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**Supporting Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: A Key Strategy in Advancing Women's
Political Participation and the Eradication of Violence Against Women in Politics**

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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Introduction

Parliaments are mirrors to our societiesⁱ. They are expected to represent and respond to the everyday reality in which they are situated. A modern parliament is one where citizens recognize themselves in their representatives, and where members represent the diverse needs and perspectives of their constituency. A modern parliament is one that navigates societies towards more equitable and just futures through advancements in legislation.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for strong, gender-responsive parliaments. During times of emergencies, leaders and policymakers must comprehend the gendered dimensions of both crisis impacts and the necessary response. Recent developments have shown how women-led countries are effective in managing the crisis, with a focus on empathic leadership and evidence-based decision-making. While women have the necessary skills to lead in the current times, they are not always given the opportunity to do so.

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action calls for equal and active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels. This objective is supported by an IPU resolution adopted in 2016ⁱⁱ and a recent joint statement by the IPU and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recommending delineating in a legal framework 50 per cent women's representation in parliament as the objective to be reachedⁱⁱⁱ. However, we have a long way to go to achieve gender parity in politics, particularly in parliaments, where 75% of members are men. In order to accelerate progress, there is a need to draw from lessons learned and to engage parliaments themselves in efforts to achieve gender parity.

This paper puts forth the importance of supporting gender-sensitive parliaments around the world as a key strategy in advancing women's political participation and the eradication of violence against women.

Gender-sensitive Parliaments: Definition and Framework for Action

In 2011, the IPU published a global review of good practices that have helped define what constitutes a gender sensitive parliament. Based on this research, the following definition has been developed: A gender-sensitive parliament is one that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and work. Gender-sensitive parliaments remove the impediments to women's full participation and offer a positive example or model to society at large. They ensure that their operations and resources are used effectively towards promoting gender equality. A gender-sensitive parliament is one in which there are no barriers – substantive, structural or cultural – to women's full participation and to equality between its men and women members and staff. It is not only a place where women can work, but also one where women want to work and contribute. It sets a positive example by promoting gender equality and women's empowerment among society both nationally and internationally. A gender-sensitive parliament is therefore a modern parliament; one that addresses and reflects the equality demands of a modern society. Ultimately, it is a parliament that is more efficient, effective and legitimate.

In 2012, a Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments was adopted by IPU's Member Parliaments, including seven action areas^{iv}. This plan of action is based on a set of international standards derived from a breadth of national case studies to inform policies on how to make parliaments gender-sensitive^v. The seven action areas include: (1) increasing the number of women in parliament and achieving equality in participation, (2) strengthening gender equality

legislation and policy, (3) mainstreaming gender equality throughout all parliamentary work, (4) instituting or improving gender-sensitive infrastructure and parliamentary culture, (5) ensuring that responsibility for gender equality is shared by all parliamentarians—men and women, (6) encouraging political parties to be champions of gender equality, and (7) enhancing the gender sensitivity of, and gender equality among, parliamentary staff.

Increasing women's political participation in parliaments and addressing the various levels of violence against women in politics are two key components of gender-sensitive parliaments. The plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments should be addressed and supported with these two components in mind. Such support can have IPU's gender-sensitive parliament self-assessment methodology as a starting point. To date, this stock-taking and reform-planning methodology has been applied with IPU support in Rwanda, Chile, Bangladesh, Turkey, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, Georgia, the United Kingdom, Colombia and Serbia, as well as spontaneously by several other parliaments, leading to concrete action and gender-responsive reforms. A toolkit was developed in 2016 based on many of such experiences in order to support similar efforts.^{vi}

Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: A Framework for Greater Women's Participation

While the representation of women in parliaments has increased steadily, it still does not match women's broader representation in society. The recent slowdown in pace of progress calls for robust action if we are to achieve gender parity. Gender-sensitive parliaments is a crucial strategy towards achieving equal representation in parliaments, as well as a more gender equal society. A gender-sensitive parliament is premised on the principle of gender equality – that is, that both men and women have an equal right to participate in its structures and processes, without discrimination and without reprimand.

Gender-sensitive parliaments are those that promote and achieve equality in numbers of women and men and where women participate fully. Women members of parliament cannot have a meaningful role and make substantial contributions if they are subject to discrimination of any form, sexism, harassment and violence in parliaments. This means going beyond the numbers and focusing on the quality of institutions. This means focusing on the positions that women occupy, the sectors in which they have a role, the work culture, as well as the infrastructure and policy framework in which parliaments operate. Women's full political participation is a component of gender-sensitive parliaments, as they seek to provide an enabling environment for women's perspective to be fully included in decision-making processes.

Parliaments around the world were originally designed as male-dominated bodies. For that reason, they can be unsuited to the needs of women. That has not necessarily changed as the number of women in parliament has increased. Women still bear much of the responsibility for family and household duties. The prospect of parliamentary debates lasting into the evening and the early hours may deter them from entering politics. Moreover, parliamentary infrastructure is often not adapted to women, especially those who are breastfeeding infants or caring for young children. Parliaments can take several steps to reform male-centric work practices and structures and shape a more family-friendly and gender-sensitive work environment.

In a nutshell, a parliament that is perceived as gender-sensitive provides an incentive for women to run for public office, as they see the institution as a place where they belong and will not be subject to any form of discrimination; it is also a parliament where women can participate and lead in a meaningful way; finally, it is a parliament that is able to deliver on gender equality and promote laws and policies that can enhance women's participation in political life.

Women's Participation in Parliament

A gender-sensitive parliament is one that promotes and achieves equality in numbers of women and men across all of its bodies and internal structures. Increasing women's political participation in parliaments is both a catalyst for gender-sensitive parliaments and an important outcome of successful gender-sensitive reforms in parliament. Increasing access to parliament through gender-sensitive reforms will help increase the number of women parliamentarians, which can in turn prompt the further implementation of the principles of gender sensitivity, such as the creation of a gender-sensitive and family friendly work environment. This shift to a more amenable work culture can in turn encourage more women to run for parliamentary positions. This self-reinforcing cycle is one which all parliaments should strive for.

Global Perspective

In charting a way forward, it is important to recognize the journey parliaments have taken regarding women's political participation in recent decades. The last 25 years have seen a significant increase in the proportion of women in parliaments around the world^{vii}. In 1995, just 11.3 per cent of parliamentary seats were held by women. By 2015, this figure had almost doubled to 22.1 per cent. Although the pace of progress has slowed in the past five years, 2020 figures show that the share of women in national parliaments is now at around 25 per cent. In lower and single houses of parliament, the percentage of seats held by women increased from 11.6 per cent in 1995 to 24.9 per cent in 2020.

The countries that have achieved the greatest progress between 1995 and 2020 in their single and lower houses of parliament are Rwanda, the United Arab Emirates, Andorra and Bolivia. Upper houses saw the percentage increase from 9.4 per cent to 24.6 per cent during the same period as well. Increases in women's participation have occurred in the upper houses of Bolivia, Mexico, Belgium, Antigua and Barbuda, and Argentina.

Gender Quotas

Gender quotas are a key component in achieving equal representation in parliaments, and thus in achieving gender-sensitive parliaments. Quotas – either legislated or applied voluntarily by political parties – have been adopted in every region of the globe, and have been instrumental in driving progress in women's political participation. Research and experience from parliamentary support work in various countries show that quotas work when they set ambitious targets and have strong implementation mechanisms – and when they are combined with other measures. These include incentives that encourage political parties to recruit and nominate women, policies that level the playing field in access to funding, and outreach campaigns that raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in politics. Part of the action areas for gender-sensitive parliaments is ensuring that political parties are champions of gender equality, and their role as avenues for recruitment of women as well as strong implementers of the party quota system are two key reasons for their significance.

Among the top 20 countries with the highest share of women parliamentarians, 16 of them used legislated and (voluntary) party quotas. On average, the share of women in parliamentary chambers without quotas is considerably lower. In 2019, women won 25.8 per cent of all seats in parliamentary chambers up for renewal. In the 40 chambers that applied quotas – either legislated or applied voluntarily by political parties – women gained 30.3 per cent of seats on average. In

the remaining 28 chambers without quota systems, only 17.9 per cent of seats were won by women.

In order to be effective, quotas should not only set ambitious goals, but also be designed in a way that delivers results, with clear sanctions for non-compliance. Since becoming a candidate is only the first step towards electoral success, additional measures are needed that allow women to be preselected into winnable seats or winnable positions on lists (the so-called “zipper system”). Similar provisions could also be set for women in local government and in the executive.

Today, elections in 81 countries are held under legislation that provides for gender quotas, with two countries adopting new legal measures in 2019 alone: a presidential decree mandating gender parity in the United Arab Emirates, and a new constitutional provision in Benin providing for the introduction of quotas in the electoral law. In Guinea, meanwhile, the gender quota for candidate lists was revised in May 2019 upwards from 30 per cent to 50 per cent.

Bolivia’s case shows how gender quotas can be successfully implemented and incrementally improved. After introducing it in the 1990s, the country has progressively raised targets towards gender parity, as well as strengthening mechanisms for implementation. The 2010 law that introduced gender parity and an alternation system would not have been successful without the systematic rejection of non-compliant party lists. This shows that progress lies on the commitment of political parties, the presence of ambitious targets, as well as strict enforcement and accountability mechanisms.

Moving Towards Gender Parity

Gender quotas have been gradually revised upwards towards full parity. Countries are now encouraged to aim for 50 per cent women’s representation in parliament by 2030. Doing so would mark an important step towards equality in political life. In 2016, an IPU resolution called on parliaments to set a deadline by which at least 30 per cent of seats should be held by women, and a further deadline by which that proportion should reach 50 per cent^{viii}. This approach was supported in a recent joint statement by the IPU and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women^{ix}.

Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: A Greater Framework for Women’s Greater Influence

While women’s access to and participation in parliaments is the first and crucial step, the second is ensuring that they can fully contribute their expertise and resources to the best of their abilities. Gender-sensitive parliaments highlight the substantive contribution women can make in these institutions. A gender-sensitive parliament is one where women’s caucuses can operate to amplify women’s voices and where gender equality is valued. It is an institution where sexism, harassment and violence against women in politics is eradicated. It is an institution where women have a space and where that they can use that space in the best way possible. It’s an enabling and inclusive environment where women have the power and necessary support to make a difference. Beyond numbers, gender-sensitive parliaments are where women parliamentarians can lead and make meaningful contributions to further advance gender equality through their work.

Women in Parliamentary Leadership Roles

Women are still underrepresented among Speakers of parliament. As of 2020, women make up 20.5 per cent of all Speakers of parliament, as compared to 25 per cent representation in parliaments. Following the 2019 elections, Andorra, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Togo, Indonesia, and Kazakhstan have all elected their first female Speakers. Women have now served as parliamentary Speakers in all regions of the world—only the Pacific currently has not had a female Speaker of parliament.

Parity in parliament must also be applied to committees and leadership. Parliamentary standing committees must ensure that both women and men are equally represented among the experts in committee hearings, and that there is sufficient capacity among the experts to evaluate the effects of planned legislation on gender equality.

In Uganda, after a gender self-assessment within parliament, a strong-willed female Speaker and a women's caucus undertook bold reforms to advance gender equality in parliament through setting internal quotas for women in the leadership of parliamentary committees. The Standing Orders were amended to provide that 40 per cent of leadership posts on parliamentary committees are reserved for women.

Women's Caucuses

As women in most countries form a minority in parliament, women MPs tend to coalesce and create spaces enabling them to make their voices heard, forge ties of mutual solidarity and contribute to the work of parliament. IPU has identified 81 parliamentary women's caucuses created over the last 20 years. The establishment of women's parliamentary caucuses is one of the mechanisms that have enabled women to strengthen their political impact^x. Women's caucuses can also help to bring greater equality between men and women in the daily operations and work of parliament. Such caucuses have been particularly effective in changing legislation and policies from a gender perspective and raising awareness about gender equality.

The success of women's caucuses stems primarily from their capacity to rally the support of women parliamentarians around common objectives, rising above political divisions. Women's caucuses also receive strong backing from civil society organizations and engage men in support of their actions. But there is no single model for a successful women's parliamentary caucus. Quite the contrary: the diversity observed among such caucuses, in terms of structure, composition, functioning and areas of activity, has been a function of the specific needs and objectives pursued by women parliamentarians in various countries, as well as the specific political and cultural context in which they evolve.

The Women's Parliamentary Caucus in Mauritania is composed of former and acting women members of parliament. The caucus has successfully amended the draft law on violence against women and is now working on getting the law passed in parliament. It has organized caravans in rural areas to discuss and address gender issues, and later raised issues related to the situation of rural women in particular on the floor of parliament.

The Eradication of Violence Against Women in Politics

The sharp increase in the number of women in parliament in recent years represents an important step towards achieving the principles essential to democracy. The growing presence of women in parliament, once a predominantly male domain, is enabling the institution to adapt its working methods, structures and legislative priorities to evolve.

While the influx of women into parliament is beneficial for representative democracy, it has tended to disrupt the established order, provoking some resistance. By entering the political domain, women are shifting away from a role that confined them to the private sphere and are entering a world where their legitimacy is sometimes challenged.

Gender-sensitive parliaments understand that parliaments can be hostile environments and foster abusive cultures against women. Thus, instituting or improving gender-sensitive infrastructure and parliamentary culture and enhancing the gender sensitivity of—and gender equality among—parliamentary staff, remain key action areas. However, in understanding how to move towards gender-sensitive norms, one must first understand the current levels of violence faced by women in politics.

Levels of Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliaments

Violence against women parliamentarians can take different forms, such as sexist remarks, intimidation or harassment. These levels can span from psychological violence, to latent sexism, to physical violence, sexual violence or economic abuse. Economic abuse can manifest in denied funds or resources to which they were entitled during their terms in office, and to which their male counterparts enjoyed. Directed against women in politics, such behavior is particularly troubling. An IPU study on sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians^{xi} confirms that the situation is very real and widespread. The study's findings reveal troubling levels of prevalence – particularly for psychological violence, affecting 81.8 per cent of the respondents from all countries and regions. Among the kinds of psychological violence, 44.4 per cent of those surveyed said they had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction during their parliamentary term.

In a study on women in European parliaments^{xii}, 85.2 per cent of female MPs who took part in the study said that they had suffered psychological violence in the course of their term of office. 46.9 per cent had received death threats or threats of rape or beating. 58.2 per cent had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks. 67.9 per cent had been the target of comments relating to their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes. 24.7 per cent had suffered sexual violence. 14.8 per cent had suffered physical violence.

Combatting Gender-Based Violence in Parliaments

Recognizing sexism, harassment and violence against women as real problems in parliamentary workplaces, understanding how these problems arise and breaking the silence about them are essential steps in acting to prevent and eliminate them. The IPU offers guidelines towards eliminating violence against women in parliaments which involve three key steps: mobilizing for action, enshrining the standards in a policy, and implementation^{xiii}. Conducting gender self-assessments in parliaments also encourages parliaments to design a process suited to their national contexts^{xiv}.

Countries cases show that combatting gender-based violence in parliaments is possible with concerted effort among MPs and strong political will. Women's caucuses and gender committees are important structures to advance such causes as well.

Last 2019 in Norway, in the wake of the IPU landmark studies on sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament and of the #MeToo movement, Parliament had initiated an internal survey which had revealed cases of bullying, harassment or unwanted sexual behavior against women MPs and staff. To ensure a safe work environment for all, the Norwegian Parliament introduced a zero-tolerance measure towards such behavior.

In Madagascar, the internal rules of Parliament and the code of ethics and deontology for MPs were amended to address all forms of threats and sexual harassment against women MPs.

Conclusion

Parliament's role as the central institution of democracy as well as its capacity to enact legislation that affects a national population makes them a priority institution to support in the fight for gender equality. Advocating for gender-sensitive parliaments is a strategic way to do so. Gender-sensitive parliaments looks at women's political participation and eradicating violence against women in politics. These represent two main thrusts of gender equality: access and participation. While gaining women access to the political field is important, it's just as important to ensure that they can participate fully and without fear within their elected positions. Parliaments as institutions have a key role to play in shaping processes and work environments that are conducive to women's full participation.

Women representatives cannot have a meaningful role and make substantial contributions if they are subject to sexism, harassment and violence in parliaments. Once women are given the opportunity to participate fully and meaningfully in their parliaments, more gender-responsive legislation, budgets and policies can be adopted and implemented to benefit larger societies for generations to come. At the same time, more women will be encouraged to enter politics given more conducive work environments and the opportunity to enact concrete reforms. However, gender sensitivity is about more than just ensuring women can fully participate. It is also about guaranteeing that parliamentary outcomes advance gender equality in society. While research shows that women in parliament have promoted the gender equality agenda, this objective must be understood as the responsibility of the institution as a whole – and of men and women alike.

Gender-sensitive parliaments highlight the substantive contribution women can make in these institutions. A gender-sensitive parliament is one where women's caucuses take place, where gender quotas are implemented, and where gender equality is valued. It is an institution where women have a space and where that they can use that space in the best way possible. It is the creation of an enabling and inclusive environment where women have the power and necessary support to make a difference. Advocates are hungry to see legislation that enables gender equality in all aspects of life. Gender-sensitive parliaments are key to craft and implement gender-responsive legislation

As this paper has shown, parliaments have been making laudable contributions towards fostering gender-sensitivity within their institutions, but more needs to be done to support them. Parliaments still have a lot to contribute towards gender equality, and there are still many avenues for organizations to partner with them in their journey.

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ⁱⁱⁱ IPU (2016). The freedom of women to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference: Building partnerships between men and women to achieve this objective. *135th IPU Assembly Resolution*. Geneva, Switzerland. Access here: <http://archive.ipu.org/conf-e/135/item4.pdf>

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^{vi} IPU (2016). Evaluating the gender sensitivity of parliaments: A self-assessment toolkit. Geneva, Switzerland. Access here: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/toolkits/2016-11/evaluating-gender-sensitivity-parliaments-self-assessment-toolkit>

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^{ix} CEDAW and IPU (2019). Women's political leadership: Striving for balance: 50/50 by 2030". Geneva, Switzerland. Joint statement by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Access here: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24279&LangID=E>

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^{xi} IPU (2016). Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians. Geneva, Switzerland. Access here: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>

^{xii} IPU (2018). Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe. Geneva, Switzerland. Access here: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe>

^{xiii} IPU (2019). Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament. Geneva, Switzerland. Access here: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2019-11/guidelines-elimination-sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliament>

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