

Empowering rural women: What role for parliamentarians?



A parliamentary event organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union
and UN Women
on the occasion of the 56th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women



29 February 2011, UN Headquarters, New York

SUMMARY OF DEBATES

Opening

Dr. N. Ali Assegaf (Indonesia), President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians, opened the meeting, welcomed the participants and greeted the introductory speakers.

Introductory speeches

Mr. Abdelwahad Radi (Morocco), President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, gave the following address: "The commitment of the IPU and of parliaments to the cause of advancing gender equality has recently been strongly reaffirmed by the member parliaments of our organization, who have made it the second objective of the first strategic direction in the IPU's new Strategy 2012-2017 and a key element of its theme of 'Better parliaments for stronger democracies'. And by better parliaments, in this context we mean parliaments that facilitate women's political participation, parliaments that incorporate gender issues into their work, parliaments that strive to ensure that the rights of women are respected.

As we set about this task, for which we are accountable to all of our fellow-citizens, the combined support of the IPU and of UN Women will be of crucial importance in reaching our objectives as parliaments and parliamentarians.

Today's meeting is devoted to the role of parliaments in empowering rural women. Everywhere in the world, these women play an essential role in their community: farming, fishing, looking after children, caring for family members and doing the household chores. However, their role in the rural economies of the world is not recognized, even though they embody an enormous potential for poverty alleviation and increasing food security. That recognition continues to be hampered by many political, socio-economic and cultural barriers, resulting to a great extent from inequalities between men and women, inequalities which limit rural women's access to the means of production, such as land, finance, technology and training. Rural women are also more severely affected by poverty and illiteracy and by difficulty in accessing essential services such as health care, water and education.

These constraints, added to the weight of social and cultural practice that has caused the public domain to be traditionally the preserve of men, impede rural women's political participation. Their voice is not sufficiently heard in the places where decisions are taken. It is our responsibility as parliamentarians to join in implementing solutions that will enable rural women to rise to the challenges with which they are faced. We have to draw up legislative, political and budgetary measures, which will squarely face the problems of inequity between men and women. We must, for example, regularly examine the legislation and the policies in the agricultural, land ownership and family law spheres, in order to identify and modify the provisions that are discriminatory against women, for example by impeding their access to land ownership, credit and inheritance.

As an illustration, a few years ago in my country of Morocco, we performed an analysis of the budgetary credits allocated to agricultural activities. That study showed that only 9% of women benefited from these credits, even though they represented 39% of the rural labour force. As a consequence of that discovery, Morocco increased by 50% the funding of programmes dedicated to rural women.

When it comes to the strengthening of the political participation of rural women, today around 100 countries have chosen to apply quotas to encourage more balanced participation, at local or higher level. Senegal recently modified its electoral law to introduce male-female parity in the lists of candidates not only for national elections but also for regional and municipal councils. Tanzania has introduced a law that requires the participation of women in the local land administration bodies. Such legal measures are an encouraging first step, but more is needed.

Education and training, economic empowerment and equality of status remain determining factors. It is also necessary to ensure rural women's access to technologies, infrastructures and essential services that will lighten their burden of work so that they will have more time to devote to social and political activities. It is necessary also to mobilize them and allow them to strengthen their capacity to establish their leadership. It is our task as parliamentarians to come up with solutions which we can place at the service of rural women.

I wish us all a successful meeting".

Ms. Michele Bachelet, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, offered the following words: “Since we last met, UN Women has issued our first flagship report on progress of the world's women: In Pursuit of Justice. The report found that in many countries, the rule of law still rules women out. It also found that we can make justice work for women by spearheading legal reform and policy change, by supporting women's legal rights and by increasing the number of women police and judges.

Two major developments dominate the global debate: the transition in the Arab States and the continued financial and economic crisis. In response to these events and to the demands of women, UN Women will place special emphasis this year on expanding women's political participation and leadership, and economic empowerment.

Advancing women's political participation and leadership is an area where the collaboration with IPU and all your Parliaments is crucial. Women's full and equal participation in the political arena is fundamental to democracy and justice, which people are demanding.

When the protests erupted in Tunisia and Tahrir Square, UN Women responded immediately, providing support for women's participation in constitutional reform, elections and political transition. I have travelled four times to the region to meet with women and young people. In September, UN Women brought women leaders from all regions together at the United Nations General Assembly to call for more women leaders in politics worldwide. December saw the adoption of a new resolution that calls on Member States to take concrete steps to increase women's political participation and leadership.

In November, UN Women issued 16 policy steps that should be taken to prevent and end violence against women. Obviously, this work is not something that UN Women can do alone. Collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Union is critical. Our partnership has brought benefits at the global and national levels and we look forward to continued strong collaboration as we move forward. For example, in 2012 UN Women will work with parliaments in 20 countries to amend laws to include gender equality; will organize training sessions in 38 countries on parliamentary and legislative techniques to advance women's political participation; will support training for women candidates in 27 countries; and will support reforms of electoral laws in 39 countries to facilitate the inclusion of women in elections as voters and candidates.

Analysis shows that rural women and girls are the furthest from reaching any of the Millennium Development Goals. They have less access than urban women and girls and than all boys and men to basic social services such as education and health care. Rural girls are twice as likely as girls in urban areas to be forced into child marriage and teenage pregnancy. There is an urgent need to amend or abolish laws and policies that discriminate against women. You, as members of Parliament, can play a decisive role in making sure that laws uphold human rights and gender equality. Being accountable to the people means that decisions of public authorities take into account women's and men's, and girls' and boys' needs and interests equally. Rural women and men, through awareness-raising and outreach programmes, need to be made aware of their rights.

As parliamentarians, you are important implementing allies to UN Women. When the present session of the Commission on the Status of Women ends, I urge you to take its agreed conclusions back to your respective countries, and turn those words into action. UN Women will stand beside you to promote the empowerment of women and gender equality”.

Session 1, Theme 1: Political empowerment of rural women – Rural women’s involvement in the political process

Ms. Winnie Byanima, Director of the UNDP Gender Team, Bureau for Development Policy, gave an overview of challenges faced by rural women in participating in politics, including the important role of political parties. Ms. Lenita Freidenvall, Expert, Labour Market Committee, Parliament of Sweden, contributed some thoughts on what measures can be taken to support rural women’s political participation especially at local level, and Ms. Scheznarda Fernandez, Member of Parliament of Ecuador and Member of the Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians of the IPU, shared her experience in reaching out to rural women and the initiatives her country and parliament had taken to support rural women politically.

Although they are often depicted as such, rural women are not a vulnerable group. In the developing countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia, they are the drivers of economic development and should be recognized as such. They are the backbone of the agricultural sector, producing more than 50% of all food grown worldwide and between 80% and 90% of the food grown in Sub-Saharan Africa. Rural women play a key role in helping their households and communities to achieve food and nutrition security, in generating income and contributing to enterprises that fuel local and global economies.

Engaging rural communities - and rural women in particular - is critical to building inclusive, sustainable development and deepening democracy

Winnie Byanima

Yet despite their considerable contributions, rural women in developing countries face persistent discrimination in access to resources and opportunities, such as credit and the right to own and inherit property. In developing countries for which data are available, only 10% to 20% of all landholders are women. Rural women also have a greater overall workload than men, one that includes a heavy burden of unpaid chores like fetching water and firewood and caring for ailing family members. They have less education and less access to agricultural information and extension services, use less credit and other financial services and are much less likely to purchase inputs such as fertilizers, improved seeds and mechanical equipment.

But empowering rural women requires more than economic opportunities. A woman is empowered when she has not only the ability and the opportunity to earn a livelihood but also the agency and power to take and act on decisions, benefit from her efforts and exercise control over her life and her assets.

The issue of rural women's representation should be placed in the broader context of achieving inclusive democracy. While the drive for greater diversity in government must come from society at large, parliamentarians have an important role to play in bringing this debate to the public agenda. Parliaments can also open doors to women's organizations and provide opportunities for them to bring their issues before parliamentary committees.

Women may have a different view from men on development challenges and it is important to take those differences into account. For example, women and men face different challenges in accessing basic services, which means that they may have different views on the location of facilities such as schools, public roads or community services. Rural women's development priorities may be different from men's: for example, they may prioritize the provision of agriculture extension services or clinics over the building of roads. Parliamentarians need to learn to analyze the national budget from a gender perspective to ensure it is meeting the needs of both women and men. Parliamentarians can demand that the budget law be accompanied by a gender analysis.

Political parties can benefit from taking the needs of rural women into account in their platforms and policies, thereby not only promoting women's participation and gender equality but also gaining politically too. As actors within their respective parties, parliamentarians have an opportunity to bring their parties' attention to how addressing the needs of rural communities, and rural women in particular, can have pay-offs in deepening democracy and promoting sustainable development.

Women's political representation across the world is improving, but too slowly. As a worldwide average, women's representation in parliament stands at 20%, compared with 11.3% in 1995. Thus despite the gains over time only one-fifth of all legislators are women. Only 28 countries have achieved the 30% target for women in decision-making positions set by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Only nine have reached gender balance, defined as being between 40% and 60%.

Traditional attitudes, the lack of education for girls and women and even illiteracy can be major barriers to achieving gender equality in any country, in any society. All such conditions are difficult to alter in the short term. Quotas have become an increasingly popular tool for increasing women's representation in politics, either in the form of legally mandated numbers of reserved seats, or as voluntary party quotas. In order for legal quotas to be effective, rank ordering rules, sanctions for non-compliance and independent monitoring bodies have to be in place. Voluntary quotas set by the political parties have to be governed by transparent and fair rules.

Another element in improving the political participation of women in general and rural women in particular involves capacity-building, including for example training in communication, fund-raising and leadership skills, recruitment strategies and knowledge networks. Efforts have to be made to change attitudes and combat stereotypes. Here the media play an important part, but parliamentarians too can contribute by taking the lead and setting examples.

In addition, elected bodies themselves have to become more gender-sensitive. In its recently published report on gender-sensitive parliaments, the IPU provides tools to parliaments to foster gender equality in their structures, operations and methods. Some of the mechanisms mentioned in this report are provision of child-care facilities in parliaments, regulated meeting hours, avoidance of night sittings, women's caucuses, and so on.

Ecuador has a quota law, which covers women's participation in politics through sequencing and alternating in representation processes with a view to making it mandatory for 50% of the candidates to be women. Any activity that involves a discriminatory process in breach of the right to equal respect for women's rights in the sociopolitical and cultural spheres is penalized under the law. This principle has been enshrined in the new law on elections and political organizations, the Democracy Code, passed by the National Assembly of Ecuador on 27 December 2011 and thus enacted into law. In addition to governing parity between men and women on election lists, the Code sets a number of restrictions on candidate eligibility, for example excluding persons who have committed gender-based violence or who are delinquent in their child support payments. Through the establishment of parish boards in Ecuador, rural women have become political subjects by virtue of being nominated and elected first and foremost because as inhabitants of these localities, they are aware of their specific needs and problems. Women elected by these parish boards have a daunting task, tackling many years of prejudice and bias.

According to statistics published in April 2010, the percentages of positions held by women are 42.1% in the National government; 32.3 % in the National Assembly; 4.8% in the Supreme Court of Justice, 47.3% in the National Court of Justice; 40% in the National Electoral Council; and 57.1% in the Citizen Participation and Social Watch. At the local level, the percentages of women elected were: mayors, 6.3%; prefects, 8.7%; councilors, 28.6%; and parish board spokespersons, 21.9%.

The members of the Parliamentary Group on Women's Rights, together with all women members of parliament, are committed to working to achieve the full enjoyment of rights for the women who account for 51% of the country's population.

In the discussion session that followed, contributions were made by the representatives of Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Canada, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Gambia, Indonesia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Maldives, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, Republic of Korea, South Africa, Spain, Suriname, Turkey, Uganda and Zimbabwe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Participants described the situation in their own countries and the initiatives their governments have taken seeking to enhance the political empowerment of rural women. In many cases, the approach is to enhance the political role of women in general, and then to extend those improvements to the specific category of rural women. Thus the application of quotas, whether imposed by the government or voluntarily adopted by the political parties, increases the chances for all women to achieve elected office. The problem is that all too often rural women are not aware of the opportunities that are open to them. Hence the importance of outreach programmes, workshops, and awareness-raising campaigns, engaging women, teaching them about laws which are relevant to them, giving them the tools to use and getting feedback from them. Rural women, too, should be encouraged to bring their concerns to Parliament. Some countries have an arrangement under which, a number of times a year, Parliament itself moves out from the capital to hold sessions in the countryside, involving rural people in the parliamentary process. Also, when parliamentarians visit their constituents in rural areas, they should make sure to have some time set aside specifically for talking to rural women.

Some countries, including the Republic of Korea and Sweden, have adopted the "zipper" system, in which electoral lists present alternating male and female candidates. A variant is the "zebra" system, in which elected positions have to alternate between the sexes: if the chairperson of a body is a woman, then its vice-chair must be a man, and so on. That system is used in Kenya, Burkina Faso and elsewhere.

Steps are being taken to assist candidates with the costs of running an election campaign. Like the application of quotas, funds might be made available from government, or they might come from the political parties. In some cases the policy is one of strict equality in the funding provided to men and women candidates; in others, in recognition of women's generally less favourable economic position, more funding is provided to women candidates than to men. Likewise, some parliaments, in recognition of the added load of the family responsibilities of women parliamentarians, have limited or abolished late-night sessions.

Some delegates described training opportunities provided in their country to rural women. Some of the training facilities are run by central government, some are financed by international organizations. Their purpose is to impart professional and leadership skills in politics and economics, to promote the advancement of women leaders, and in some cases to train trainers, who will then fan out over the country, disseminating the skills they have acquired.

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

- Information is key. To enhance rural women's political participation, they have to be made aware of what opportunities are open to them. This will require outreach efforts, workshops and awareness-raising campaigns. Training will need to be provided in leadership, decision-making, communication and networking skills, as well as in understanding and using gender-responsive budgeting.
- More statistical information on the situation of rural women in general is needed, covering for example their access to land, and rural to urban migration. One way to obtain that would be through some form of specialized observatory.
- Improving the working conditions of rural women will lead to their having more time available in which they might take up political duties. Such improvements could include the provision of water supply nearer their homes, improved cooking facilities to replace burdensome wood-collecting, providing childcare facilities in the workplace, or improving transportation.
- Many of the enhancements made to women's political participation in general, such as quotas, campaign financing, and consideration of women's additional family and community responsibilities, will automatically also benefit rural women in particular.

- Political parties have a particular responsibility to reach out to rural women and encourage them to stand for election. Often, rural women's involvement in local concerns such as farm-workers' associations or committees on water supply can become the basis for persuading them to stand for formal political office at local level. Subsequently, they can be encouraged to go on to provincial politics and then the national political arena.
- Some categories of rural women have extra burdens to bear. Examples are indigenous women at risk of exploitation and of losing their cultural identity, or those that have suffered under a long-running armed conflict, such as that in Colombia, the extent of whose suffering is only now coming to light.
- Gender-responsive budgeting, allocation of additional budgetary funds to women's activities and reservation of a certain portion of government procurement to women-owned businesses are crucial to the situation of women in general. In the specific case of rural women, consideration should be given to allocating extra funds for micro-credits as seed money for women's start-up businesses.
- Political representation is about power. If more women are to gain political power, some men will have to lose it, unless the size of elected bodies is increased. Thus it may be anticipated that some male parliamentarians will resist the addition of more women candidates. The IPU could be called upon to help in such situations.

Session 2, Theme 2: Strategic objectives for the empowerment of rural women – Addressing discrimination in the law

At the invitation of Dr. Assegaf, H. E. Ms. Marjon V. Kamara, Permanent Representative of Liberia to the United Nations and Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, made some welcoming remarks, as follows:

Over the last two days as the Commission has focused on the priority theme, we have heard about progress as well as shortcomings in many areas of the law that have a direct impact on the lives of rural women everywhere, on their rights to equality and non-discrimination and on their capacity to be productive members of society.

Securing women's legal rights to land and other property is an indispensable component of economic empowerment. Land ownership is the basis for sustainable food production, an important factor at the present time when serious concerns are being raised about food insecurity, land ownership is farmers' key means of for accessing irrigation, credit, subsidies, and decision-making power. The fact that rural women are less likely than men to own land not only makes their farm work less productive, but also frequently excludes them from farmers' organizations and other bodies that promote enhanced productivity and growth.

The Commission has also been discussing the need for rural women to be supplied with legal documentation such as identity cards and papers confirming land titles. There has also been much talk about cultural traditions and discriminatory customary laws, including in relation to marriage, that often impede rural women's access to land, finance, information, and new technologies.

Member States have carried out legal reforms to repeal discriminatory laws and ensure women's equal rights to own and inherit property. However, even where good laws are in place, women are often unaware of their existence or have little access to the justice system, with the laws thus remaining unenforced. Parliamentarians like yourselves have a critical role in creating adequate legislation and in overseeing government action with regard to its implementation. Parliamentarians also exercise significant oversight over government budgets and can use this leverage to ensure that public budgets address the priorities and needs of both men and women in rural areas. They have a key role in enacting temporary special measures to eliminate discrimination and accelerate the achievement of equality between women and men. Such temporary measures, including quotas, are an effective tool to increase the number of women at all levels of decision-making. But there are also instances where parliamentarians are reluctant to enact progressive measures initiated by the executive arm of government, with quotas and other steps not always receiving the support that could bring change.

In its work the Commission places strong emphasis on bridging the gap between commitments made at global level and implementation nationally. Such accountability is key for ensuring that the Beijing Platform for Action and subsequent commitments evolve into tangible results for women and girls in their daily realities. This means that the real work starts after the session, when delegates return home and begin implementation of the agreed conclusions. I encourage all parliamentarians committed to gender equality and the empowerment of rural women to review the agreed conclusions that we will adopt, and I look forward to the message that you will send to the CSW at the end of your own deliberations here.

Addressing discrimination in the law

Mr. Jean-Claude Mignon, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, shared the European experience in ensuring that the law promotes respect for women's rights; Ms. Gaynel Curry, Gender and Women's Rights Adviser at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, gave an overview of the various types of discrimination in the law that limit rural women's empowerment, with examples of good practices to act against such

discrimination, and Ms. Annie Munshya Chungu, Member of Parliament of Zambia, described recent initiatives taken by her country to review discriminatory legislation, especially in terms of access to land.

The advancement and protection of women's rights is certainly a core concern of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Today's meeting deals with one of the most problematic aspects of this subject, namely the status of women in the rural environment, where socio-economic conditions are much more difficult than elsewhere. In fact, poverty, unemployment, insufficient transportation, difficult access to education or health care and the persistence of patriarchal mindsets increase inequality between men and women. Women in these rural areas are, therefore, faced with major obstacles to the full achievement of gender equality. Furthermore, rural women generally do not have independent incomes because they are working in family holdings, they are excluded from decision-making and face many barriers to property and inheritance rights, making for a grave situation which is worsening with the effects of globalization and the economic and financial crisis.

On top of the multiple forms of violation and discrimination, rural women are particularly vulnerable to violence, notably domestic violence. Furthermore, in these zones of widespread unemployment and poverty, they are the main target for trafficking in human beings, which results in sexual exploitation and forced labour.

It is the duty of parliamentarians to bring these issues to the attention of governments and to draw up legislation in this domain. Those countries that have not yet done so, including States that are not members of the Council of Europe, should sign and ratify the Council of Europe's Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings and its Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, which so far 18 countries have signed but only Turkey has ratified.

Despite the importance of land ownership to livelihoods, food security, economic independence and physical security, women control only a small percentage of all titled land worldwide. This low percentage of ownership appears largely to result from low levels of inheritance of property by women and denial of other of their fundamental human rights. Remedying this situation requires the adoption of a human rights-based approach, which is one that analyses inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and seeks to redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power. The processes of development must be anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law, thereby facilitating the sustainability of development work, empowering people and holding accountable those who have a duty to act.

To ensure a human rights perspective in promoting women's control over land a number of principles must be taken into account and integrated into all related policies and programmes. The first is non-discrimination and equality: all human beings are equally entitled to their human rights without discrimination of any kind. There must be both formal (*de jure*) equality, which requires reform of laws and policies containing discriminatory provisions, and substantive (*de facto*) equality, which is concerned with the effects of those laws and policies, with a view to ensuring that they do not maintain, but rather alleviate, the inherent disadvantages facing particular groups such as women.

The second principle is that of participation. The CEDAW Committee has stressed that particularly in countries undergoing a programme of agrarian reform, the rights of women to share in the redistribution on equal terms with men must be carefully observed.

The third principle is that of accountability and the rule of law. States and other duty-bearers are answerable for the observance of human rights, and must comply with the provisions enshrined in human rights instruments, while aggrieved rights-holders are entitled to institute proceedings for appropriate redress before a competent adjudicator.

Gaps in legislation governing women's ownership of land are often deeply rooted in discriminatory social attitudes which perpetuate inequalities. Awareness-raising for the holders of such attitudes is essential, but most importantly, women must be made aware of their rights and empowered to claim them. This is a task for United Nations entities, donors and NGOs, but the lead role falls to States and above all to parliamentarians.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has developed a number of tools to assist in the monitoring of this human rights approach to women's control over land by State authorities, international organizations or civil society organizations.

From a human rights perspective, women should be in a position to access land in their own right, but in Zambia, women do not enjoy the same right to land as men, despite being the major producers of the nation's food. Zambia has a dual system of land administration, with State land estimated to account for 6% of the total area, customary land for 94%, but customary land is constrained by a traditional administration that results in men's domination over ownership.

The National Gender Policy of 2000 recognized that the difficulty of women's ownership of land continues to be major hindrance to their participation in national development. The Government then passed the Land Act, but although that legislation is gender-neutral, its effect was limited, with only 20% of eligible women owning land. In response, in 2009 the Government issued a policy directive to all land-allocating agencies that 30% of all available plots were to be

set aside for allocation to women, with the remaining 70% being competed for by men and women. This directive has resulted in a significant increase in the number of women owning land.

However, just the existence of the policy provision is not enough: there is need to ensure that it is well publicized, which is an area where civil society and women's organizations have an important role to play, while the responsibility of parliamentarians is to ensure that the executive implements the policy correctly.

Another obstacle is that obtaining title to land in customary areas has to pass through the traditional leaders. Receiving a request for land title, the traditional leader is required to write a letter to the District Council, which then submits the request to the Commission of Lands. But this process largely remains unknown to rural women, who are thus unable to make use of it. However, the Minister of Lands has initiated an advocacy programme to make traditional leaders aware of the importance of releasing land for development to women in particular, and of simplifying procedures and reducing formalities.

In the discussion session that followed, contributions were made by representatives from Angola, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Canada, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Republic of Korea and Sudan.

Delegates reported on changes that have been made in discriminatory laws and regulations in their countries. Pakistan, for example, launched the Benazir Income Support Programme which recognizes women as head of households in rural areas. The effect of this one programme, in one year, has been an increase in women's registration – required for them to be able to claim benefits from the State – from 20% to 70%. Furthermore, Pakistan has amended the notorious Hudud laws which did not distinguish rape from adultery, causing many women to be put in jail if they went to the police with an accusation of rape. In December 2011, Pakistan enacted the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Bill, under which, for the first time, the State criminalizes practices such as giving young women away to settle disputes between families, depriving a woman of her inheritance or forcing a woman to marry against her will.

In other countries, laws are recognized to be discriminatory, but they are so deeply entrenched in the culture and attitudes of the country that changing them will be a considerable effort. In Burkina Faso, for example, the Gender Commission has started a project to train parliamentarians on gender mainstreaming. The project, financed by UN Women, will allow parliamentarians to incorporate gender considerations in laws submitted to the National Assembly, but it is recognized that this will be a long undertaking.

Some representatives described situations in their countries in which there was, unexpectedly, no discrimination. In Angola, for example, access to land makes no distinction between women and men. Either sex is merely required to produce the proper documentation to access finance and development projects. This equality of treatment came about with the passage of the Land Act. Angola recognizes that it still has much work to do in the fields of education, training and health, but Parliament has recently approved an Act against Domestic Violence, which is an important step forward.

There are other cases in which, while in theory there are equal opportunities for women and men, in practice women's participation in decision-making is hampered by a number of limiting factors, notably the weight of culture and custom, rural women's generally lower level of education, stereotypes of women's role, and so on. In some cases, the disadvantages come not from the law, but from the very fact of living in the rural areas, with their generally higher unemployment, lower incomes, harder access to education and health and a lack of child care, preventing women from returning to work after childbirth.

The situation is particularly acute in the context of agriculture. Even if men and women are doing the same work on a farm, and even if both sexes theoretically have an equal right to ownership, in many countries it is the men who are recognized as the owners, the women being simply undervalued labourers. A few countries, but only a few – one is Spain – have promulgated laws to stipulate that when men and women work jointly in an agricultural undertaking, they have equal rights to revenue from the undertaking and that women cannot be unilaterally deprived of their share simply by virtue of the farm's being sold.

Without rights, rural women are invisible

Maria del Carmen Quintanilla Barba,
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Turkey has passed a similar law, under which the first five years' of social security premiums of uninsured women working in agriculture will be unconditionally covered by the government. Some governments have passed laws providing for fiscal advantages to women entrepreneurs, while in others, women-only agricultural cooperatives have been established and financially supported by the government until they are self-sustaining. In some countries, the government has stipulated that all publicly-held corporations must have at least one woman member on their boards.

Sometimes external events conspired to worsen the discrimination. In Colombia, for example, much rural land is not held by title. If the male head of household lost his life in the country's long-running armed conflict, the woman's right to take over the ownership was not recognized. Alone and unempowered, such women then became the subject of

sexual violence and other abuses, particularly from the combatants. This resulted in their migration to urban areas, where they often fell prey to trafficking and prostitution. A law was in process which would seek to compensate for this type of harm, but what was really needed was for a commission to be created to follow up on reparations to rural women heads of household, to have their land rights restored.

With the return of democracy in Chile, its agricultural sector had been reformed, but women are still disadvantaged. Work in the agricultural sector is precarious and seasonal, and does not bring rights or benefits. There is a National Organization of Indigenous Rural Women, which, however, does not yet have the necessary strength for effective collective bargaining. Funds will be needed for training of women on labour rights and negotiating skills.

In some countries the inequality in the ownership of land is already so entrenched that a total redistribution appears necessary. In Ecuador, for example, 5% of the population holds more than 55% of land. Without a far-reaching change in the matrix of production, women will not be land-owners and will not be able to leverage ownership into access to credit or other benefits

We cannot redistribute land to women if the land has already been distributed to others.

Scheznarda Fernandez,
National Assembly, Ecuador

Some countries, such as Mexico, have tackled the problem of gender inequality by mandating that there have to be gender-responsive budgetary provisions, administered by the Parliament and directed towards assisting rural women.

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

- Creating gender-responsive budget analysis is a step towards greater public transparency, and can shift economic policies. Strengthening rural women's rights to control of land should be considered as a priority. A minimum set of social protection rights to secure rural women's access to essential services and income security should be developed and ratified by States, in line with international norms.
- Funds will have to be provided for the training of women on labour rights, wage negotiations and safeguarding workers' rights.
- Discriminatory laws come in part from discriminatory attitudes. Tolerance and respect between the sexes must be inculcated from a very early age, starting right at the primary or basic education stage.

Session 2: Ensuring access to health

Ms. Rebecca Kadaga, Speaker of Parliament (Uganda) and a specialist in maternal and child health, contributed some successes and setbacks in that area; and Professor Lynn Freedman, Director of the Averting Maternal Death and Disability Program at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, put forward some views on local-level accountability for women's and children's health.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Maputo Protocol all enshrine the right of women in rural areas to have access to adequate health care facilities and services including those relating to pregnancy and childbirth.

However, most national budgets fail to recognize the necessary resource allocation for maternal health. For instance, most African countries are party to the Abuja Declaration, but in reality the 15% budget allocation remains a myth. In Uganda this year, the budget allocation is 5.5%. Additionally, Uganda has a shortage of highly trained professionals: for example, the country needs an additional 4200 midwives if it is to achieve the minimum level of service delivery.

It is imperative that countries address the issue of poor rural road infrastructure, so that women can reach the health facilities. Governments must ask: how does a woman move from her home to the nearest health facility? What is the geographical distribution of the health facilities? Are there enough ambulances? As a pilot project in a district in Uganda, a pregnant woman can call a service on her mobile phone for a motorcycle to take her for antenatal and postnatal visits. That is an experiment that might be replicated in rural areas of other countries, since obviously, a motorcycle will cost far less than a normal motor vehicle ambulance.

Another critical health issue is that of water, which needs to be not only clean and in sufficient quantities, but also located very near to the women so that they can collect it quickly and return to other duties. This is urgent, as the issue of water is a source of domestic violence: in countries such as Uganda, many men beat their wives because they suspect that the long hours spent at water points are actually being used for illicit love affairs. Young boys and girls, too, who spend many hours unsupervised at the water points are tempted to engage in early sexual activities, leading to unwanted pregnancies and dropping out of school. Thus adequate and accessible water is not only a health issue but also one of security and stability in rural communities.

Where there is not sufficient solar or hydro power, members of parliament should urge their governments to invest in energy-saving stoves. Such an investment will, firstly, enable women to cook quickly so that their time and energy are released to engage in income-generating projects or to attend meetings on important issues in their communities, and,

secondly, improve the women's and children's daily health environment, reducing their exposure to respiratory diseases and eye ailments.

Through its committee system, Parliament needs to take an interest in and track the implementation of government interventions for the realization of maternal and neonatal health. In the Ugandan Parliament, for example, there is a core team of parliamentarians, male and female, who have undertaken to raise the issues of maternal health, gender and budgetary allocations. Members of the team sit in each of the committees of the House, to raise a flag when policies and programmes appear inadequate. Parliament should also take an interest in and allocate funding to voucher systems designed to reduce out-of-pocket spending for mothers. Voucher systems have the advantage of being able to target services at the grassroots according to demographic or socio-economic criteria. In the case of Uganda, such systems have helped expectant mothers in the rural areas to seek antenatal care and to be able to deliver in health facilities.

Uganda uses maternal death audits, in-depth and systematic reviews of the cases of mothers who die during or shortly after giving birth, not to apportion blame but to learn lessons about the remediable factors that might save the lives of mothers in the future. Through such audits, Katakwi District in Uganda has, in one year, succeeded in reducing maternal mortality from 465 to 370 per 100,000 live births.

Rural women's access to health should be viewed as a development issue, with access to health rights being intimately linked to the successful implementation of other sectors of development, such as roads, electricity and water, education, equality and governance.

Health professionals are moving firmly towards a set of global standards about how countries should frame their policies and align their budgets and even towards some consensus about the principles that should underlie international aid in this field. The data and the science show quite clearly that most maternal deaths and many newborn deaths are preventable with access to basic clinical interventions that should be available in every primary health care system. In other words, we know what works, clinically, and now the biggest barrier is access to a responsive, rights-respecting health care system that can meet the "AAAQ" standard: available, accessible, affordable and of acceptable quality.

The biggest obstacle then to realizing such a system is the huge gap that exists between health policies and the reality. The gap between what technical experts write about and what women actually experience, which is often a deeply dysfunctional system. There are often many pieces missing: human resources, drugs, equipment, infrastructure. In some countries health facilities stand empty and locked, while sometimes just down the road others are terribly overcrowded with several women in one bed or even lying on the floor ready to give birth. What women experience in many health systems is alienating, inequitable and often even abusive. In this connection, the World Bank has recently introduced the term "quiet corruption". This has nothing to do with diverting public money for private gain: "quiet corruption" is about not working up to standards, is about the kind of deep malaise that is normalized in many health systems. For example, in many countries, there is documented absenteeism of as much as 60%, among health workers, who simply are not at the place where they are being paid to be. There is extensive disrespect, mistreatment and abuse of women in childbirth. Most of all there is a large "know-do gap", in the phrase used in the health field. Health workers know what they should do, they've been trained to do it, but they don't do it.

Why does the Bank call this corruption? Because it is about the way that power flows in the system; and about the opportunity to abuse that power in unchecked ways. Citizenship is not just about the right to vote, or the right to own

"...neglect, abuse, and marginalization by the health system now actually constitutes part of the very experience of what it means to be poor in the world."

Lynn Freedman

land. It is also about the right to demand what you are entitled to from the health system and have that demand met. Thus a functioning, rights-respecting health system is part of the very core of social institutions and democratic societies. In this sense, health systems become a huge opportunity for parliamentarians.

Even though health care seems like a very technical field, problem-solving is not the role of technical experts, but of people

like parliamentarians, who have a deep understanding of the dynamics that underlie the health systems in each country and in each local setting. Because to transform health there is a need to challenge the status quo; there is a need to put a new emphasis on what might be called accountability at the front lines. While accountability at the global level is essential, in terms of the commitments that countries make whether as donors or as grant recipients, there is a need for a new kind of emphasis on accountability at the front lines of service, where women meet the system, in issues of life and death.

Such a concept brings up three key lessons and one hard truth. Firstly, accountability at the front lines requires accountability both top down and bottom up. Parliamentarians are perfectly placed to ensure that the accountability flows in both directions. Secondly, the issue cannot be solved just by taking so-called best practices imposed from outside; rather the change must grow as problem-solving that is honest about the way that power flows in local systems. Parliamentarians have the deep knowledge of their own communities, the special touch with the systems

around them, to be able to insist on honesty about why things are not working. Thirdly, the right to information is absolutely key to the accountability dynamic, not only in terms of counting births, deaths and illnesses but also in terms of access to that information, of transparency in what happens. Again, parliamentarians should demand that the health system generate that information and that it be of good quality and available to those who need it in order to tell whether their systems are working.

The hard truth is that nobody readily gives up their power to questioning. It takes an enormous commitment to reduction in maternal deaths and safe childbirth to risk the vulnerability entailed in opening up the power dynamic. In demanding the rearrangement of that power between people and providers, providers and managers, managers and policy makers, Parliamentarians are called upon to be leaders, standing alongside the women whose very survival depends on that leadership.

In the ensuing discussion, contributions were made by the representatives of Burkina Faso, Chad, Chile, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Indonesia, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia and the Republic of Korea.

It was agreed that the right to health is part of a woman's human rights. But in addition to requiring the provision of health facilities and the training of medical personnel, health brings into play many other aspects of development. These include, of course, water and sanitation, but since many health problems are impacted by the distance from and difficulty in reaching health centres, health also raises the need for improved roads or other means of transportation.

Several representatives described the efforts being made in their countries to train increased numbers of medical personnel. Morocco has a plan for training 3,300 doctors a year as well as paramedics and other personnel to implement the country's mother and child health strategy; Korea has trained 4,000 midwives and related personnel. There were many other examples.

Several delegates explained that the health situation of their country improved markedly when health services and supplies were made free of charge: obstetric services, impregnated bed-nets to combat malaria, anti-retrovirals to treat HIV/AIDS, and others.

In some countries, the persistence of tradition prevents people, women in particular, from having access to health care. In some societies, men do not allow their wives to visit the health centres or to have certain medical procedures. Additionally, cultural pressures, coupled with low levels of education, may cause rural women actually to prefer to be attended by a traditional birthing assistant than a properly qualified midwife or doctor. While this calls for awareness-raising efforts to be directed towards rural men and women, it also points to a need, in some cases, for the health care system and personnel to show greater cultural sensitivity.

A specific problem in this area in some traditional countries and cultures is that of family planning and of spacing births, since the cultural customs dictate that women should have large numbers of children. In several such countries, major training efforts are under way to inform women about family planning and the advantages of less-frequent births.

Large percentages, perhaps as much as 50%, of rural women in some countries become prematurely ill owing to their harsh conditions of work. These illnesses include joint and muscle troubles, or respiratory illnesses resulting from proximity to pesticides and other chemicals. In addition, if their agricultural work is seasonal they are forced to work harder and longer than is reasonable, because for part of the year they will not be earning at all. Starting to become ill early in life, they have to stop contributing at a relatively young age to their family's income.

Some countries have introduced programmes to focus specifically on these illnesses of rural women. In addition, in some cases where rural women, particularly the elderly, find it hard to travel to the health centres, countries have set up mobile medical service centres, installed inside buses, which bring the medical care to rural women even in the remotest areas.

The conclusions that emerged from the discussion included the following:

- The right to health is part of a woman's human rights, and should be both guaranteed in the constitution of every country and codified in international norms and standards. Parliamentarians have a duty to guarantee women's access to health, and parliaments should have committees to oversee the work of the ministry of health.
- Sound health policies, while important, are not enough on their own. Parliamentarians have a responsibility to ensure that governments do actually implement those policies, and do allocate sufficient budgetary resources to them. As an example, an important benchmark for budgetary allocations to health is the Abuja Commitment.
- The international pharmaceutical industry could do more to help in the reduction of maternal and infant mortality, by making more drugs available at prices affordable in developing countries. Generic medicines should be made more freely available. The World Health Organization should play a more active role in bringing these improvements about.

The President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians 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 panellists and all who had contributed to a very lively discussion.