women into positions of leadership, the intention was not to replace men, but for women to lead alongside men and change society's options in cooperation with them. If the world was to survive terrorism, wars, threats of nuclear attack, plagues and famines, it needs to make use of all of its resources, and that includes those of its women leaders.

Essentially, it is necessary to change people's perception of women as leaders. There needs to be large numbers of them so that it becomes a perfectly normal phenomenon that a country's leader is a woman. But numbers are not enough. Research has shown that women's political ambition has to be encouraged. When men enter politics, it has been found that a third of them already envisaged themselves in office, while the same number of women were waiting for encouragement. Men could provide that encouragement and urge them to take the next step and aim for leadership. Men need to recognize the skills that women bring to the political arena, rather than always insisting on being centre-stage themselves.

Having a large number of women in a parliamentary assembly is not enough to make it more receptive to the issue of equality between the sexes: the challenge lies in raising the awareness of the whole political elite. In the Scandinavian countries, for example, where the proportion of women in parliament is particularly high, one of the key factors responsible for their influence on decision-making is the role of the women's factions in the political parties and the organization of networks of women in politics outside of party affiliations.

Education and health are often priorities for women who are traditionally the instigators of social policies aimed at reconciling work and family. But the involvement of women in areas that are less 'soft' is also on the increase. Women should not be confined to specific areas but should approach all sectors with their own sensitivity. If a new political issue is given to elected women, men should understand that it is because of women's particular experience of life and approach to problems, which often differs from that of men.

How women Speakers of parliament are affecting change

The meeting also heard a report on the outcome of the meeting of women Speakers of parliament on *Gender Equality on the Legislative Agenda*, convened by the IPU at UN headquarters on 27 February 2006. The debates had centered around two main themes: mechanisms to promote the equal participation of women in parliaments, and the impact of women on politics, including the specific role of women Speakers. In addressing the first theme, the meeting had deliberated at length issues such as the impact of electoral systems, the effect of implementing temporary special measures such as quotas, and the responsibilities and critical role of political parties. Additionally, a key concern had been the challenge of reconciling the public and private lives of women and balancing family and political responsibilities.

Regarding the second theme, on whether or not women made an impact on politics, the meeting had pondered on the legitimacy of the question, given that it was never asked of men. It was therefore decided that perhaps a more pertinent question would be how women make an impact on politics. A thorough scrutiny of the subject revealed that women's participation had indeed gone a long way in changing the political landscape. The changes brought by women parliamentarians and in particular women Speakers operated on different levels. Firstly, and most superficially, women were instrumental in transforming the actual physical premises to make them more gender-friendly and better adapted to the needs of working women with families. Secondly, women were known to bring about changes in institutional culture, using their influence to instill practices and procedures that make parliaments better adapted to women members. Thirdly, women are able to change the institutional discourse to make it reflect the society that they want to create, bringing about changes in language that had originated in more patriarchal thinking. It was noted that women Speakers not only act as role models, but also help to raise the visibility of parliament in the public domain, and should use the opportunities accorded by their status to voice opinions in fora beyond parliament.

General discussion

In the ensuing debate, many delegates reported on what was happening in their countries with regard to women's parliamentary participation, giving accounts of progress made and achievements realized, but also of setbacks encountered. Several also described the progress made in areas such as criminalizing violence against women or sexual harassment, assigning shared responsibilities for the raising of families, the provision of education for girls, and so on.

The conclusions from the debate included the following:

- In some countries, even though there had been a large increase in the number of women parliamentarians, there is often a perception that women are still not ready for a representative role in society. It was a struggle for them to be accepted, and there needs to be more education and training in order for women to be accepted as legitimate political representatives and to be assertive of their rights.
- There was a parallel need identified to educate men in how to accept women parliamentarians as their equals. In countries where the culture is one of keeping women at home, without rights of their own, or where the quality traditionally most prized in women is modesty, the situation is very difficult to change. Fundamentally, the attitude of men must be changed, even in such simple aspects as learning to stop their conversations when a woman legislator rises to speak.
- Once women have been economically empowered, especially in village cultures, there has been a tremendous change in their situation. Economically empowered women are better able to compel respect from men. But in some countries it is difficult to bring about this situation.
- In some countries it is also apparent that while there have been increases in the participation rates of women in secondary and tertiary studies, with women often obtaining better results than men, and all

careers are open to them, these countries continue to maintain low rates of female parliamentary participation, especially in Europe.

- In some countries, an obstacle to women's parliamentary participation is that the political parties themselves are not democratic, and women are impeded in their efforts to stand as candidates.
- Another way to increase women's participation is to waive the fees that are normally due for registering as a political candidate in countries where it is prohibitively high. In some countries political parties receive funds from the government in proportion to the number of women elected.
- One way to increase women's participation in politics is by enhancing their awareness of the benefits of forming networks. They can also be beneficial to women in traditionally male-dominated professions such as medicine and law. Also important is the provision of support and mentoring to young women who are considering a career in politics.
- When using fast-track measures such as quotas to increase women's representation in parliament, care has to be exercised to ensure that male parliamentarians do not become defensive. One possible remedy might be through electoral or institutional reform, such as increasing the number of seats in the legislature, so that those men already holding a seat would not feel threatened. The fight for greater representation for women is not a fight against men, but a struggle for gender equality.
- Some cautioned that women elected through quota systems may not end up gaining the respect that they deserve because they have not been elected in free and/or open seats. There is the risk of a double standard that works to the disadvantage of women elected via a quota mechanism.
- Where a country decides not to use quotas, there can be advantages in publicizing gender imbalances on candidates' lists submitted by political parties for election. It was reported that the parties with a serious gender imbalance tended to do badly in the elections once their unequal approach was made public.
- Even a simple measure such as a change in the working hours of parliamentarians, to enable women parliamentarians to combine work and family duties, would assist in the participation of women in political life and would also make men aware of the sacrifices that women are called upon to make in traditional scenarios.
- In Iceland, a new law on paternity leave had brought about surprisingly wide-ranging changes in the way that men and women regard each other.
- Even the countries that are in the vanguard of women's representation have room for improvement, and much can be learned through studying other countries, and examining what has worked there and what has not been successful.

Guest speakers

Mr. Jan Eliasson, President of the UN General Assembly, said that he was very pleased to see so many familiar colleagues and so many active parliamentarians. It is absolutely crucial to reach better results in the area of women and political decision-making, and thus it is encouraging that the number of parliaments achieving the targeted 30 per cent level of women had grown fourfold in the past 10 years.

As the legendary Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme had said, what was referred to as the emancipation of women was, equally, the emancipation of men, through tapping the enormous resources and potential of women. One of the most important aspects was the need to educate girls, which would bring enormous multiplier effects.

Mr. Eliasson was pleased to see notable progress in several post-conflict countries, and in particular that Liberia had elected Africa's first woman Head of State - Ms. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Liberia had become stable enough to hold elections thanks to the work of the United Nations peace-keepers. It was important to remember achievements like that at a time when the Organization was under attack.

Also important was spreading the word about what was being done in the area of United Nations reform. One important aspect of that has been the Peace-Building Commission. There were still issues to be resolved about its composition, but the political decision to create the Commission had been taken. The United Nations now had a process for dealing with post-conflict countries. It was important that UN missions stayed in a country to assist with reconciliation and reconstruction efforts. Of the conflicts that had ended over the past 20 years, fighting had resumed in 50 per cent of them. Good post-conflict work, known as

peacebuilding, could in fact be preventive of future conflicts and the UN had a major role to play in that regard.

Another challenge was the Human Rights Council. Mr. Eliasson's proposal had received strong support from many countries, and reservations from some others. There was a need to preserve the human rights dimension in the United Nations. It should always be remembered that the first words of the United Nations Charter were "We the peoples...". The Organization existed to serve people: the victims, those in distress, conflict, disease or poverty. The human rights dimension represented that moral and ethical dimension, the soul of the United Nations.

With all of the endeavours ahead, he was grateful for the support of countries' representation in New York and their governments at home. Parliamentarians could be very helpful in fulfilling people's expectations of the United Nations. There was a need to keep a cool head, at a time of turmoil and mistrust, both global and national. With the distinction between international and domestic issues tending to disappear, it had to be realized that effective international cooperation was in the national interest, and in that cooperation, a decisive contribution could be made by the untapped potential of women.

Mrs. Carmen María Gallardo Hernández, Chairperson of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, said that the meeting was an excellent opportunity to contribute to the thinking on the egalitarian participation of women and men in the decision-making process at all levels. It was clear that there was still a long way to go before efforts could be relaxed in this area, and it was thus essential to continue empowering women's leadership.

The debates taking place within the context of the 50th session of the Commission on the Status of Women had repeatedly stressed the importance of cooperative work between men and women as strategic allies for change. Parliamentary fora, both national and international, where laws were directed towards promoting the gender perspective, and equality between men and women, could be instituted and supported. It is also necessary to strengthen the dialogue between civil society organizations, in particular women's groups, and national parliaments, the IPU and the UN system.

Within the context of the process of UN reform, the Heads of State and Government have stressed the importance of strengthening the active participation of parliamentarians in the various topics of the UN agenda. Promotion of the gender perspective and the advancement of women are topics of common interest that can make an effective difference in people's collective wellbeing. Thus there needs to be reflection on the institutional changes required to adapt working methods to the ever more pressing challenges of the participation of women in the decision-making processes at all levels.

Session two

Making a Difference: The Role of Parliamentary Mechanisms

This session sought to identify which parliamentary mechanisms can facilitate a different approach to decision-making in parliament in order to enhance a gender equality perspective. It focused on how parliaments are becoming more gender-sensitive, including by developing institutional structures to support change such as specialized bodies and committees on gender equality, women's caucuses and working with civil society and political parties.

Senator Mónica Xavier, Uruguay; Ms. Khofifah Indar Parawansa, MP, Indonesia, and Ms. Britt Bohlin Ohlsson, MP, Sweden, exchanged views with the parliamentarians.

Parliamentary committees for gender equality

One very effective mechanism for increasing women's political participation is the parliamentary committee for gender equality. In Uruguay, for example, such a committee has arisen out of the joint work that women politicians undertook following the re-establishment of democracy, regardless of party affiliation of the members. That has resulted in the establishment of a network of politicians who take a common position on matters of concern to them as women, while retaining their individual positions in all other areas of their

political activity. Out of this background of trust, gender solidarity, and determination to mainstream a gender perspective in all areas of political activity has grown a parliamentary committee whose task is to analyse and monitor the movement towards gender equality in the country.

Of fundamental importance was defining a strategy and the thematic areas to be implemented during the legislative period. In tandem, the women legislators from both chambers, and from all political orientations, resolved to concentrate as a first step on the areas of domestic violence, sexual harassment and child abuse. Following passage of the Domestic Violence Act in 2002, they set up an observatory to monitor its implementation. It was their view that approval of laws was not the end of the job: legislators, both male and female, still had to take responsibility for seeing that laws were correctly applied and that the intention of those framing the legislation was respected. Consequently, they have promoted training workshops for legislators, the judiciary and members of various areas of the executive, so as to instill a shared vision of topics as complex as those of domestic violence, sexual harassment and child abuse. It was certain that much work was still needed, but they had succeeded in modifying certain provisions of the Penal Code regarding child abuse. Currently, the legislators are working on a law covering the creation of a national register of parents in default of child support.

Another area of work that the women legislators have taken on is that of education, culture and the media. They have succeeded in having sex-education introduced into schools from a very early stage and have ensured that the curriculum now incorporates a gender perspective. They are also working with the media to reduce or eliminate advertising that makes use of sexual stereotypes. In the labour market, they are working to remove some of the situations of really striking discrimination in the content and remuneration of women's work. They have also paid particular attention to the serious issues of poverty in female-headed households. In the most recent legislative session, they have worked to bring sexual and reproductive rights and health into the political agenda, and although they have not been successful with the draft law that has been submitted, at least a start had been made on discussion of the topic.

Naturally, achieving success in all of these areas requires wide-ranging support. The gender equality committee maintains an ongoing dialogue with women who have attained positions of importance in local government, thus building up their networks of women politicians that could sustain the promotion of equality of rights and opportunities.

In the preceding legislative session there has been discussion of the level of women's political participation, and in the current session a draft law on quotas will be submitted. A voluntary approach has been tried, but without success: it appears that the political parties are not prepared to voluntarily increase the proportion of women candidates on their lists if that means that some men would lose their seats. Consequently, it seems that the quota approach is the only way forward, with the electoral authorities taking on responsibility for monitoring implementation, in order to guarantee to women the seats that the law assigned them.

One essential aspect of the strategy of any parliamentary commission dealing with gender equality is taking an inter-institutional and multidisciplinary approach. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs has assumed the responsibility of monitoring Uruguay's progress regarding commitments made under international conventions and treaties, calling on the expertise of civil society, international cooperation bodies, women parliamentarians and women from the executive branch. It is noteworthy that the composition of the gender equality committee has evolved from six women and one man to six women and three men. Since membership is voluntary, it seems that the efforts of the committee to bring about gender equality are attracting growing support from men.

Women's parliamentary caucuses and civil society contributions

Women's caucuses could be another effective way of increasing women's influence in parliament. In Indonesia, for example, the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus played an important role in bringing about reforms in the electoral law under which, since 2004, all parties are urged to have 30 per cent women among their nominated candidates.

In the late 1990s, Indonesia started its reform process. As part of the reform process, three women parliamentarians created the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus, while the Ministry of Women's

Empowerment supported the development of the Caucus of Women in Politics. Both caucuses focused on enhancing the position of women in politics as an important area of the decision-making process. In the year 2000, civil society organizations collaborated with women legislators to bring about an improvement in women's role and status by ensuring that gender equality considerations were incorporated wherever possible in the amendments being made to the constitution. When the law on political parties had been enacted in 2002 the women's groups had not been successful in enforcing a stipulation of 30 per cent representation for women, but they had then worked to influence the drafting of the election law in 2003. In that process, the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus had represented the legislative branch in urging the drafting commission to adjust the text so as to accommodate such a provision.

At the same time, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment from the executive branch had facilitated the initiative of many civil society organizations and the Caucus of Women in Politics to join forces and become pressure groups. Moreover, some women leaders had persuaded their party executive boards to support the requirement for each political party to list a minimum of 30 per cent women among their nominated candidates. To ensure that the whole process could be monitored, the meeting schedule of the drafting commission had been distributed to all interested groups. As a result, the spectator area on the second floor of the parliament building was generally filled by women activists or representatives of women's organizations. Becoming known as the 'Balcony Group,' they had exerted effective pressure on the parliamentarians, and as a result the stipulation of 30 per cent representation for women became law. That has been an important first step, but further strengthening is needed before the next election, in 2009.

Gender sensitive parliaments

Gender equality is not measured only in quantitative terms, but is a process that calls for continued and qualitative evaluation. Countries that have made a good showing in terms of women's presence in parliament have often had to struggle to achieve it. Sweden, for example, is arguably at the forefront when it comes to gender equality, with the second-best female representation in the world, but it had not always been such a rosy picture. The Swedish parliament had approved equal suffrage for women and men in 1919, but female representation had increased very slowly over the years: by 1950, women still held only about 10 per cent of parliamentary seats. It was not until the 1970s that the representation of women in parliament had started to increase. In the 1980s their position was further strengthened, but a dramatic setback was seen in the 1991 elections as the female representation in parliament had dropped.

This situation had provoked women to take action. The women's organization within the political parties had called for more female representatives, and as a result most parties had adopted either quotas or recommendations on female representation in their party lists. In 1994, the Swedish Government had stated that a gender equality perspective should permeate all areas of Government policy, since when the level of female representation in parliament had been steady at around 45 per cent.

The factors that have led to this high level of women's participation include the existence of powerful and assertive women's organizations, both party-related and independent; the early development of a welfare state with extensive child care that created greater opportunities for women to take paid employment; and various economic incentives for women to enter the labour market.

But even now, with a relatively good showing, Sweden still has work to do. In November 2003, representatives of the Social Democratic Party had listed a series of proposals on improving gender equality in parliament. Sweden has indeed reached a high numerical level of female MPs, but that did not automatically result in real equality. Consequently, a working group was established within the Swedish parliament with the mission of looking at "gender equality beyond figures" and presenting proposals on how to improve the situation.

The proposals presented in the report covered a wide range of areas and were intended to help gender mainstreaming. For example, the suggestion that parliament should launch a specific gender equality programme for every term of office in order to monitor and increase activities in this field; or the call for organization of seminars for the parliamentary standing committees where working methods, cultural aspects, the role of the committee chairpersons and other issues could be discussed. Another issue was the need for

more research regarding parliamentary work from a gender perspective, and to that end cooperation with universities was to be intensified. More attention was also to be paid to the family situation of MPs when drawing up schedules or travel plans.

Promoting gender equality is not an exclusive responsibility on women to conform to male values. It is about building new relationships based on equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men. If gender equality is to become a reality in all areas and at all levels of society, including parliament, both men and women must be willing to change and be actively involved.

General discussion

In the ensuing debate, many delegates reported on the mechanisms being adopted in their countries to enhance the participation of women in decision-making processes. These included action plans; the mainstreaming approach; ministries for women's affairs; gender focal points or desks within all government ministries; and specific bodies or committees for gender equality. In some cases the latter were concurrent committees, in which each member of the standing committee on women's rights and gender equality also belonged to another topical committee such as finance, education, and so on. An alternative approach was for the standing committee to have the right and duty of monitoring all the other committees, to ascertain that they had taken gender mainstreaming into account. Opinions were divided on the benefits of having a specific commission to take care of women's rights. Several delegations thought that while that approach might be needed in young democracies, they should strive towards the position exemplified by Sweden, where gender mainstreaming is the responsibility of each committee in its own sphere.

The conclusions from the debate included the following:

- Whatever the particular mechanism selected, of overriding importance is finding the political will to make a change.
- The most 'woman-friendly' electoral systems can still be defeated by deep-seated stereotypes about male and female roles. Women's advancement can also be hindered by gender stereotypes in mass media and advertising, which can throw doubt on the perception of women's suitability for leadership roles.
- One useful function of women's caucuses is to recommend women for important political positions as they became vacant, regardless of party affiliation. It is advantageous to have as many women strategically placed as possible, because women's concerns about certain issues – health, education, children's wellbeing, prevention of trafficking and prostitution – transcends political differences.
- In a number of countries, women's caucuses and civil society organizations are running 50-50 campaigns, seeking complete parity between men and women representatives. The caucus can also have a mentoring function.
- International organizations have an important role to play. The IPU's Gender Partnership Group has a programme of dialogue with various countries where the status of women in public life is in need of enhancement and support.
- In order to achieve their goals, women have to work from a basis in their country's traditions, and it is highly undesirable for countries with a completely foreign culture to attempt to impose their own specific vision of what democracy is.
- Parliamentarians' work in enhancing women's representation does not end when the relevant laws are passed: there is a need for an ongoing process of monitoring implementation and of ensuring that achievements to date are maintained.

The Parliamentary session finished with closing remarks from Senator Fraser who thanked all the participants for their thoughtful and interesting interventions. Senator Fraser provided an oral report on the conclusions of the meeting in the general debate of the CSW on 3 March 2006.