



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

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2nd Session of the PAM Women Parliamentary Forum
Empowering Women for Cohesive and Inclusive Societies: From the Gulf to the
Mediterranean

The Future of Women Fora: How Women Can Lead and Inspire in Times of
Fragmentation

Wednesday, 28 January 2026

Allow me first to express my deep appreciation to the United Arab Emirates and to the Federal National Council for hosting us here in Abu Dhabi, and to acknowledge, with profound respect, Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, for her leadership in fostering dialogue and advancing gender equality.

I also wish to thank the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean for bringing us together, and the PAM Women Parliamentary Forum for convening this timely dialogue—at a moment when cohesion, inclusion, and leadership matter more than ever.

As we gather here today, the world is more fragmented and more uncertain than at any time in recent memory. In such moments, it can feel tempting to retreat into what is familiar, what is immediate, what seems controllable. But this is precisely when multilateralism matters the most: as the essential space where we keep channels open, manage differences, and build solutions that no country can secure alone.

That conviction is in the DNA of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The IPU was created in 1889, as the first political organization for global dialogue. It was born from a simple but enduring idea: even when positions diverge, dialogue must remain possible.

Today, the IPU brings together 183 Member Parliaments and 15 Associate Members. As the world's organization of parliaments, our mission remains the same: to make dialogue possible at all times, and to make it consequential.

And this is where parliamentary diplomacy matters so deeply. When executive channels freeze, parliaments can still speak. When traditional channels harden, legislators can still listen. Parliamentary diplomacy offers alternative pathways—beyond party lines, beyond borders. It is a safeguard for dialogue when that dialogue is most at risk.

So, when we ask, “What is the future of women fora?” we are also asking: what kind of multilateralism will endure in an era of fragmentation? Because cohesion and inclusion do not happen by accident. They are built rule by rule, culture by culture. And gender equality in decision-making is first and foremost a matter of rights. At the same time, it is also a governance imperative: the point has been made here yesterday and today, that when half the population is not fully represented, institutions lose legitimacy and become less resilient.

Looking at the facts, let us just remind ourselves that women now make up just over 27% of parliamentarians worldwide. In leadership positions the gap remains even more stark: women hold about one in five Speakers posts globally.

There has been progress—from 11.3% of women MPs in 1995 to 27.2% in 2025—but we should also be clear-eyed: in recent years, progress has stagnated. 2024 brought only a 0.3 percentage-point increase globally, the slowest rate since 2017.

When it comes to the Women, Peace and Security agenda, women's leadership appears all the more crucial. UN Women data shows that women's participation in peace processes increases the probability of an agreement lasting at least two years by 20%, and lasting 15 years by 35%. This is about the durability of peace itself.

But the reality is striking. In 2024, women made up only 7 per cent of negotiators on average worldwide, and nearly 9 out of 10 negotiation tracks included no women negotiators at all. Two thirds of mediation efforts did not include any woman mediator.

Against this backdrop, the message is simple. Gains are not self-sustaining. They require leadership, institutions that deliver and spaces that keep ambition alive and translate it into change. This is precisely why women's fora are not "side meetings". They are engines of democratic renewal. At the IPU, our experience is indicative of what women's fora can achieve over time. As the IPU President said yesterday, in 2025, the IPU Forum of Women Parliamentarians marked its 40 years of existence. Over four decades, the Forum has provided a space for empowerment, solidarity and impact. It has contributed, in practical ways, to shaping the IPU's priorities and working culture, helping ensure that gender equality is reflected increasingly in our day-to-day practices and decisions.

And we have learned something important: a forum becomes transformative when it has three things.

First: a forum needs institutional influence, not symbolic space.

To lead and inspire, women's fora must be connected to how decisions are made, so that gender equality is treated as a core measure of institutional legitimacy.

At the IPU, we have chosen to be explicit so that inclusion is not left to goodwill. Our Statutes and Rules require mainstreaming a gender perspective in all our work. They are couched in a way as to foster gender-balanced representation in our structures, with the ultimate goal of overall, 50:50 parity.

And we have backed this commitment with concrete mechanisms. Under the same rules, if a delegation attends two consecutive Assemblies composed exclusively of parliamentarians of the same sex, it faces voting penalties.

Second: a forum needs safety—physical safety and democratic safety.

Women cannot lead if they are forced to navigate intimidation, harassment, and violence, whether in corridors, in meetings, or online. They also cannot lead if the space for debate becomes hostile—if speaking up carries a personal cost.

This is not abstract. Four IPU studies have documented that sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments are disturbingly widespread: between 80% and 85% of women MPs surveyed reported experiencing some form of psychological violence during their term of office.

This must be met with zero tolerance—not as a slogan, but as a standard backed by rules, reporting mechanisms, and accountability. No woman should have to choose between public service and personal safety, and no space for dialogue can call itself democratic if intimidation is allowed to silence women's voices. This applies unequivocally to all women, from MPs to staff members and interns.

Within the IPU, we have moved from awareness to concrete protection. Our anti-harassment policy aims to foster an inclusive, respectful environment supported by clear definitions and reporting pathways.

And I would say to every institution represented here: a forum's credibility depends on whether women can participate without fear and speak without consequences. And that protection must extend to digital spaces as well as physical ones.

Third: a forum needs sustained access so women can enter, remain, and advance.

The future of our institutions depends on whether women can get in and whether they can stay in.

That means practical reforms: meeting times that recognize care responsibilities; facilities that make participation possible; working methods that support parenthood; and leadership pathways that do not rely on networks historically closed to women. This is the everyday architecture of equality, and it is where inclusion either becomes real, or remains rhetorical.

And this brings me to a final point: we must shift the paradigm of what women's fora are meant for and what they are meant to be.

The future is not fora as "events". The future is fora as institutional methodology, built into how organizations, parliaments, governments plan, convene, deliberate, and decide.

This is the logic behind the IPU's long-standing work on gender-sensitive parliaments: ensuring that rules, procedures, infrastructure, and culture enable women and men to participate equally and effectively.

It is also why, in my own role, I make it a point to champion gender equality in every forum available to me, including through the International Gender Champions network, where I serve as Chair of the Global Board. Through this network, we have helped advance practical guidance such as the Gender-Responsive Assemblies Toolkit which is a concrete "how-to" guide for making convenings more representative and more effective, before, during and after an assembly or fora.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The region we are in has always been a crossroads of trade, culture, and ideas. In our time, let it also be a crossroads of renewed multilateralism.

If the world is fragmenting, then our task is to build bridges, keep channels open, make institutions safe and ensure that women's fora are recognized as powerhouses of democratic resilience.

The IPU stands ready to work with you so that women lead not only in spite of fragmentation, but precisely to overcome it.

Thank you.