



## The Role of Parliaments in promoting access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology

A parliamentary event organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women on the occasion of the 55<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women  
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### SUMMARY OF DEBATES

#### Opening

**Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams (Namibia), Vice-President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians**, welcomed the participants, explaining that the topics for the day's discussions had been chosen because there was still much to be done to ensure equal access for girls to education, including in science and technology. There was also a need to ensure gender equality in science careers and in access to information and communication technologies. Members of parliament had to contribute to that global effort. As legislators, they should ensure that the legal frameworks in their country promoted girls' education; as opinion leaders, they could address stereotypes and change mentalities. In particular, women parliamentarians needed to be role models for the next generation of women, encouraging them to pursue areas that had traditionally been male-dominated. The discussions would be a contribution to the work of the Commission on the Status of Women, and she urged all the participants to guarantee follow-up to that work by taking its recommendations home and ensuring that they were implemented.

#### Keynote address

**Ms. Michelle Bachelet, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women**, gave the following address on the work of UN Women:

"One concern has dominated the debate leading up to the creation of UN Women: the 'implementation gap.' Great commitments on gender equality are made at the international level, and yet they have failed to turn into sufficient action and results. In many cases, we know what to do to empower women and girls, and yet progress remains disappointingly slow.

You, as Members of Parliament, know better than anyone how issues are prioritized, how funding is allocated, how legislative amendments survive or disappear. You know how difficult it is to put gender equality at the top of political agenda, and to keep it there.

Your interest in the activities of the Commission on the Status of Women can help bring us closer to bridging the implementation gap, and ensuring that the agreements made at United Nations Headquarters have an impact at the national level.

Let me first say a few words about UN Women, since this is the first opportunity for the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women to meet and interact with a critical group of stakeholders – parliamentarians – and with a longstanding champion of gender equality and partner – the IPU.

UN Women is the first new organization established within the UN system in many years. It brings together the mandates and functions of the four former offices for women's issues that you have worked with in the past. UN Women will continue to support the intergovernmental processes on gender equality and the empowerment of women, within the broad framework of follow-up to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, including CEDAW and related United Nations instruments. At the same time, UN Women will assist countries to deliver on their commitments for concrete changes in the lives of women and girls.

I am determined that UN Women will be a catalyst for change. UN Women's vision is one where women and men have equal rights and opportunities, and the principles of gender

equality and women's empowerment are firmly integrated in the United Nations development, human rights, and peace and security agendas. UN Women will focus on five thematic priorities in its operational activities:

- 1) **Expanding women's voice, leadership and participation**, working with partners to close the gaps in women's leadership and participation in different sectors and to demonstrate the benefits of such leadership for society as a whole – this is an area where we look forward to close cooperation with the IPU. Globally, 19% of all parliamentarians are women. Of the 192 countries in the world, 19 are headed by women. We must work to raise these numbers.
- 2) **Ending violence against women** by enabling States to set up the mechanisms needed to formulate and enforce laws, policies and services that protect women and girls, promoting the involvement of men and boys in preventing violence.
- 3) **Strengthening implementation of the women's peace and security agenda**, through women's full participation in conflict resolution and peace processes, gender-responsive early-warning, protection from sexual violence and redress for its survivors in accordance with UN resolutions. Last year, we marked the 10-year anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325, on women, peace and security, but progress in this area is still very slow. UN Women will shortly be starting a three-year programme to enhance the capacity of women as mediators. In some contexts where women will not be accepted as mediators, we must have male leaders who are prepared to sit down with women, listen to their concerns and bring those concerns to the negotiating table.
- 4) **Enhancing women's economic empowerment** is particularly important in the context of the global economic crisis. Every crisis impacts women in very specific ways, but those specificities are not usually taken into consideration. UN Women will work with governments and multilateral partners to ensure the full realization of women's economic security and rights, including social protection and access to productive assets, and to correct the distorted situation in which, globally, women are responsible for 60% of agricultural work, but own only 2% of agricultural land.
- 5) **Making gender equality priorities central to national, local and sectoral planning and budgeting**: working with partners, UN Women will support national capacities in evidence-based planning, budgeting and statistics. At present, it is difficult to know whether women are progressing or not, owing to a lack of gender-disaggregated data. This must be improved

This year, the Commission on the Status of Women considers as its priority theme, "Access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work".

This topic touches on issues of great importance, particularly in the current global economic context. As the world economy is increasingly knowledge-driven, an educated workforce is key to the future of all countries. To prepare for that future, we must make sure that women and girls have access to quality education and training throughout their lives. A quality education is one that imparts relevant knowledge and skills to students, but also one that empowers them to explore diverse study and career options, regardless of their sex. There is a long-standing and erroneous perception of mathematics and science as domains for men, for instance, and this has a negative impact on girls' performance and interest in these disciplines, deterring many of them from considering scientific and technical careers. We must tackle such gender stereotypes, if we are to end horizontal segregation in the labour force and increase women's economic opportunities and income.

*The doctor or the engineer was a man; the woman was his sexy assistant in a short skirt.*

Michelle Bachelet, on stereotypes in school books.

The outcome of the Commission will include a set of policy recommendations, which guide a range of stakeholders to take specific action to fully implement commitments made on gender equality. The text is negotiated by Member States and adopted by consensus, giving a sense of ownership. I urge you to take the agreed conclusions back with you to your respective countries, and to make use of them. Please also share them with your colleagues, and let them know that these are the actions that your country committed to undertake.

Parliamentarians, by the very nature of their function, have the opportunity to provide tremendous leadership in ending discrimination, overcoming stereotypes and galvanizing society towards greater equality and empowerment of women. I appeal to you to support budgetary allocations to ministries for women's issues. I appeal to you, also, to be aware of the gender aspects of the everyday business of government, because those aspects are everywhere: that road that your Ministry of Public Works is considering: if it is built, will it improve or worsen women's access from the fields to the market?

I look forward to your support and to working with you."

In the interactive session that followed, questions were asked and comments made by representatives of Burkina Faso, Chile, Croatia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Lesotho, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. Given how few women, relatively speaking, were in positions of authority worldwide, Ms. Bachelet was asked why UN Women could not simply demand that all countries set a quota of, for example, 30% of female participation in Parliament. While the inclusion in the five priorities of violence against women was welcomed, it was noted that the scourge continued even though many States had ratified instruments outlawing it, and she was asked what UN Women intended to do to remedy that shortcoming, and how parliamentarians could help.

Some representatives asked her to explain the importance she attached to an evidence-based approach, while others asked how UN Women would provide support to women in parliament, to parliamentary committees on women, and to women's NGOS. A further question was how the activities of UN Women would be funded and whether the economic and financial crisis was having an impact on its budget.

She was asked whether UN Women had any plans to develop indicators to measure the progress of women towards equality, in particular making those indicators available to parliaments to help them fulfil their monitoring function. In reference to her third priority, the strengthening of peace and security for women in the world, she was asked whether that would be restricted to post-conflict situations, or whether it would also cover the suffering arising from organized crime, trafficking in persons and the drugs trade, for example in certain countries in Latin America.

Several delegates pointed out that the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women always resulted in many promises, the so-called "agreed conclusions", but that the rhetoric was not translated into practice.

**Ms. Bachelet** began her response by saying that all the necessary work could not be done by UN Women alone. Everyone with an interest in women's welfare had to play their part. UN

**We are all UN Women.**

Michelle Bachelet

Women would not replace governments, parliaments or women's organizations. And it was important to remember that there was still a long way to go and the desired outcomes would not be achieved overnight. Rather than attempting to do it alone, UN

Women would work through cooperative networks and partnerships. Already it was in discussion with the various United Nations regional economic commissions, searching for synergies. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, had a gender observatory whose findings would be vital to the work of UN Women.

She clarified, too, that the five priorities she had defined were those at the global level; more locally, the emphasis would change from country to country and from region to region, depending on women's situations. In some places, other United Nations agencies were already working in fields of concern to UN Women – such as UNFPA on population issues or UNAIDS on HIV/AIDS – and there would be no need for UN Women to go into those countries and duplicate the work already being done.

But while the United Nations and its agencies were very concerned to better the lot of women, in this area as in others they were under a constraint: their work had to be demand-driven. As a Member State organization, the United Nations – except in the case of the Security Council in certain circumstances – could act only at the invitation of a Member State. Thus one of its agencies could not simply demand that every country establish a certain mandatory level of women's representation. However, at the same time all Member States had already committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, Goal 3 of which related to the empowerment of women, measured in part by the percentage of women in national parliaments. She pointed out, too, that 27 countries had already achieved women's parliamentary representation of 30% or more, all but five having done so by way of adopting quota laws.

In the area of violence against women, one major aspect was the campaign UNiTE to End Violence against Women, which sought to involve men and boys in the cause, through spreading the message that real men do not harm women. It was necessary, too, to incorporate that message in boys' early education, since in many cases, future wife beaters would simply be repeating a pattern they had seen in childhood, of abuse of women by men. The initial education of such male children needed to instil the concept of respect for others and non-violent resolution of disputes.

The importance of an evidence-based approach was that it enabled data-based arguments to be made. If the budgetary authorities objected that an undertaking such as reducing violence against women would be too costly, it would be important to have the data to show the contrasting cost of doing nothing. Violence against women in the United States, for example, had been costed at US\$ 5.8 billion a year, in terms of health costs, lost productivity, and so on.

Assistance to women in politics, and to bodies supporting them, would be provided by the Fund for Gender Equality, to which entities – governments, parliamentarians, NGOs – could apply for project funding. Indeed, the majority of projects funded so far had been political in nature.

When the General Assembly had approved the creation of UN Women, there had been talk of a budget of US\$ 500 million. Even that figure was probably not going to be enough, but in any event it was only a target. The real budget she actually had was about US\$ 190 million. The shortfall was doubtless in part due to the impact of the economic crisis, although the first country to donate had been Spain, despite its having an economic and financial crisis of its own. She hoped that all parliamentarians would urge their governments to allocate a sufficiency of resources to UN Women.

With regard to indicators, she noted that on the occasion of the 10-year anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325, UN Women had been given the task of developing indicators to track the progress of the peace and security agenda. That work would start shortly. The primary responsibility of UN Women in peace and security was in the post-conflict arena, with the lead UN agency on organized crime being the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, but UN Women – particularly because 70% of trafficking victims were women and girls – would be cooperating with and supporting UNODC.

Concerning the work of the Commission on the Status of Women, she pointed out that the agreed conclusions represented a target to be achieved, settled on by consensus. To turn those conclusions into reality, all needed to do their part. A very important responsibility fell to

parliamentarians, namely voting the laws and the budgets that could make those agreed conclusions a reality. Only through that role of parliamentarians could the gap between recommendations and practice, the implementation gap, be reduced and ultimately eliminated.

At present, UN Women was working under a 100-day plan, with a small budget, but in June she would present its longer-term strategic plan to the Executive Board. She hoped that all parliamentarians would urge their governments to lend their voices in support of the strategic plan.

**Ms. Mensah-Williams** thanked Ms. Bachelet for her inspiring presentation and committed the IPU to support the work of UN Women.

### **Theme 1: Girls' education – a prerequisite to access to science and technology**

Ms. GULSER CORAT, DIRECTOR, DIVISION FOR GENDER EQUALITY, UNESCO, PROVIDED AN OVERALL INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT, MR. MEVLÜT ÇAVUŞOĞLU, PRESIDENT OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE, CONTRIBUTED SOME THOUGHTS ON THE SITUATION IN EUROPE, AND MS. NTLHOI MOTSAMAI, SPEAKER OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF LESOTHO, DESCRIBED THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING OF LESOTHO.

While it is true that gender disparities in education have been narrowing in most regions of the world, with growing numbers of girls attending school where they have traditionally not done so, the overall educational picture still represents a waste of resources of many kinds. There are two issues: firstly the persistent gender inequalities that deny many girls access to even a basic education and secondly the disparities specific to science and technology, which remain statistically masculine disciplines, failing to attract competent female students. To enhance the percentage of girls studying those fields, two factors are fundamental: appropriate teaching materials and good curriculum design. For the first, research has found that school textbooks depict both males and females in gender-stereotyped ways, constraining girls' and boys' visions of who they are and what they can become. In the second area, poor quality science and technology education fails to provide girls with the skills needed in the job market. Female students who do go into science and technology are less likely to translate their qualifications into employment; those who do are less likely to reach the highest levels than men and are often paid less. Overall only 29% of the world's researchers are women, although there are striking disparities in the numbers from region to region, hinting at the sociocultural underpinnings of these inequalities.

*At a global level, women hold over half of university degrees, but only 30% are in sciences or technology.*

But in addition to the need for quality teaching materials and appropriate curriculum design, there is a need to boost girls' confidence in their own ability to tackle science and technology. Here, female science teachers play a crucial role as role models. Teachers also have an important potential for socializing children beyond gender stereotypes, through the attitudes they communicate in the classroom. Families, too, particularly mothers, have a responsibility to alert girls to the possibilities of pursuing education and a career in science and technology.

Over several decades, Europe has made remarkable progress in elaborating a comprehensive legal framework to ensure *de jure* gender equality, including in education. However, it has to be recognized that the gap between what is written in legal texts and what is happening in reality is still very wide. In some countries in the Balkans and in Central and Eastern Europe, the number of girls who drop out of school is on the rise. Where there is parity between boys and girls in enrolment, there is often disparity in quality of education.

All over Europe, in poor rural areas, girls do not complete compulsory education. In many cases, not being able to send all their children to school, some parents give precedence to educating boys. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that girls are used for domestic tasks within the household, which encourages parents not to send them to school. In one of its

recent resolutions, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe identified a number of concrete measures in this respect: firstly, in order to guarantee access to education for all children, particularly girls, States should take over the costs related to their schooling. Secondly and, perhaps more importantly, there has to be change in ways of thinking: good legislation will not make the necessary difference if mentalities – particularly of teachers and parents – do not change radically. In particular, parents should be made more aware of the personal worth of their daughters, and must be persuaded to ensure that household tasks are not disproportionately delegated to girls. Girls need as much time as boys for themselves, for their schoolwork and their personal development. These changes cannot be achieved by institutional means alone. There is a very important human element in the process and it is individuals' shared duty to promote and realize these principles.

In Lesotho, a predominantly rural country, a boy's role has been traditionally defined as preparation for his subsequent duty as breadwinner. From the age of six, as girls began their schooling, boys from rural families became herders of the family's animals. If some boys did start school, many of them then dropped out to seek employment in order to pay for their sisters' schooling. Now, the challenge is that of changing attitudes, bringing boys into the educational mainstream, while at the same time closing the gap for women whose numbers in senior and decision-making positions are not commensurate with the educational advantages they had when young.

The Constitution of Lesotho, adopted at independence in 1966, stipulates that the country shall make primary education compulsory and available to all, and secondary and tertiary education generally available and also accessible to all. This commitment was enshrined in the country's Lesotho Vision 2020 document, adopted in 2000, in partial fulfilment of which free primary education was introduced in the same year.

In 2003, the Government released a policy document whose purposes included that of ensuring full equality of opportunities among women, men, girls and boys. It drew attention, with concern, to the tendency in most schools to sex-stereotype the choice of subjects which boys and girls undertake, thus limiting their capacity to venture into non-traditional careers like medicine and political science for girls and catering and nursing for boys. Consequently the policy document undertook to include gender-sensitive career guidance at all levels of education and to eliminate such sociocultural barriers.

Over a quarter of the entire national budget is currently allocated to the Ministry of Education and Training. At all levels of education, there is gender parity in enrolment, or a slight preponderance of females. However, at the tertiary level, there is still a tendency for enrolment to be dominated by gender-based stereotypes.

In spite of Lesotho's progress in the education and training of women and girls, a number of challenges remain, falling into three broad categories: firstly, socio-economic factors including poverty and the impact of HIV/AIDS; secondly topographical factors arising from Lesotho's harsh terrain; and thirdly physiological factors such as pregnancy and menstruation.

Measures put in place to address these challenges include the introduction of bursaries for orphans and vulnerable children; creation of centres where young children are cared for free of charge while their siblings are in class; construction of more schools and boarding facilities, particularly in the rural areas. At the secondary level, vulnerable children are provided with bursaries and textbooks are issued at a minimal fee; and half-way homes for girls are being built to provide rent-free housing. Additionally, efforts have been made to ensure that all teaching and learning materials are gender-sensitive.

In the subsequent interactive session, contributions were made by representatives from Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chile, Croatia, the Czech Republic, the Dominican Republic, Greece, Hungary, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Namibia, Portugal and the United Kingdom,

Many representatives described the situation of education in their countries. In most cases, while female students were in the numerical majority, particularly at the tertiary level, and despite advances made in so many other areas, students tended to choose their fields of study

***Remain ignorant and you will remain obedient.***

Maria Pia Garavaglia,  
Senator, Italy

on the basis of outmoded and conventional gender-based stereotypes, induced by the expectations of society but having no objective basis in fact. The percentages of female students in science and technology subjects were disproportionately low, and in some cases were actually

dropping. Particularly in the wake of the economic crisis, there was a danger that governments' spending on education would go down, and a further danger that as families struggled to make ends meet, they would increasingly pull their girls out of education. Suggestions were sought from the panelists and from other participants on how to improve the situation.

There was general agreement that in all countries, primary education should be compulsory for girls and boys, and that ideally it should be free. If a country cannot afford free education for all children, preference should be given to making it free for girls. Non-tuition costs of education, such as for books, uniforms and transportation, often represent a significant barrier to girls' basic education, and should be eliminated – it was pointless to have a legal right to education if the education itself was not affordable. It was suggested that consideration should be given to making science compulsory. If girls are compelled to study at least elementary science, they may find to their surprise that they have an aptitude for it and enjoy it.

The conclusions and recommendations that emerged from the debate included the following:

- Providing a relevant and stimulating curriculum is the essential first step in raising the number of girls who choose to study science and technology. Research has shown that girls learn best in hands-on experiments, and in being shown how what they are learning fits into the bigger picture,
- Additionally, girls should be taught how the sciences can contribute to females' more nurturing nature: for example, how engineering and hydraulics can serve to bring irrigation to a waterless desert village.
- Learning of scientific theory by rote, often the norm in developing countries, should be discouraged. Developed countries that have created more innovative teaching methods can help by exporting those ideas and materials.
- Efforts must be made to attract more female science teachers, including by incentives such as bursaries. They can be key role models for girls perhaps unsure of their ability to tackle science and technology.
- Female students can also be motivated by prestigious awards, such as the UNESCO-L'Oréal prize for Women in Science.
- Even when gender equality is supposedly assured, teaching and learning materials must be carefully scrutinized for stereotype-reinforcing images and language.
- In addition to imaginative teaching, non-stereotyped career guidance must be given, at all ages.
- Teachers should be made aware of the particular difficulties which can be experienced by young immigrant girls and girls from disadvantaged ethnic minorities.
- In the search for funding, the focus should not only be on government. The business community should meet its corporate social responsibilities by establishing scholarships for girls' education.

- Particularly in Africa, when foreign companies are granted exploration rights for countries' rich natural resources, a part of the agreement should be an obligation on the company to invest in the education of women and girls in the country.

## **Theme 2: Women's employment in science and technology**

Ms. JANE STEWART, DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION OFFICE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK, PROVIDED AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ILO.

Ms. Stewart gave a brief presentation of the history of the International Labour Organization, pointing out that it predated the United Nations, and that its very first conference had women's issues on the agenda. It is a tripartite organization, bringing together Governments, employers and workers in a joint search for fairness and social justice in the workplace. In the context of women's work, four important ILO conventions can help with policy design: Convention 100, on Equal Remuneration (1951), ratified by 168 countries; Convention 111, on Discrimination (employment and occupation) (1958), ratified by 169 countries; Convention 156, on Workers with Family Responsibilities (1981), ratified by 41 countries; and Convention 183, on Maternity Protection (updated several times, most recent version 2000), ratified by 19 countries. The ILO also produces practical recommendations on how to implement those conventions.

Certain stereotypes apply to the field of women in science and technology, such as that male knowledge is more scientific, analytical and objective, while female knowledge is based on maternal intuition; that science is hard and rigorous while women are irrational and emotional; or that science is a search for power, while women prefer to search for harmony. Over and above these stereotypes, there are some factual negative considerations as women try to enter the science and technology labour market. The gender wage gap is largest in male-dominated occupations, thus when women are employed in scientific or technological fields, they are less likely to have equal pay for work of equal value. The structure of science funding is highly dependent on external grants, which are normally allocated to full-time positions, making access difficult for women seeking part-time work because they have to look after children or parents. Also, work is often performed in laboratories which are physically separated from departments where more women are present, such as administration, thereby further isolating the already few women scientists from these communities of comfort.

*There is a need to turn the culture on its head.*

Jane Stewart

Even where a scientific institution pursues work-life balance policies, this often does not mean that women will rise to the highest positions, since the culture is that high performers are not expected to take advantage of such policies. The ILO is currently researching how these measures, passed in good faith but not having their intended effect, can be amended to allow women to rise to the top.

In the interactive session that followed, questions were asked and comments made by representatives of Angola, Burkina Faso, Chile, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, the Republic of Korea, Jordan, Romania and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean. In most countries, numbers of women working in science and technology are low, and if any improvement can be discerned, it is coming only slowly. It was suggested that because of the stereotypes and other negative factors, women have to outperform men with the same qualifications, in order to be considered for employment. However, there are glimmerings of hope: in Angola, for example, the ministry for science and technology is headed by a woman; in Korea, the Government has introduced a quota system for women's employment in government-funded science and research facilities, and is seeking ways to reduce the burden of their domestic responsibilities.

In most countries, the already-small numbers of women in science and technology drop even further as they begin to have children. There is an obvious need for policies to improve work-life balance, but not only for women. Men, too, have to be given the opportunity for a more harmonious balance between work and the rest of life, something that would incidentally improve women's employment prospects also.

But work on changing the culture has to start earlier: education is fundamental. Quality education leads to decent work for women. Quality education means that there have to be quality teachers, which in turn implies there must be decent work for teachers. Role models are needed, as well as mentors and good men and women teachers who can encourage girls to take up science at a very early age.

The conclusions and recommendations that emerged from the debate included the following:

- Women represent a large competitive reservoir of talent and share the same ambition as men to succeed in their professional lives.
- The underlying culture in science and technology tends to marginalize those who take up any offerings intended to improve work-life balance. Changing this culture will be difficult to achieve
- Stereotypes about the places of men and women in science and technology will have to be demolished – this too will be difficult.

### **Theme 3: How can information and communication technologies (ICTs) support women in politics?**

Ms. PIYOO KOCHAR, COORDINATOR, iKNOW POLITICS, GAVE A PRESENTATION ON THE ONLINE PLATFORM FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS; MR. JEFFREY GRIFFITH, SENIOR ADVISER, GLOBAL CENTRE FOR ICT IN PARLIAMENT, DISCUSSED THE USE THAT PARLIAMENTS WERE MAKING OF ICTs AND MS. MARIJA LUGARIC, MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, CROATIA, DESCRIBED HER OWN EXPERIENCE IN USING SUCH TECHNOLOGIES.

The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics – iKNOW Politics – is an online platform which uses social media tools to connect women in politics, providing access to resources and information in four languages. It also provides a forum for discussion and sharing experiences, as well as expert sections where new entrants into the political arena can pose questions to seasoned politicians and seek their help in finding successful strategies.

As information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become an intrinsic part of so many people's lives, information overload is preventing some people from finding the right information at the time that they need it. iKNOW Politics sets out to meet that need. It also offers access to the most current news about women in politics, using social media to reach out not just to the women themselves but also to those who support them and to the organizations that work with them.

More generally, surveys show that citizens are increasingly using technology to follow the work of their governments and parliaments, thereby participating in the political process. The

*The ideal of the informed legislator has been a goal for hundreds of years and technology is helping us to get closer to achieving it.*

Jeffrey Griffith

expectations of citizens for transparency and accountability are growing, and technology allows parliaments to meet those expectations. Technology not only offers parliamentarians and citizens the means to communicate with one another, but also provides access to information and analysis that are

highly relevant in determining good public policy, provided that members of parliament know where to look for it.

However, when the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament surveyed parliaments' websites, using the "Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites," an international standard developed by the IPU,

it found that, by and large, parliamentary websites are not doing a good job. Fully a third, for example, do not provide the text and status of proposed legislation, and over half do not provide information about the activities of individual parliamentarians. The same survey found that under half of parliaments responding had a majority of members who regularly use e-mail to communicate with citizens, and even fewer are using some of the newer interactive technologies such as social websites. Asked about the difficulties of using electronic media for communicating back and forth, most parliaments replied that there are two main problems: parliamentarians are not sufficiently familiar with the technology, and citizens are not sufficiently familiar with the legislative process.

The Board of the Global Centre has proposed a series of actions to address these problems and to improve the state of technology in legislatures. Having an Internet connection doesn't give citizens a seat at the table, but it gives parliamentarians a tool to get them there more easily.

Technology has special value for women in parliaments, because it is a gender-neutral tool that can help to level the playing field. Providing more access to better information through ICTs helps to empower women, while sharing information with other women parliamentarians through communication tools enhances that power. As a general rule, women do not have as much access to the traditional media as their male colleagues, but using the new technology, they can compete on equal terms.

Compared with traditional means of communication, ICTs allow parliamentarians to spread their message quickly and without investing significant resources. They offer possibilities for horizontal information flow, rather than constraining politicians to work in individual vertical "silos." Audiences are much larger, communication is much faster and the multiplier effect is much bigger. Above all, the cost is very low, which is a major factor as women parliamentarians tend to be under-resourced.

A further advantage is that electoral messages, for example, sent out via ICTs are not subject to any limitations that may be placed on the use of television or radio for campaigning. And the effects of ICTs can be almost instantaneous: it is possible to report on a news event, and for parliamentarians to give their views on it, far more immediately than is possible through the traditional media. Response is fast, too: constituents' opinions or support can be canvassed far faster than by methods such as mailing.

Above all, ICTs allow communication when and where the audience is. Thus parliamentarians can let their constituents know, in detail, what they are doing on the constituents' behalf. And because ICTs have changed traditional one-to-many communication to many-to-many communication, now all voters who choose to make use of ICTs can make their views known, not only to their parliamentary representative but also to their fellow constituents. Of course, that means that some of them will criticize what the parliamentarian is doing; but it also means that other constituents will come to his or her defence, offering support and endorsement. Making oneself known to one's constituents increases one's own accountability and the constituents' loyalty.

In the interactive session that followed, questions were asked and comments made by representatives of Burkina Faso, Chile, Kenya, the Republic of Korea, Jordan, Mexico, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Zambia. Many delegates described the ICT situation in their countries: technical infrastructure, government policies, people's access, and so on. Several described the use that their parliaments, or they themselves, were making of websites and communications networks. The meeting generally agreed that the important point is not the technologies themselves but the access that they offer to knowledge and communication. The ICTs themselves are simply a tool.

Several participants sounded a cautionary note. It was pointed out that work-life balance is very important, and that precisely because ICTs are so easy to use, there is a danger of becoming almost addicted to them. Several warned against dealing with electronic messages

late at night, when correspondents often become abusive. Additionally, people tend to be much more offensive in the seemingly-ephemeral world of e-mail that they would ever be face to face or on paper. From experience, some participants warned about the danger of having platforms penetrated by hackers.

Above all, the use of electronic media is absolutely no substitute for traveling to meet constituents face to face. It is, at best, an adjunct to it, particularly as the audience for electronic communications is self-selecting.

*"..... the risk of becoming a virtual parliamentarian..."*

Several participants from developing countries expressed concerns about how ICTs could be extended to rural women. They are electors also, but few of them will have access to computers, and indeed many of them will be illiterate. In poor countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, even the cheapest mobile phones are not affordable. Further, rural women will scarcely have the time for these communication possibilities, given their already high workload. To reach such constituents through technology, parliamentarians will have to pay for radio space, which in some cases will be more expensive than a personal visit. In some countries, too, more women than men are voters, but if the family has a radio the man takes it with him to work.

In some regions, the commercial communications companies may find it not economically worthwhile to instal the infrastructure, such as antennae, that will be needed. In others, the situation may be even starker: people may have no Internet access simply because they have no electricity. Indeed, a survey by the Global Centre found that from 2008 to 2010 the number of countries reporting that they had reliable 24-hour electricity actually decreased.

There was some concern that ICTs could in fact worsen the trivializing coverage of women politicians in the traditional media, which focused on the fact of their being women, instead of on what they were or were not achieving as parliamentarians. Some participants expressed anxiety about such meaningless coverage being perpetuated on the Internet, with all of their real achievements as parliamentarians being overshadowed by pointless and demeaning reporting. Others, however, countered that the new media, the ICTs, can be used to send instant corrections to constituents of such trivial coverage, or even downright inaccuracies, in the old media.

*All the press wanted was photos of our legs, in short skirts....*

Linah Kilimo, Member of the National Assembly, Kenya

Attention was drawn to the role that social networks had played in the recent upheavals in some countries in the Middle East, although it was also pointed out that without a background of years of genuine grievances, the messages sent via the social networks would not have had such a massive response.

The conclusions and recommendations that emerged from the debate included the following:

- Technology by itself is not enough: what is important is the message. The key challenge is how to use technology to suit the message and the target audience, but the technology itself is only a tool.
- With one of the main impediments to women's participation in politics being financial, ICTs properly utilized can reduce the cost of staying in touch with constituents over large distances.
- However, the use of ICTs is not a substitute for walking around, knocking on doors and meeting people. Paradoxically, though, the ICTs can be very successful at summoning physical meetings.
- If commercial companies will only instal communications infrastructure where it is profitable, the government will have to instal the infrastructure itself or else compel the

companies to do so. Parliamentarians have a role in supporting legislation to that end. In some countries there might be a need for enhanced budgetary support to make these resources available to everyone, from the parliamentarians themselves to their poorest constituents.

- Governments, too, should ensure that technical support is available to parliamentarians to enable them to create, and, even more importantly, to continually update, their web pages. Alternatively, parliamentarians can use the ICTs to engage their volunteer base and find supporters with the necessary expertise to help them with their pages.
- One possibility to help rural women is for governments or NGOs to set up communications centres, staffed by women and open at the times when women can make use of them. Parliamentarians should regard it as part of their challenge to provide that last-mile connectivity.
- The traditional media will concentrate on men, but through the ICTs women parliamentarians can publicize their own achievements.
- Women parliamentarians should claim the online space and use it in whatever ways work for them. If men see women using the new technologies much better than they can, it will shift the balance of power.
- Sometimes there can be too much communication – if advocacy groups overwhelm parliamentarians' offices with thousands of anonymous and identical e-mails, the effect is counterproductive and the messages will be disregarded.
- In countries where the means of communication – be they the family radio, a computer, or just a mobile phone – are owned only by the men in the family, it is the parliamentarians' job to change the rules of the game.

**Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams** summarized the day's discussions, which would be incorporated into the IPU's submission to the Commission on the Status of Women, and thanked the panelists and all who had contributed to a very lively discussion.

