



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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145th IPU Assembly

Kigali, Rwanda
11-15 October 2022



145th IPU ASSEMBLY
2022 | Kigali, Rwanda

Parity debate

Rejuvenating parliaments: Why younger and gender-sensitive parliaments are more effective and efficient institutions

Thursday, 13 October 2022
11:30 to 13:00, MH4, ground floor, KCC

The overall aim of a parity debate is to promote dialogue between women and men at the IPU and to encourage them to debate issues of common interest together. In line with the principle of a parity debate, the composition of the debating panel will be gender balanced. The order of speakers invited to intervene from the floor will also follow a gender-balanced sequence. Having an equal number of men and women speak in the debate will allow the different and complementary views and experiences of both genders to emerge. Delegations are therefore invited to be represented in this debate by male and female participants.

Concept note

It was in October 2012 – exactly ten years ago – that the IPU's groundbreaking *Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments* was adopted at the 127th IPU Assembly in Quebec City, Canada. The Plan defines a gender-sensitive parliament (GSP) as one that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its composition, structures, operations, methods, and work. It is a parliament that embodies gender equality and delivers on it.

Over the last decade, gender-sensitivity has become increasingly acknowledged as a global democratic standard. There is moreover increasing appreciation that only by *becoming* gender sensitive can parliaments be *truly* representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective – the essential characteristics of a democratic institution (IPU 2005). Around the world, more and more parliaments and legislatures are undertaking GSP audits and implementing gender sensitizing reforms. The IPU's 2016 *self-assessment tool* provides a framework to assess existing parliamentary practices and policies, identify possible areas for reform, plan for change, and establish mechanisms to monitor progress.

Another crucial development over the last decade is the world-wide acknowledgement that gender equality is a must for sustainable development, peace and prosperity. Sustainable Development Goal 5 calls on all countries to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” by 2030. Whilst there is still a long way to go to eliminate gender-based discrimination, stereotypes and violence, there is evidence of progress towards gender equality, including legal reforms, greater numbers of girls in school, and fewer child marriages for example.

Parliaments all over the world have contributed to advancements in gender equality and have adapted their working capacities and structures to better deliver on this goal. For example, there are today 178 gender-equality parliamentary committees worldwide, up from 151 five years ago. Many parliaments have also enhanced their capacities to work on gender equality goals by recruiting and/or training specialized staff, using sex-disaggregated data in their work, and implementing gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting.

In addition to the progress in gender equality outcomes to which parliaments have contributed, larger numbers of women MPs are another notable improvement in achieving gender-sensitive parliaments over the past 10 years. The percentage of women MPs has grown from 19.5 per cent in 2012 to 26.4 per cent in 2022. Changes in the composition of parliaments is associated with improvements in the way parliaments operate. More and more institutions provide equal opportunities for male and female members to access leadership positions and support the establishment of women's parliamentary caucuses. Responding to MPs and staff experiences of sexism and gender-based harassment and violence has also led parliaments to start developing preventative and counteractive strategies, policies, and mechanisms.

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Today's parliaments are also becoming younger institutions. MPs under 45 make up close to 30 per cent of MPs worldwide. Younger MPs not only have different life and work experiences, they also have greater expectations of parliaments as modern workplaces. IPU research demonstrates that long and busy parliamentary schedules, evening and/or night sessions, as well as in-country and international travel, makes reconciling parliamentary activities and family responsibilities challenging for both men and women MPs and parliamentary staff.

Responding to the caring needs of parent MPs is yet another improvement that is making parliaments more gender-sensitive institutions. For example, in 2011, 26 per cent of parliaments made no provisions for maternity leave and 49 per cent made none for paternity (IPU 2011). Today, images of MPs and indeed Prime Ministers with their babies in parliamentary chambers go viral, helping to normalize parenting and parliamentary work.

Technological progress and the use of IT – including measures rapidly adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – are a significant development in parliaments in recent years. Best practices of online and hybrid arrangements point to flexibility, efficiency, productivity, as well as gender-sensitive, gains. For example, recent pandemic-related innovations include remote voting, online plenaries, and online or hybrid committee sessions. This has permitted MPs to continue with their parliamentary duties when they were required to isolate and/or provide homeschooling. Technology and gender sensitivity have huge potential to go hand in hand.

But despite progress in many areas, today no country has achieved gender equality, and no parliament is 100 per cent gender sensitive. It is indisputable that gender *ins*sensitive institutions produce negative consequences for individual members, for the parliament as a whole and for their societies. Ensuring the highest quality representation, legislative, and scrutiny work by all MPs, requires parliaments to meet the needs and aspirations of their younger, more gender-balanced and more diverse memberships. Healthy democracies require strong parliaments where *all* MPs can function to the very best of their abilities and ambitions, and in so doing, better represent the needs and interests of those they represent and ensure successful and sustainable societies.

Parliaments that do not rejuvenate/modernize/evolve, ossify at best, and decline at worse.

Looking at the future of gender-sensitive parliaments, participants are invited to share their views and experiences and to identify answers to the following key questions:

- What barriers do younger and more diverse MPs face in undertaking their parliamentary work? And how can parliaments better adapt to the needs and aspirations of these more diverse members?
- What is needed for parliaments to accelerate progress towards achieving gender equality in the next ten years?
- In what ways did new technologies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to better (or worse) parliamentary: (i) procedures and processes; (ii) outputs and outcomes; and (iii) gender-sensitive and family-friendly rules, practices, and culture? How might technological innovations be improved upon yet further?

Moderator: Mr. Ulrich Lechte, Member of Parliament (Germany)

Panellists:

- **Ms. Martha Ruiz Flores**, Member of Parliament (Bolivia)
- **Mr. John Kiarie**, Member of Parliament and Chair of the IPU Committee to Promote Respect for International Humanitarian Law (Kenya)
- **Ms. Andréanne Larouche**, Member of Parliament (Canada)
- **Mr. Jamal Fakhro**, Vice President of the Shura Council (Bahrain)
- **Ms. Sarah Childs**, Professor of Politics and Gender, University of Edinburgh