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THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES IN MAINSTREAMING GENDER AND PROMOTING THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Seminar for Chairpersons and Members of Parliamentary Bodies Dealing with Gender Equality

IPU Headquarters, Geneva, 4-6 December 2006

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SEMINAR

The meeting elected Ms. G. Mahlangu-Nkabinde, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of the Parliament of South Africa, as its rapporteur. The following report is based on concluding comments presented by the rapporteur at the closing session.

The seminar for chairpersons and members of parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality on the "The Role of parliamentary committees in mainstreaming gender and promoting the status of women" brought together more than 100 members of parliament and parliamentary staff from 38 countries. Over two and a half days participants discussed and exchanged experiences on the functioning of parliamentary committees dealing with gender equality and the status of women and how policy and legislative outcomes can be bolstered to promote gender equality.

The seminar was opened by IPU Secretary General, Mr. A. B. Johnsson, and chaired by President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians, Ms. M. Xavier (Uruguay). The keynote address was delivered by Ms. A.M. Lizin, President of the Belgian Senate. Nearly 70 interventions were heard in the plenary debates, the highlights of which are presented below.

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The participants began by noting that as elected representatives of the people, parliamentarians have a crucial role to play in the promotion of gender equality in parliaments. They must see to it that norms for the protection of equal opportunities for women and men are translated into national laws. Likewise, parliamentarians have a duty to oversee the implementation of policies and programmes to ensure that they meet the standards and goals set. Finally, as politicians, they have a natural role to raise gender equality issues in public debate and to help forge national consensus on these issues.

Mandate, composition and working methods

During the meeting, participants discussed the functioning and mandate of parliamentary committees dealing with gender. In so doing, the *raison d'être* of such committees was

debated. It was clear that their existence was not an end in itself, but rather that they were instrumental in contributing to the work of parliament to promote and defend gender equality.

In some parliaments however, this goal is achieved not through the existence of specialized gender committees, but through mainstreaming gender equality in the existing committee structures. There is, however, no one model - it varies from country to country depending on parliamentary practice and history. The two approaches are, however, complementary and the existence of a specialized gender committee should not take the onus off other committees to address gender concerns. This task is facilitated by the presence of women in parliament. The importance of having a critical mass of women in Parliament - the 30% objective - was highlighted.

Discussions also focused on the specific powers of parliamentary committees, ranging from committees that have the power to propose legislation to those that exercise mainly a monitoring function. Despite some differences, participants agreed that one of the most important functions of such committees is their role in parliamentary oversight and holding governments to account. Parliamentarians have many tools at their disposal for this oversight function such as oral and written questions, the right to summon ministers and government officials, holding public hearings and holding open meetings to allow the public to engage with the committee. It was noted that it is also important for the reports of gender committees to have an official status so as to enable follow up of the proposals and recommendations made.

The achievement of gender mainstreaming also depends on coordination with other committees in parliament. The specific example was cited of convening common sittings with other parliamentary committees to debate the contents of a bill and ensure that a gender perspective is considered. This type of cooperation is crucial with finance and budget committees with the view to developing gender-sensitive budgets. Another idea was to have gender focal points in all committees.

According to the data collected by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in its *World Directory on Parliamentary Bodies on the Status of Women and Gender Equality*, nearly all parliamentary gender committees are composed of both women and men. However, men's participation remains weak. Participants agreed that men should play a greater role in the work of gender committees, as indeed it is as much in their interest as that of women to ensure equality.

Relations with partners

The meeting also examined the importance of partnerships in order for parliament to fully contribute to national efforts to promote gender equality. Parliamentarians can be isolated and need to develop cooperation with government and civil society. It was very clear from the debate that there is a need to formalize relations between national women's machineries and parliaments, as they have complementary roles to play. Cooperation with ombudspersons and the judiciary was also highlighted. Within that general context, the specific role of parliamentary committees on gender should be monitored to ensure efficiency and to avoid overlap with other bodies.

In addition, cooperation with civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is crucial. NGOs are a key source of information and are critical partners in ensuring follow-up of parliamentary action. Women's parliamentary caucuses can be useful fora for women to meet beyond party lines and can provide additional support to the work of parliamentary gender committees.

Participants also discussed the vital role of the media and outreach strategies to inform the public of parliamentary action and raise awareness of gender issues. Despite what some may see as a love-hate relationship, it is important to enlist support of the media and make use of all possible communication avenues to reach out to people, especially to those who are most isolated, through initiatives such as community radio and free newspapers. The media has an advocacy role to play and a role in holding Parliaments accountable for follow up on actions and decisions taken.

Legislative and policy outputs

The meeting heard about the wide range of issues that are being addressed in committees and the immense challenges to attaining gender equality. The importance of developing strategies that can be used to meet objectives was raised, such as gender-sensitive budgeting. This is a new approach for many parliaments. The development of gender-sensitive budgets is a long-term process that requires changing policies and transforming processes. Parliamentarians have an important role in the development of such a tool and should press governments to develop gender-sensitive budgets. One way to accomplish this is by introducing requirements for gender budgeting in laws and rules on budgeting.

Undertaking a gender-sensitive budgeting process requires analysis at all stages of the process starting with the planning and programming. In order to have substantive input and the capacity to develop such budgets, parliaments need to have access to sex-disaggregated data and comprehensive information - an obligation under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The role of gender committees is to raise gender issues during the budget debates, develop partnerships with the budget committees, and serve as conduits between women's organizations and the parliament. The importance of parliamentary oversight was again raised - parliamentarians need to closely follow and monitor the implementation of the budget by conducting gender audits and analyses.

Given the novelty of this exercise, the necessity of implementing training programmes for parliamentarians as well as parliamentary staff was noted.

CEDAW

Another important function of gender committees is to oversee proper implementation of international and regional commitments. The meeting gave particular attention to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a tool that we can use to legitimize our demands for gender equality.

CEDAW brings together - in a single comprehensive human rights treaty - the provisions of previous United Nations instruments concerning discrimination on the basis of sex and extends them further to create a tool dedicated to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

Participants discussed in particular the role of parliaments and agreed that they had to be more involved in overseeing implementation of the obligations and rights included in CEDAW. One of these obligations has to do with reporting. States Parties must report regularly to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on progress made in implementing the CEDAW. Parliamentarians have to make sure that these periodic reports go to parliament for debate before they are submitted to the UN, and that parliament ensures that

they contain a wide variety of views, including those of civil society and independent analysts. In addition, members of parliament should be included in the national delegations to the CEDAW Committee so as to better understand the concluding comments and recommendations that are subsequently made. These comments have to be presented to parliament in order to be followed up and implemented at the national level.

Parliamentarians also have a role to raise awareness among their peers and society at large on CEDAW, monitor government implementation, review national legislation to bring it in line with CEDAW principles, monitor the validity of reservations to CEDAW and work towards their removal. It is important that all parliamentarians and parliamentary staff have an understanding of the principles of CEDAW, hence the need for training programmes.

A wide range of issues related to women's rights and gender equality was discussed. From the many interventions that were made, it was clear that gender equality spans across all policy areas and that it is at the core of society's well-being and development. The challenges are immense, including poverty, poor health care, low levels of education, violence, and HIV/AIDS. While responses to these challenges are varied, education has a key role to play, starting in the home.

Many participants also mentioned the question of enhancing women's participation in political life. With a world average of nearly 17 per cent, we all agree that we have to do much better, much sooner. Several related initiatives were mentioned such as the SADC 50/50 campaign by 2020.

Combating violence against women

The main thematic debate of the seminar was the question of violence against women. Acts of violence against women are among the most potent obstacles to the advancement of women and are a fundamental violation of their basic human rights. Violence against women is a problem that affects all countries without exception.

To address violence against women, the importance of understanding it is a pattern of behaviour was stressed. Strategies to combat this scourge need to be holistic in their approach, moving beyond mere criminalization, prevention and assistance measures to include initiatives aimed at changing the environment in which women live (looking at health care issues, housing, security, domestic legislation, stereotyping in the media). Indeed it is necessary to do a much better job at bringing up new generations who do not view violence and gender inequality as something which is natural. To achieve this, there has to be a radical - even revolutionary change in education and in the multiple messages we receive through TV, radio, movies, advertisement etc.

Effective policies to combat violence against women require accurate data. Data is also needed for parliamentary committees to fulfil their watchdog role and properly oversee and assess government action and progress. Participants had a long discussion on the problem of defining violence against women and developing indicators to measure its prevalence. Establishing common global or regional indicators was raised as an objective; this would certainly help in developing a common framework of analysis and defining coordinated responses. The United Nations was called upon to assist in developing such common indicators. Committees should request the development of sex-disaggregated data and press for the "engendering" of national statistics laws, as well as ensure that statisticians are adequately trained and sensitive to gender issues.

Participants agreed that responses to violence against women have to be multi-sectoral and build on the contribution of all stakeholders. Providing a solid legal framework to combat violence against women and impunity was underscored, together with the need to ensure adequate financing of policies and oversee proper implementation. The crucial role of awareness-raising and education, particularly using a rights-based approach, was raised, together with the need to train and sensitize the judiciary, law enforcement agencies as well as health and social services.

Follow-Up

The meeting spent time discussing support to parliament. It was clear that parliamentarians would like to see greater efforts in strengthening parliament's ability to carry out its work to promote gender equality and defend women's rights.

Participants expressed their wish to have similar meetings convened in the future. The important role that gender committees can play in the process of mainstreaming gender was underscored.

Parliamentarians also highlighted the value of convening thematic meetings to discuss particular gender issues in-depth, such as trafficking of women and children, health care, HIV/Aids and women's economic empowerment.

It was noted that it is important to also work with parliaments that do not have specialized parliamentary committees on gender to provide support, solidarity and to examine different avenues in which gender can be mainstreamed.

Participants agreed to share the results of the meeting with their colleagues in parliament and to follow up on suggestions made.