



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Parliamentary Forum at the 2025 UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Gender equality and health: fast forwarding progress

22 July 2025
United Nations, New York

Summary report

Introduction

1. The Parliamentary Forum at the United Nations (UN) High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is designed to engage parliamentarians in assessing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2025 Forum, held on 22 July in New York, focused on two SDGs under review at the HLPF: SDG 3 on health and well-being, and SDG 5 on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. The Forum featured two sessions with experts and highlighted steps parliamentarians could take to advance progress towards these two Goals and the broader SDG framework.

Opening session

2. **Dr. Tulia Ackson**, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), welcomed the parliamentarians and said the hearing offered a key opportunity for them to make their voices heard at the UN. Fewer than 20% of SDG targets were on track globally and no country was set to achieve all of the Goals by the 2030 deadline. An estimated US\$ 4 trillion was needed each year to get the job done, which was not impossible given that the size of the global economy stood at \$100 trillion. But not enough was being done to fulfil aid commitments, find sustainable solutions to growing debt problems, impose progressive tax policies and reform the global financial system – all actions that would propel progress towards the SDGs. About 50 countries were in conflict, and governments were wasting time, energy and trillions in military spending instead of investing in diplomacy and dialogue, which were cheaper and more effective. The biggest threat to national security was human insecurity, which was driving social unrest and political tension.
3. While there had been progress in some areas, SDGs 3 and 5 were badly off track even though they were vital for realization of all the SDGs. The IPU had resources to assist parliaments, including the *SDG-informed legislative scrutiny* toolkit. While national Voluntary National Reviews were critical, surveys had shown that just one third of parliaments were contributing to these annual SDG progress reports. Parliamentarians were urged to act swiftly on the SDGs: with only five years left, every day was an opportunity to make a difference.

SDG 5: The role of parliaments in delivering on gender equality

4. SDG 5 is not just one goal, but a precondition for the success of the entire 2030 Agenda. Unfortunately, there is coordinated pushback against women's and girls' rights, their bodily autonomy, and gender equality. This pushback is rooted in patriarchal gender norms and political opportunism and fuelled by misinformation and violence. Attacks against women and their sexual and reproductive health and rights are taking place throughout the world, and many countries are seeing an upsurge in misogynist movements. Women and girls are disproportionately affected in conflict and war, subjected to female genital mutilation and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, and often excluded from education and public life. Funding for gender-responsive policies and women's empowerment has been slashed, legal protections rolled back and discrimination emboldened.

5. As 2025 marks 30 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, parliaments must fight against these attacks on women's rights, ensure hard-won gains made over the years are not lost, and promote an ambitious agenda to advance gender equality. Parliamentarians should enact gender-responsive laws and policies, pass gender-sensitive budgets, and hold their governments accountable. They must enshrine women's rights in national laws and constitutions, establish gender parity as the only viable path to true equality, and consider establishing and strengthening dedicated parliamentary bodies for monitoring and oversight, such as gender committees and women's caucuses.
6. Women's equal representation in politics is vital for peace and security, the economy, sustainable development, and social justice. Gender parity in numbers and influence is key for women to successfully change the parliamentary agenda – and, importantly, policy outcomes improve with inclusive decision-making. But women remain grossly underrepresented because patriarchy is embedded in societies and institutions – parliaments, governments and across the board. Progress over the last 30 years, while tangible and important, has been too slow, fragile and inconsistent.
7. One hundred countries have no guarantees for women's participation in politics, and it is projected that a girl born today will be 39 years old before parity is reached in national parliaments worldwide. Women in politics continue to face gendered barriers including deeply entrenched stereotypes, sexual harassment, threats and violence – be it online or offline. Men dominate decision-making: data from the IPU and UN Women show that only 28 countries are led by women and 102 nations have never had a woman at the helm. Women make up only 23% of cabinet ministers and nine countries have no women in cabinet. While today's frameworks call for 50-50 gender parity in politics, the global average of 27% women falls short of even the 30% target set 35 years ago.
8. Electoral quotas are a key driver of gender parity but remain underused. According to UN Women, 93 countries have legislated electoral quotas at the national level. Of those, 73 have adopted quotas in electoral laws, 25 in parity laws and 17 in their constitutions. But only 37% of these countries have set targets in excess of 40% for women's participation. To improve the effectiveness of quotas, parliamentarians must set bold targets, enact ranking and replacement rules that give women a chance to stand for winnable seats, and use enforcement mechanisms such as non-registration and financial penalties for political parties that fail to comply.

Recommendations for parliamentarians for achieving gender equality:

- (a) **Enshrine women's rights in constitutions and legislative frameworks, in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international conventions.** Adopt national action plans and use gender-responsive budgetary and oversight powers to fund and enforce them.
- (b) **Strengthen normative, legal and regulatory frameworks to boost women's participation in politics, including by adopting electoral quotas.** Set ambitious, mandatory quota targets and duly enforce them. Use financial incentives and other measures to push for political parties to nominate, fund and support women, especially in winnable seats.
- (c) **Promote gender parity at all levels and in all spheres of influence,** including at home, at work, in the community, and on both the national and international stages. Ensure that at least 50% of delegates at hearings such as the Parliamentary Forum are women.
- (d) **Educate girls and boys, as well as young people, about equality, egalitarian values, and the importance of promoting the role of women and girls** in leadership and decision-making.

- (e) **Advance gender-responsive institutional policies and procedures** to allow women's meaningful participation and leadership, including zero-tolerance policies towards sexism, harassment and violence against women, as well as family-friendly policies, and quotas for leadership positions.
- (f) **Ensure that public participation is at the heart of the legislative process.** For example, public participation is mandated by the Constitution of Kenya, helping to engage communities and ensure that the experiences of vulnerable and marginalized groups shape policy responses.
- (g) **Form parliamentary gender committees and women's caucuses to promote gender equality and support the empowerment of women in parliament.** Ensure that such mechanisms are well-resourced and include both men and women.
- (h) **Address the needs of women and girls with targeted programmes and services.** For example, Algeria has created centres for political and economic assistance for women, while Mexico has reformed its administrative and criminal code to protect adolescents' rights.
- (i) **Review policies and budgets around caregiving.** Unpaid care work often falls to women and prevents them from meaningfully participating in civic and political life.
- (j) **Build solidarity with male colleagues** who support gender-equality work, since a more equal world would benefit everyone.
- (k) **Speak up and show international solidarity** when discrimination, violence and the silencing of women take place. Support an effort to recognize gender apartheid as a crime in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

SDG 3: No one left behind: The role of parliaments in health for all

9. SDG 3 focuses on ensuring healthy lives and well-being for all, with priorities in areas such as universal health coverage, and reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health. While recent years have seen reduced child mortality rates and better HIV treatment, progress has been minimal in areas such as maternal mortality and access to health services. In 2019, world leaders adopted the *Political declaration of the high-level meeting on universal health coverage*. In the same year, parliaments from around the world adopted the IPU resolution *Achieving universal health coverage by 2030: The role of parliaments in ensuring the right to health*. Both resolutions demonstrated the importance of achieving health for all. Yet, in 2021, 4.5 billion people did not have full access to essential health services.
10. Health inequities persist, and women and girls face systemic obstacles to, and growing attacks on, their sexual and reproductive health and rights, which are fundamental to human dignity, empowerment, gender equality and sustainable development. Every US\$ 1 invested in family planning and maternal health yields more than US\$ 8 in economic benefits. But information on, and services for, sexual and reproductive health are consistently politicized and underfunded in universal health coverage policies, strategies and plans. Discrimination and harmful stereotypes block access to essential services, and barriers are institutionalized in norms, laws and policies. Women and girls suffer and die when medical treatment is denied because of restrictive policies and norms. And every two minutes, a woman dies from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.
11. Other key areas of concern raised include reduced aid, entrenched public-health scepticism, vaccine hesitation, growing isolationism, and attacks on women's health, all of which have created roadblocks to the achievement of healthy lives for all. There is also a need for more complex and long-term care for ageing societies, more mental-health and preventive services, and greater access to health services for rural and other vulnerable populations – all of which require targeted action.

Recommendations for parliamentarians to help ensure health for all:

- (a) **Strengthen the healthcare workforce.** The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that, by 2030, there will be a global shortage of 10 million healthcare workers. This figure includes 1 million midwives, who provide 90% of essential sexual and reproductive health services.
- (b) **Ensure financial protections and integrate sexual and reproductive health and rights into universal health coverage.** Financial barriers discourage people from seeking the services they need. Parliaments must therefore incorporate protections into universal health programmes and national health benefit packages. The World Health Organization (WHO) is developing a short guide on integrating sexual and reproductive health and rights into universal health coverage. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, to take one example, has embedded free maternal healthcare in its universal health coverage law.
- (c) **Prioritize the use of data in addressing health inequities, ensure that healthcare service provision is science-based, and ensure that such services are used equitably.** Comprehensive, disaggregated and rights-based data is needed to understand and address disparities in healthcare services and associated outcomes. Data must help close gaps, not exacerbate them through biased algorithms and other shortcomings. Parliamentarians should also build relationships with the scientific community and ensure science-based policymaking.
- (d) **Focus on preventive care, and acknowledge and reinforce critical linkages,** such as between gender equality and health. Preventive healthcare is almost always cheaper than curative healthcare. Empowering women improves their health and the health of their families. Parliaments must ensure that policies across sectors – including climate change and education – support people's health and well-being.
- (e) **Improve international cooperation and support multilateral organizations** to create coordinated, cross-border solutions on issues that impact people's health and well-being, including substance addiction, gender-based violence and human trafficking. Fund and support partners and organizations such as UNFPA, UN Women and WHO.
- (f) **Break taboos through education, awareness campaigns, services, and laws and policies.** In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, young women who are pregnant cannot be cast out of schools. In Romania, an awareness campaign aims to reduce teenage pregnancies. And in Austria, the government is funding sexual education programmes by subsidizing helplines for young people, as well as fighting period poverty by providing free products.
- (g) **Invest in serving vulnerable populations,** including the elderly, people with disabilities and those in rural areas. For example, Greece is shifting from hospital-centred to community-based health models focused on primary and long-term care to serve the needs of an ageing society.

Closing session

12. **Mr. Martin Chungong**, Secretary General of the IPU, said the Forum had confirmed that progress towards SDGs 3 and 5 was lagging worldwide. Some countries had made progress by enshrining women's rights in their constitutions, legislation and policies, but more work was needed to end discrimination and to ensure gender equality and parity. Parliamentarians were encouraged to work with each other, follow best practices, and ratify documents such as the *WHO Pandemic Agreement* to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. The establishment of gender equality committees, women's caucuses and similar bodies was important for parliaments to hold their governments accountable and help propel progress towards the SDGs. Parliamentarians must muster the political will to fast-track the SDGs, be more forceful about their implementation, and improve the enforcement of laws and policies already in place to ensure gender equality and healthy lives for all.

List of speakers

Opening session

- Dr. Tulia Ackson, President of the IPU

Session I: SDG 5: The role of parliaments in delivering on gender equality

- Moderator: Ms. Paddy Torsney, Head of the Office of the IPU Permanent Observer to the UN in New York
- Ms. Gabriela Morawska-Stanecka, Vice-President of the IPU, Member of the Senate of Poland
- Mr. Mohamed Sabbari, First Deputy Speaker of the Chamber of Representatives of Morocco
- Ms. Fatuma Dullo, Member of the Senate of Kenya, Member of the Kenya Women Parliamentary Association (KEWOPA)
- Ms. Julie Ballington, Policy Adviser on Political Participation, Leadership and Governance Section, UN Women

Session II: SDG 3: No one left behind: The role of parliaments in health for all

- Moderator: Ms. Farida Ilimi, Member of the National People's Assembly of Algeria, Member of the IPU Committee on Health
- Ms. Petra Bayr, Member of the National Council of Austria
- Mr. John Banza Lunda, Member of the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Ms. Soyoltuya Bayaraa, Deputy Director, Programme Division, UNFPA

Closing session

- Mr. Martin Chungong, Secretary General of the IPU