



Conference report

Democracy, human rights, gender equality and youth participation

The principles of democracy were set out by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in the 1997 [Universal Declaration on Democracy](#) and vigorously reaffirmed at its 137th Assembly, held in St Petersburg, Russian Federation, in 2017. According to these principles, democracy aims to protect and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual, instil social justice, and foster economic and social development. As a form of government, it is the best way of achieving these objectives. It is also the only political system that has the capacity for self-correction. The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society, as well as an openness to the participation and contribution of youth and diverse groups.

In its 2006 publication [Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century: A guide to good practice](#), the IPU defined a democratic parliament as one that was representative, open and transparent, accessible, accountable, and effective at the national and international levels. Since then, parliaments have continued to evolve to meet new challenges and expectations. Parliaments, like democracy itself, can always improve. For example, the [Declaration on parliamentary leadership for more effective multilateralism that delivers peace and sustainable development for the people and planet](#), adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic at the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, called for recovery efforts to uphold the rule of law, democratic principles and universal human rights, to be inclusive, sustainable and green, and to incorporate innovative solutions to the climate crisis. It encouraged parliaments to continue to innovate and expand the use of digital technologies – a call that is more salient than ever today with the expansion of artificial intelligence, with its attendant opportunities and threats.

This report, prepared for the Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, reviews current trends, examines the IPU's work and proposes the way forward in three areas that are central to the Organization's mission: defending the human rights of parliamentarians, advancing equality between men and women in political participation, and promoting youth participation in politics.

Section 1: Defending the human rights of parliamentarians

At the heart of the IPU's mandate lies the promotion and protection of human rights – a cornerstone of democratic societies and peaceful international cooperation. As representatives of the people, MPs play a pivotal role in upholding these rights, advancing the rule of law and holding governments accountable.

Defending and protecting the human rights of MPs is therefore not just about safeguarding individuals. It is also about protecting the very foundation of democracy. When MPs are arbitrarily detained, harassed or stripped of their rights for political reasons, the institution of parliament is undermined and the voices of the citizens they represent are silenced.

For almost five decades now, the IPU's [Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians](#) (CHRP) has investigated allegations of human rights violations against MPs and worked behind the scenes to resolve cases through dialogue, diplomacy and international pressure. The track record of this unique mechanism speaks to its importance and impact.

Recent examples of the IPU's impact

In Sri Lanka, sustained pressure from the IPU led to the release of two opposition MPs, Mr. Rishad Bathiudeen and Mr. Ranjan Ramanayake, in 2022. Both had been imprisoned under contentious circumstances and their cases were the subject of repeated interventions by the CHRP.

In Türkiye, the IPU had long been advocating for the release of Ms. Aysel Tuğluk, a former opposition MP suffering from deteriorating health. After years of appeals highlighting her medical condition and unjust detention, she was finally released in October 2022.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, IPU support contributed to the acquittals of two former MPs, Mr. Eugène Ndongala and Mr. Frank Diongo, enabling them to re-engage in public life.



Ms. de Lima arrested in Manila, February 2017 © Ted Aljibe/AFP

In the Philippines, Ms. Leila de Lima, an opposition member of the Senate, was acquitted in June 2024 after spending more than seven years in prison on charges widely seen as politically motivated. Her case attracted considerable global attention. The IPU maintained pressure on the authorities, sent trial observers and visited Ms. de Lima in prison.

In Zimbabwe, opposition MP Mr. Job Sikhala was released in January 2024 after 595 days in custody. The IPU had conducted several trial observation missions to the country and engaged in continued dialogue with the authorities.

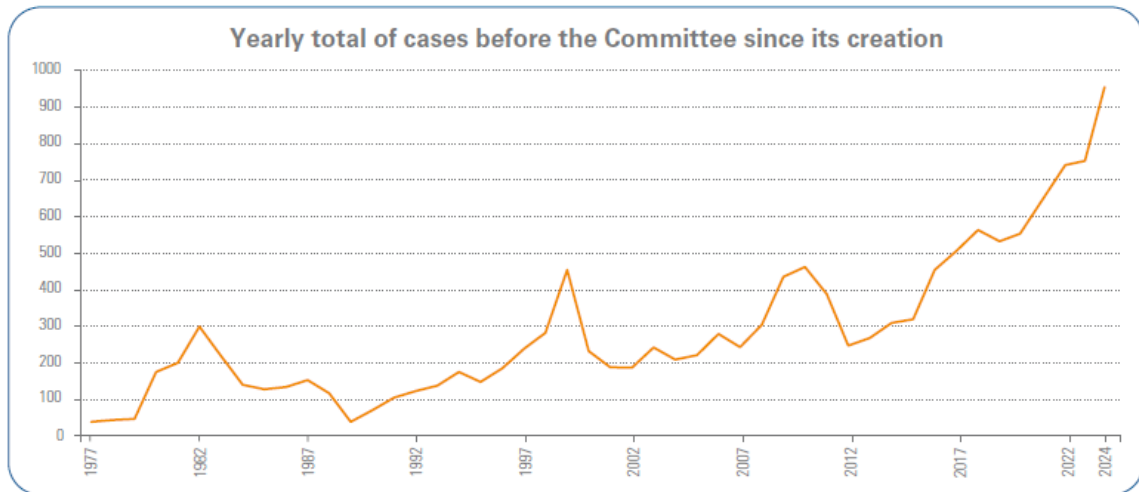


Mr. Sikhala with IPU Secretary General Mr. Martin Chungong, 2024 ©

In Senegal, two former opposition MPs, Mr. Khalifa Sall and Mr. Ousmane Sonko, were released, all criminal proceedings against them were dismissed and their full political rights were restored. As a result, Mr. Sall was able to run as a candidate in the March 2024 presidential election, while Mr. Sonko was appointed as Prime Minister.

In Iraq, former MP Mr. Ahmed Al-Alwani [was released on 23 April 2025](#) after more than a decade in detention. His case had been closely monitored by the CHRP, which consistently called for his release. In August 2023, a delegation from the Committee visited Baghdad, meeting with senior Iraqi officials, Mr. Al-Alwani himself, his family and his legal team. This mission marked a turning point, fostering dialogue, transparency and trust. During the visit, the CHRP also engaged with religious and political leaders, urging them to call for a halt to Mr. Al-Alwani's pending execution and to encourage a just resolution. His eventual release is a powerful example of what sustained, principled diplomacy can achieve.

A worrying trend



The number of cases brought before the CHRP has more than tripled over the past decade, from 311 in 2014 to 956 in 2024. This dramatic increase highlights a worrying global trend: a growing number of parliamentarians appear to be facing threats, harassment or violence simply for carrying out their duties. Opposition MPs continue to be disproportionately targeted, often for exercising their freedom of expression.

The CHRP is currently monitoring cases from 52 countries – a 27% increase on the 41 countries it monitored a decade ago. Complaints have been received from every region of the world, suggesting that this is not an isolated or regional problem but, instead, a systemic threat to parliamentary democracy globally.

Good practices

Several parliaments have taken robust action to promote parliamentary solidarity in response to these concerning trends. For instance, in 2003, the German Bundestag launched [Parliamentarians Protect Parliamentarians](#), a pioneering initiative to defend MPs at risk worldwide. And in November 2024, the Chamber of Deputies of Luxembourg invited the CHRP to engage directly with MPs, national institutions and academics, setting the stage for meaningful dialogue and facilitating intersectoral connections in support of threatened parliamentarians.

What parliaments can do

Parliaments could take the following national-level actions to help reverse the troubling tide of violations against MPs:

- Cooperate with the CHRP by providing information when requested, attending hearings, welcoming delegations and engaging in follow-up on the Committee's decisions, including in cases concerning other countries.
- Adopt specific legal and procedural safeguards that protect MPs – especially those representing opposition parties or marginalized groups – from arbitrary suspension or loss of mandate, and from threats or harassment.
- Ensure MPs subjected to abuse receive legal, psychological and institutional support.
- Press governments for full investigations and accountability in cases of violations.
- Mainstream human rights considerations – both national and global – across all core parliamentary functions, using the IPU's [Parliaments and Human Rights self-assessment toolkit](#) and other relevant resources for support.
- Establish national oversight systems to document and report on violations of MPs' rights around the world, integrating efforts with those of the IPU and other international organizations.
- Institutionalize [parliamentary solidarity](#) through dedicated parliamentary processes to foster transnational support networks for MPs in danger.

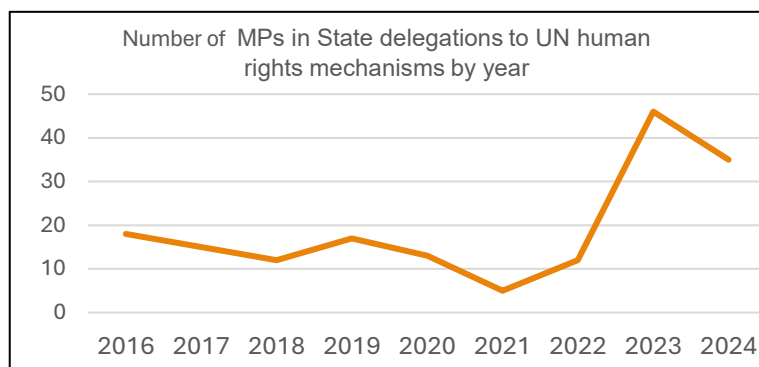
Parliamentary engagement with United Nations human rights mechanisms

The IPU is committed to enhancing the role of parliaments in promoting and protecting human rights by supporting their engagement with UN human rights mechanisms, including the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) – especially its universal periodic review (UPR) process – and UN human rights treaty bodies (TBs). The Organization helps parliaments engage in all stages of the reporting and follow-up procedures, i.e. in the drafting of the national report submitted to these mechanisms, in the review sessions (when parliamentarians are included in State delegations) and in the domestic implementation of HRC and TB recommendations.

Over the years, the IPU has been closely monitoring the participation of parliamentarians in State delegations coming to Geneva to attend UPR or TB sessions. Between 2020 and May 2025, 123 MPs participated in such delegations, including 85 only for the UPR, with 46 parliamentarians, including 34 only for the UPR, taking part in 2023 alone. This record figure testifies to the efforts of the IPU and its partners, who have long been working to increase parliamentary involvement in major UN processes. The IPU has also held capacity-building workshops and briefings, giving parliamentarians an opportunity to share good practices and discuss the importance of participating in the reporting and follow-up cycle.

Good practices

In Uzbekistan, parliamentarians have taken part in or led the State delegation to every review session of the UPR and TBs since 2020, when the Supreme Assembly established the Parliamentary Commission on Follow-up and Compliance with International Human Rights Obligations after receiving input from the IPU and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as part of a workshop. The body holds hearings on all outstanding reports and monitors progress on implementation, including through oversight by human rights institutions that report directly to parliament. An Uzbek MP was elected to the HRC in 2024.



In 2022, after an IPU follow-up workshop, the Parliament of Burkina Faso contributed to the implementation of recommendations from the UPR process, including revising the mandate of the National Human Rights Commission.

In Morocco, MPs helped prepare the country's national report to various human rights bodies and joined the State delegation that participated in sessions at the HRC and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2023.

In 2024, the National Assembly of Armenia held a series of workshops attended by members of its Standing Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Public Affairs, as well as by representatives of the government, civil society and international organizations. The sessions covered topics addressed under the UPR process, such as the rights of national minorities, women, children and forcibly displaced persons, and the implementation of UPR recommendations. Following these workshops, parliament provided comments to the national report and held two thematic hearings on the rights of national minorities and children in preparation for the UPR process.

In 2025, the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina was represented in the State delegation to the UPR session in Geneva. Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights subsequently held a workshop, where the outcomes of the process were presented and participants discussed the Committee's role in implementing relevant UPR recommendations, with a specific focus on the rights of persons with disabilities.

What parliaments can do

Considering the importance of the UPR process and the TBs, it is crucial that parliamentarians take part in the various stages of these international reporting mechanisms, supporting their mission to improve the well-being of the people through the promotion of their human rights.

Section 2: Advancing equality between men and women in political participation

Without women's full and equal participation, it is not possible to achieve democracy, secure peace or promote sustainable development. Gender equality in parliaments, and in society through the work of parliaments, is at the core of the IPU's mission to promote inclusive, representative and effective democratic governance.

The IPU is the leading global authority on data on women in parliament. Over the years, it has developed comprehensive frameworks to support women's participation in parliaments around the world, helping to set gender parity as the ultimate goal. This commitment is reflected in key documents such as the [Kigali Declaration](#), adopted at the 145th IPU Assembly in October 2022, and [From Mexico to the world: Let's mobilize for gender parity!](#), a plan of action for advancing gender parity in parliament adopted at the [IPU Global Conference of Women Parliamentarians](#) in March 2025.

The IPU has also conducted research and published guidance on gender-sensitive parliaments and the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament, helping to shape global understanding and action in these areas. Through its [Forum of Women Parliamentarians](#), established in 1985, the IPU has led efforts to redress the gender imbalance in political representation in national parliaments and to ensure that women, in all their diversity, are equally represented in politics.

Global frameworks such as the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW) and [CEDAW Committee General recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems](#) provide a strong and coherent foundation for advancing women's political participation. Collectively, these frameworks underscore the urgency of removing structural barriers and continue to guide and strengthen the efforts of institutions such as the IPU towards building more inclusive, representative and gender-equal democracies, with gender parity in numbers and in influence, and a gender parity culture.

Women's participation in parliament

The IPU report [Women in parliament 1995–2025](#), published in March 2025, reveals that, 30 years on from the [Fourth World Conference on Women](#), held in Beijing, China, in 1995, women's representation in national parliaments has more than doubled, from 11.3% to 27.2%. However, recent trends indicate that progress is stalling. In 2024, despite 73 chamber renewals globally, women's parliamentary representation increased by only 0.3 percentage points – the slowest increase since 2017. At this rate, it would take 60 years to achieve gender parity.

As of 2025, six countries – Andorra, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates – have achieved or exceeded gender parity in their lower or single chambers. Gender quotas have been a crucial driver of these gains. In 2024, countries with legislated quotas elected or appointed women to 31.2% of parliamentary seats, nearly double the 16.8% average in countries without such measures. Electoral systems that favour proportional representation and proactive political-party policies have also served to advance women's representation.

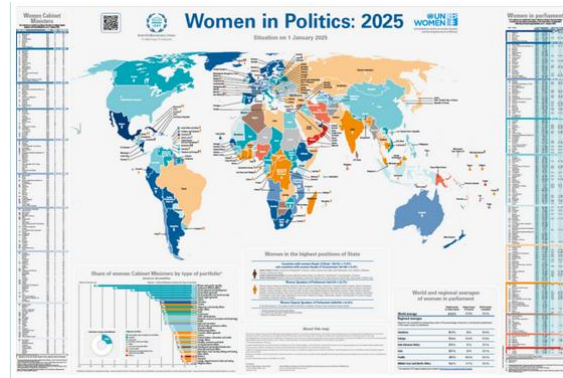
Despite these positive trends, significant challenges persist. These include harmful norms that perpetuate the idea that women do not belong in politics, and widespread political violence against women, including harassment and abuse during election campaigns. Addressing these barriers is essential to sustaining momentum and ensuring that progress towards gender parity in political representation continues without interruption.

Women in political leadership

Women remain significantly underrepresented in top parliamentary leadership roles.

As of January 2025, women held 23.7% of Speaker positions – a slight decrease from the January 2024 figure of 23.8%. However, there has been progress over a longer period: in 1995, only 10.5% of Speakers were women.

Progress in women's participation in executive and government roles remains similarly uneven. The [Women in Politics: 2025](#) map, published jointly by the IPU and UN Women, shows a slight increase in the number of women Heads of State or Government versus 2024. However, the share of women ministers fell from 23.3% to 22.9% over the same period, with only 9 countries reaching or exceeding gender parity in ministerial positions – down from 15 in 2024.



Violence against women in politics

Most women parliamentarians surveyed for IPU [reports on sexism, harassment and violence against women](#) in parliament have reported facing routine harassment – especially verbal and psychological abuse – in the conduct of their duties. The figures are striking: 80–85% of women MPs in Europe and Africa have reported experiencing psychological harassment, while 60% of those surveyed in the Asia-Pacific region have been subjected to online abuse.

These numbers clearly illustrate both the scale and the severity of the issue. Rates of psychological and sexual violence are significantly higher among certain groups of women parliamentarians, especially younger women, unmarried women and those from minority backgrounds – all of which highlights the urgent need for an intersectional response. The prevalence and consistency of these findings point to violence against women in politics being a global and systemic barrier to women's full and equal participation in political life.

The way forward

In 2025, the IPU launched [Achieving gender equality, action by action](#), a landmark campaign that all Speakers of parliament and MPs are urged to implement. The campaign sets out 10 actions for achieving gender equality in parliament:

Achieve parity in parliament and politics

1. Enact parity laws to ensure 50:50 representation in elections and political roles.
2. Eliminate violence against women in parliament and politics through legislation on online and offline violence and internal policies in parliament.
3. Include women in politics in all their diversity through electoral quotas and fair and inclusive selection processes.

Make parliaments gender-sensitive

4. Assess your Parliament's gender sensitivity using the IPU's evaluation tool.
5. Achieve equality in leadership roles for women and men in your Parliament through quotas, co-leadership and rotation.
6. Foster a gender-sensitive culture in your Parliament by implementing policies for equality and work-life balance, and against discrimination, sexism, harassment and violence against women.

Create a world free from gender-based discrimination and violence

7. Revise and eliminate laws that discriminate against women and girls.
8. Prevent and punish violence against women and girls through strong and comprehensive legislation.
9. Track legislation and monitor budgets to support gender equality and gender mainstreaming.

And...

10. Speak out against gender-based inequality and violence whenever and wherever you see it!

Section 3: Promoting youth participation in politics

The state of play and the IPU's response

Responsive, inclusive and representative decision-making requires the full and effective participation of all people, including youth – not least because young people have much to offer in addressing the critical challenges faced by people of all ages, including climate change, conflict and new technologies.

People under the age of 30 account for about half of the world's population but only 2.8% of parliamentarians globally, with 39% of parliaments having no members in this age group. There are many barriers impeding young men and women from running for political office or being politically active. Legal obstacles play a particularly prominent role: for 70% of parliamentary chambers, the minimum age to stand as a candidate is older than the minimum voting age. Financial barriers, harmful social norms and circumstantial access challenges also act as obstacles to youth participation in politics.

The 2010 resolution [Youth participation in the democratic process](#), adopted at the 122nd IPU Assembly in Bangkok, Thailand, called on parliaments to take comprehensive legal and policy action to enhance youth participation in politics. The [Forum of Young Parliamentarians](#) was created in 2013 as a meeting place to promote youth participation in the IPU and in politics globally.¹

Another IPU initiative in this area is the [Youth Participation programme](#), which publishes authoritative data on youth participation in parliament, offers technical support to parliaments to promote youth engagement and empower young MPs, and provides policy guidance on issues of importance to young people. The Organization also hosts the yearly [IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians](#).

Recent priorities

Following the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, young MPs placed special priority on empowering young people on the topics of climate action, and peace and security.

In 2022, the IPU Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians, held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, focused on the theme *Young MPs for climate action*. The outcomes of the event contributed to the subsequent COP27 conference, also held in Egypt.

The IPU has also undertaken other climate-related initiatives, including *Empowerment series* briefings for young MPs and the production of a road map on climate action. At COP28, held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in 2023, the IPU held its first ever event in the "blue zone", entitled [How can women and young MPs make the difference: Partnerships for change](#).

At the 148th IPU Assembly, held in Geneva, Switzerland, in March 2024, the Forum of Young Parliamentarians held an exchange with the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs on the role of young MPs in promoting [UN Security Council resolution 2250 \(2015\)](#) and in advancing the related youth, peace and security agenda. This was followed by several *Empowerment series*

¹ In October 2024, the IPU amended its Statutes and Rules, lowering the age to be considered a young parliamentarian from age 45 or under to "below the age of 40 years".

briefings on the topic, which led to the production of a policy document on the role of young MPs in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Since then, the IPU has continued to provide national-level support to countries facing security challenges.

More recently, young MPs have placed increased emphasis on advancing gender equality – in line with IPU’s priority theme for 2025 – and on building bridges with youth groups and civil society. *Empowerment series* briefings held in 2024 and 2025 have focused on promoting gender equality and eliminating violence against women. To coincide with its 10th anniversary, the Forum of Young Parliamentarians held its first ever open session, offering a platform for vibrant exchange between young MPs and youth representatives. This initiative led to the creation of the *Young MPs Open Dialogue Series*: the first meeting, held in April 2025, focused on transforming negative gender social norms.

Catalysing action through the *I Say Yes to Youth in Parliament!* campaign

In the lead-up to the 2021 World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, the IPU launched the [*I Say Yes to Youth in Parliament!*](#) campaign, which aims to drive transformative change through six key pledges. As of May 2025, close to 2,400 changemakers had signed up, including almost 1,000 MPs and more than 75 Speakers of parliament, as well as dozens of Heads of State, UN agencies and other organizations. The campaign has also been launched in over 30 parliaments, and has led to dozens of concrete actions, including the adoption of youth quotas, the lowering of ages to run for office, the creation of new youth caucuses, and the delivery of empowerment training sessions for young MPs.



The Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament offers an opportunity for Speakers who have not yet done so to sign up to the campaign and join this growing community.

Twenty-three more Speakers of parliament are needed to reach the goal of 100. Speakers can pledge their support by signing up here: www.ipu.org/campaign/pledge-now