



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments

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ISBN: 978-92-9142-692-8

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Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments

**Adopted unanimously by the 127th IPU Assembly
(Quebec City, 26 October 2012)**

The 127th IPU Assembly,

Having before it the Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments,

Considering that the document was drawn up following an extensive process of consultation with IPU Members,

Mindful that the document resulting from this process proposes concrete solutions to situations common to all countries while offering a wide range of options responding to individual situations – national and regional – and that it represents a common basis for the advancement of gender-sensitive parliaments in all countries,

1. **Decides** to adopt the Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments;
2. **Strongly encourages** Members to bring this Plan of action to the attention of their parliaments and governments, disseminate it as widely as possible and implement it at the national level;
3. **Requests** the IPU Secretary General to ensure that this document is circulated as widely as possible at the international level and to promote its implementation at the national level.



The IPU Gender Partnership Group presents the Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments for adoption by the 127th Assembly (Quebec City, 26 October 2012).

Part 1: Preamble and objectives

Preamble

Democracy requires constant evaluation and reassessment. In the 20th century, one of the greatest changes to democracy around the world was the inclusion of increasing numbers of women, both as voters and as members of parliament.

In parallel, gender equality and women's empowerment have become an integral part of the international political and development agenda, recognized as being at the heart of progress towards, and achievement of, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Gender equality means that women and men enjoy full and equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Gender equality and women's empowerment are human rights, requiring political and legal expression. Countries must promote, respect and protect women's human rights, including gender equality.

Progress towards these goals requires direct action. While specific actions may need to take into account the individual cultural, social and religious context of parliaments around the world, progress essentially requires a widespread change in attitudes and perceptions.

Parliaments are well placed to champion the goal of gender equality. Parliaments aim to reflect society, and so they must reflect the changing dynamics of their electorates.

A gender-sensitive parliament is a parliament that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its composition, structures, operations, methods and work. Gender-sensitive parliaments remove the barriers 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. A gender-sensitive parliament 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.



The Plan of action is adopted by the 127th IPU Assembly.

Objectives

This Plan of action is designed to support parliaments in their efforts to become more gender-sensitive. It presents a broad range of strategies in seven action areas that can be implemented by all parliaments, irrespective of the number of women members.

Parliaments are called upon to take ownership of this Plan of action and to implement any or all of the Plan's strategies at the national level by setting concrete objectives, actions and deadlines suited to their national context. They are also called upon to regularly monitor and evaluate their progress towards the goal of gender sensitivity.

A gender-sensitive parliament responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and work.

A gender-sensitive parliament is one that:

1. Promotes and achieves equality in numbers of women and men across all of its bodies and internal structures.
2. Develops a gender equality policy framework suited to its own national parliamentary context.
3. Mainstreams gender equality throughout all of its work.
4. Fosters an internal culture that respects women's rights, promotes gender equality and responds to the needs and realities of MPs – men and women – to balance work and family responsibilities.
5. Acknowledges and builds on the contribution made by its men members who pursue and advocate for gender equality.
6. Encourages political parties to take a proactive role in the promotion and achievement of gender equality.
7. Equips its parliamentary staff with the capacity and resources to promote gender equality, actively encourages the recruitment and retention of women to senior positions, and ensures that gender equality is mainstreamed throughout the work of the parliamentary administration.

Part 2: Key action areas of the Plan

Action area 1

Increase the number of women in parliament and achieve equality in participation

Equality of participation can be both a catalyst for implementing gender-sensitive changes and an important outcome of successful gender-sensitive changes.

Access to parliament

While the representation of women in parliaments has increased slowly since the mid-twentieth century, it still does not match women's broader representation in society.

Increasing access to parliament through gender-sensitive changes will help increase the number of women parliamentarians, which can in turn prompt the further implementation of the principles of gender sensitivity.

To redress this imbalance, parliaments should implement one or more of the following measures:

- In line with their national context, adopt special measures to ensure that higher numbers of women are selected by parties to run in “winnable” seats, and propose amendments to electoral laws and national constitutions that provide for reserved seats.
- Condemn acts of violence against women candidates and parliamentarians and adopt legal and practical measures to prevent and punish such acts.
- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns on the importance of women's representation in parliament.
- Support mentorship programmes and promote women parliamentarians as role models through parliament's communications tools and in the media.
- Facilitate the sharing of experiences and best practices among parliamentarians through study tours to other parliaments in the region and internationally.

Achieving equality in positions and roles

While the number of women in parliament is important, it is equally important to have women in positions of parliamentary leadership.

The principles of gender-sensitive parliaments can be advanced if women occupy leadership positions as parliamentarians and as key members of parliamentary staff, as they are then in a position to influence policy directions, change parliamentary procedure and practices, serve as role models to other women and provide a different perspective in debates.

To improve the leadership status of women and achieve greater gender equality in leadership positions, parliaments should implement one or more of the following measures:

- Adopt affirmative action measures and amend the internal rules so as to give preference to women over men for parliamentary positions (including committee chairs and leadership positions in the Bureau or Board) in cases where qualifications are equal or commensurate with their representation in the parliament.
- Rotate positions of parliamentary leadership between men and women over a period of time.
- Introduce dual leadership for parliamentary structures, where possible, through the appointment of a man and a woman.
- Encourage the proportional and equitable distribution of women parliamentarians across all committees, not just those relating to women, children, gender, families, health and education.
- Encourage persons in leadership positions to broaden the criteria used to evaluate the relevance of women's and men's experience before entering politics.

Action area 2

Strengthen gender equality legislation and policy

Parliaments can become more gender-sensitive by implementing legislation and policies that support the principles of gender equality. The introduction of gender equality and gender mainstreaming legislation can be an effective catalyst for social and cultural change in attitudes towards gender equality.

Parliaments can also serve as a model for society by championing gender equality through the implementation of gender-sensitive strategic policies, action plans and operational and supporting policies.

National legislation

With the goal of promoting change in social and cultural attitudes towards gender equality, parliaments should:

- Enact laws that promote and protect gender equality; where gender equality laws were enacted but have become outdated or were enacted more than 10 years ago, parliaments should review such legislation to include gender mainstreaming frameworks and mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing implementation.

With the aim of guaranteeing a legislative mandate for gender mainstreaming, parliaments should:

- Consider introducing a law and/or mechanisms that require all government policy and legislation to be reviewed and assessed for their gender impact and compliance with the State's obligations under relevant international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights.

Parliament's strategic policies and action plans

In order to serve as leaders and role models for championing gender equality in society, parliaments should:

- Develop a gender equality policy that sets out:
 - the rationale and strategic direction for implementing measures contained in this Plan of action,
 - concrete actions the parliament will take to address gender equality within a specific timeframe, and

- indicators to measure progress that are monitored regularly through an appropriate parliamentary oversight mechanism.
- Ensure that the parliament's budget is gender-sensitive and that accountability measures are in place to monitor progress.

Operational and supporting policies of the parliament

Media and communications policies

To ensure that the importance of promoting gender equality is well understood and given the utmost visibility, parliament should:

- Develop a gender communications strategy that identifies target audiences, key messages, methods and timeframes.
- Showcase and publicize their gender equality activities and outcomes in the media, or through the parliament's own communication channels, including its website.

Anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies.

To ensure that all parliamentarians and parliamentary staff work in an environment free from all forms of discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment, parliament should:

- Introduce a code of conduct that requires all parliamentarians to be respectful and courteous and penalizes any language and behaviour that is considered sexist.
- Develop and implement anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies in line with national legislation applicable to all parliamentarians and parliamentary staff including the establishment of an independent body to which complaints can be submitted and addressed.
- Ensure that the language used in all official documents, including standing orders, is gender-sensitive (e.g. does not refer to members using the masculine pronoun "he" and uses chairperson or chair rather than chairman).



Opening debate with a woman and a man Speakers of parliament on “Transforming parliaments for gender equality”; Special session on gender-sensitive parliaments (Quebec City, 23 October 2012).

Action area 3

Mainstream gender equality throughout all parliamentary work

Gender inequality can be tackled effectively only if policies in all areas are designed in such a way as to address the specific concerns, needs and constraints of both women and men while building on their respective capacities and contributions.

The mainstreaming of gender considerations in a parliament's work is an effective gender-sensitive change as gender mainstreaming is a process that recognizes the economic, social, political and legal differences that exist between women and men.

Committing to gender mainstreaming

Parliaments should demonstrate their commitment to gender mainstreaming by showcasing and creating opportunities to incorporate a gender dimension in all areas of their work. In this respect, they should:

- Foster debates on legislation and budgets, including the implications of such bills and expenditure allocations for women and men, girls and boys (e.g. allocate time or hold a special session to debate the allocations and expenditure for gender equality in the budget).
- Develop clear gender-based legislative assessment guidelines or toolkits (e.g. a gender-based checklist for all pieces of legislation, including the budget).
- Allocate time in the order of business for special debates on gender equality or gender-specific questioning of ministers, in which both men and women are encouraged to participate.
- Ensure that committees investigating gender equality concerns have sufficient time and resources (including staff with gender expertise) to fulfil their mandate, an opportunity to report back to the plenary on their work and recommendations as well as the same powers and responsibilities as any other parliamentary committee (e.g. call for written evidence, hear from witnesses and ministers and report on findings and recommendations).
- Ensure that there is a formal mechanism by which the body that is tasked with gender mainstreaming – be it an informal women's caucus or a dedicated parliamentary committee – can report on its studies and examination of legislation to the key political organs of the parliament. Where reports have not been presented, reasons should be given.



Working group on “Building a gender-sensitive culture and infrastructure in parliament,” Special session on gender-sensitive parliaments (Quebec City, 25 October 2012).

Establishing gender mainstreaming structures and mechanisms

Gender mainstreaming involves, in part, the following activities: obtaining gender-disaggregated data and qualitative information on the situation of men and women; conducting a gender analysis which highlights the differences between and among women, men, girls and boys in terms of their relative distribution of resources, opportunities, constraints and power in a given context; and instituting gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, including the establishment of indicators to gauge the extent to which gender equality objectives are met and changes in gender relations are achieved.

Parliaments should adopt one or more of the following mechanisms that are best suited to their own context:

- **A dedicated parliamentary committee** on gender equality entrusted with reviewing government policies, legislation and budgets from a gender perspective, where committee members question a broad range of groups and individuals, including public agencies, academics and private organizations, about their views on the effectiveness of government programmes and activities, and where strong links are forged between the committee and national women’s machineries, civil society organizations (CSOs), research institutes and universities.

- **Mainstreaming gender throughout all parliamentary committees**, so that all committee members – men and women – are mandated to address the gender implications of the policy, legislative and budgetary matters under their consideration as appropriate, supported by parliamentary research staff with gender expertise.
- **A women’s parliamentary caucus** with a special remit for gender equality concerns, composed of women (and men, if desired) working on a commonly agreed agenda. An effective caucus relies on strong links with national women’s machineries, CSOs and research institutes and universities.
- **A Speaker’s reference group** on gender equality composed of men and women parliamentarians from across the political spectrum, which reports to the Speaker directly and sets the parliament’s gender equality direction and agenda;
- **Technical research units** on gender equality or **library/research staff** with gender expertise who have access to up-to-date information, books, computers and online databases and who can assist with gender-based analyses.

Action area 4

Institute or improve gender-sensitive infrastructure and parliamentary culture

Parliaments are like any other workplace, and as such, should serve as a model for society by upholding the principles of gender sensitivity through the provision of family-friendly policies and infrastructure, and the implementation of policies related to the prevention of discrimination and harassment, and policies on the equitable distribution of parliamentary resources and facilities.

Facilitating a work-family balance

To ensure that workplace policies and infrastructure reflect the contemporary work and family realities facing men and women parliamentarians, and in recognition of the fact that women worldwide continue to spend a disproportionate amount of time on care-giving, parliaments should:

- Rearrange their sitting hours (e.g. by establishing compressed sitting weeks, creating schedules that start early, avoiding late voting, and aligning sitting times with the school calendar) so that parliamentarians can return to their electorates and spend more time with their families.
- Allocate space in the parliamentary building for a childcare centre and a family room so that parliamentarians can be close to their children during sittings.
- Ensure that parliamentarians – both men and women – are entitled to parental leave on the birth of their children.
- Consider alternatives where long-term parental leave cannot be implemented, such as accepting parental leave as a legitimate reason for missing a sitting day, in addition to that of “official business”.
- Give parliamentarians who are still breastfeeding the opportunity to use a proxy vote or vote pairing so that they need not attend the sitting.

Fostering a work culture free of discrimination and harassment

To ensure a safe, respectful, non-discriminatory and harassment-free workplace, parliaments should:

- Conduct a gender-based analysis of parliamentary rituals, dress codes, forms of address and commonly used language, conventions and rules.

- Provide gender-awareness training seminars for all members of parliament and ensure that induction for new members is gender-sensitive. This could take the form of mentoring for new women parliamentarians, pairing women with experienced parliamentarians (men or women) or presentations by senior women parliamentarians on strategies to cope in the parliamentary environment.

Providing equitable resources and facilities

To ensure that the parliamentary precinct facilities are suited to the needs of men and women and that resources are equitably distributed, parliaments should:

- Conduct a gender assessment of the facilities provided to all parliamentarians.
- Ensure that allowances and parliamentary travel entitlements are provided to parliamentarians equitably and transparently and that parliamentary delegations are gender-balanced, when possible.



Working Group on “Mainstreaming gender in all of parliament’s work,”
Special session on gender-sensitive parliaments
(Quebec City, 25 October 2012).

Action area 5

Ensure that responsibility for gender equality is shared by all parliamentarians – men and women

The realization of a gender-sensitive parliament, based on the ultimate goal of gender equality in all its structures, methods and work, will not take place without the support and involvement of men parliamentarians. Changing social values and heightening gender awareness among men have resulted in stronger partnerships between men and women on gender equality.

Parliaments should adopt strategies that promote such partnerships, including by:

- Promoting the co-sponsorship of gender equality legislation by a man and a woman parliamentarian.
- Appointing a man and a woman parliamentarian as co-chairs and/or vice-chairs of a gender equality committee.
- Establishing committee inquiries into gender policy issues of interest to men.
- Encouraging the inclusion of men in parliamentary events pertaining to the recognition of gender-related issues, such as International Women's Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.
- Ensuring gender balance on study tours and in international delegations on gender equality or gender mainstreaming.
- Providing gender-sensitive training programmes for men parliamentarians.

[Special session on gender-sensitive parliaments \(Quebec City, 26 October 2012\).](#)



Action area 6

Encourage political parties to be champions of gender equality

Political parties are often the dominant form of political organization and the mechanism through which women and men pursue a legislative agenda with respect to the achievement of gender equality.

Parliaments should encourage political parties to adopt the following gender-sensitive measures:

Increase the number of women in their ranks by:

- Considering special temporary measures to promote the entry and retention of women in parliament.
- Promoting men and women equally to all leadership positions in their executive bodies.
- Endorsing training and mentoring schemes that pair elected parliamentarians with eligible women interested in running for election, including courses on various aspects of election campaigns and training in media relations.
- Establishing support networks for women candidates at elections and for elected women with the goal of improving both recruitment and retention rates.

Institute gender-sensitive meeting arrangements and work practices by:

- Setting meeting times that do not coincide with other family responsibilities.
- Respecting the expected duration of meetings so that other family commitments can be kept.

Develop gender mainstreaming mechanisms by:

- Developing an overarching gender equality plan with clear gender mainstreaming strategies and dedicated party committees to oversee, monitor and evaluate their implementation.
- Encouraging political parties to use gender-sensitive language in their documents.

Equitably allocate parliamentary committee positions among men and women by:

- Encouraging parties to adopt a transparent method of appointing members to committees and to leadership positions on those committees in a way that better matches members' diverse abilities, work experience and preferences regarding committee assignments. Parties could also give preference to women over men in cases where qualifications are equal.



[Gender-sensitive parliaments:
a global review of good practices.](#)

Action area 7

Enhance the gender sensitivity of, and gender equality among, parliamentary staff

Gender-sensitive parliaments are champions of gender equality, not only for their members, but also for the many staff who support them. Parliamentary administrations need to review their workplace culture and infrastructure, and act to ensure that all staff are able to support parliament in achieving its gender equality goals. In this respect, parliaments and their administration should:

- Develop and implement anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies applicable for all parliamentary staff, including the establishment of an independent body to which complaints can be submitted and addressed.
- Assess the number and seniority of women in the parliamentary administration.
- Establish a committee or entrust an existing one with the task of examining the possible implementation of affirmative action policies that give preference to women over men for parliamentary positions in cases where qualifications are equal and where women are inadequately represented at leadership levels.
- Provide gender awareness training seminars for all parliamentary staff to explain the principles of gender equality and why a gender-sensitive parliament benefits everyone.
- Build the capacity of parliamentary staff to conduct gender-based analyses of legislation, budgets and policies.

Initiate and implement gender-sensitive reform in parliament

Gender sensitivity is a goal towards which all parliaments must strive. To achieve this goal, parliaments should design a process suited to their national situations that should include the following core elements:

Evaluation

Parliaments interested in evaluating their level of gender sensitivity should:

- Use the IPU's gender-sensitive self-assessment toolkit. The purpose of the self-assessment is not to rank parliaments but rather to help parliaments identify their strengths and weaknesses against international best practices. The toolkit provides a framework for discussion among members of parliament. The method involves answering questions about the way gender equality is incorporated into the culture and work of the parliament.
- Use their own internal structures to evaluate their level of gender sensitivity, such as an audit, or other business review or committee. In this case, external stakeholders such as civil society groups, national women's machineries and research institutes could be invited to share their opinions on the state of gender sensitivity with the committee, and draw up recommendations for change. The committee would then present its own conclusions and recommendations to the plenary or parliamentary leadership for discussion and further action.

Implementation

Irrespective of the method used, it is vital that parliaments reflect on the importance of gender equality and the way they promote this goal not only to their electorates, but also to their members.

Taking stock is a first step, after which parliaments can draw up and implement a roadmap for reform with concrete objectives, actions and deadlines suited to their national context. For this they will need to secure resources.

Monitoring

Parliaments should identify a structure entrusted specifically with monitoring implementation of the Plan of action for gender-sensitive Parliaments and efforts to achieve the goal of gender sensitivity.

Promotion

Parliaments should give visibility to the reforms undertaken and the results achieved. Parliaments should take action at the international level to promote the principle of gender equality in all international parliamentary institutions and encourage women's equal participation therein.

Political will and commitment are essential to achieve all of this.

The role of the IPU in supporting gender-sensitive parliaments

For the past 30 years, the IPU has demonstrated its commitment to high-quality and action-oriented research on gender and parliament. The IPU is singularly placed to support its Member Parliaments in their efforts to become gender-sensitive, and, through this Plan, undertakes to:

Take the lead role in promoting gender-sensitive parliaments by:

- Ensuring high-level commitment to the Plan among Members and regular follow-up of the Plan at its Assemblies.
- Giving visibility to the Plan, including through its website, its Gender Partnership Programme and technical assistance activities.
- Supporting all national parliaments in conducting a gender-sensitive self-assessment by 2030.
- Encouraging parliaments to draw up action plans and establish monitoring mechanisms aimed at strengthening the implementation of parliamentary action plans.
- Strengthening cooperation on the promotion of a gender-sensitive parliament with regional partner organizations and relevant international organizations.

Build in-house capacity on gender equality and gender mainstreaming by:

- Implementing a gender mainstreaming strategy.
- Ensuring that professional development training for all IPU staff is gender-sensitive.
- Committing to mainstreaming gender equality throughout the Secretariat's work.

Place gender equality issues systematically on the agenda of discussions with Member Parliaments, partner organizations and regional parliamentary organizations by:

- Entrusting the Gender Partnership Group with responsibility for regularly monitoring the gender sensitivity of parliaments.
- Ensuring that gender is mainstreamed in all technical assistance activities.
- Promoting its work on gender-sensitive parliaments in all international forums.

Annex

Gender*

The social attributes associated with being male and female and the relationships between women, men, girls and boys. These attributes and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization. The concept of gender also includes expectations about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men, and when applied to social analysis, reveals socially constructed roles. Sex and gender do not mean the same thing. While sex refers to biological differences, gender refers to social differences, which can be modified since gender identity, roles and relations are determined by society.

Gender mainstreaming*

The process of assessing and taking into account the implications for women and men of any planned action – including legislation, policies or programmes – at all levels and in all spheres. The concept is understood as strategies that put gender issues at the centre of broad policy and programme decisions, institutional structures and resource allocation. Mainstreaming gender equality into the work of parliament should contribute to effective implementation and oversight of policies that address the needs and interests of both men and women.

Gender-sensitive parliament*

A parliament that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and work. Gender-sensitive parliaments remove the barriers to women's full participation and offer a positive example or model to society at large.

Gender-sensitive budgeting*

An approach that aims to mainstream gender in economic policy-making and seeks to transform the entire budgetary process. Gender budgeting refers not only to expenditures earmarked for women, but also to an analysis of the entire budget from a gender perspective, including security, health, education, public works, etc. in order to ensure that the allocations and resulting impacts respond to the needs of both women and men.

Gender-based violence**

Acts of physical, mental or social abuse (including sexual violence) that are attempted or threatened, with some type of force (such as violence, threats, coercion, manipulation, deception, cultural

expectations, weapons or economic circumstances) and directed against a person because of his or her gender roles and expectations in a society or culture. A person facing gender-based violence has no choice: he/she cannot refuse or pursue other options without serious social, physical, or psychological consequences. Forms include sexual violence, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, early marriage or forced marriage, gender discrimination, denial (e.g. of education, food and freedom) and female genital mutilation.

* Definitions are taken from UN/OSAGI, UNDP and UNESCO as quoted in UNDP, Quick Entry Points to Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in Democratic Governance Clusters, New York, 2007 and the IPU, Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments, Geneva, 2008.

** The definition is adapted from UN WOMEN, Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence against Women and Girls, last accessed on 19.09.2010

The IPU Gender Partnership Programme supports parliaments in their efforts to become gender-sensitive by:

- Gathering comparative information and examples of good practice.
- Developing tools to assess the level of gender-sensitivity of parliaments (Self-assessment toolkit available at: www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#gender-toolkit).
- Facilitating assessment exercises by making available experts, information and tools.
- Informing reform plans by providing comparative good practices and specialized expertise.
- Helping raise awareness and build knowledge about gender-sensitive parliaments by organizing regional and national seminars and workshops.
- Providing tailored capacity-building programmes on gender issues to MPs and parliamentary staff.
- Supporting women's caucuses and/or standing committees dealing with gender issues by enhancing their capacities, tools and working methods.
- Providing legislative advice and expertise in drafting gender-related legislation and/or internal procedures.

For any requests or additional information, please contact us at:
postbox@ipu.org



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.



+41 22 919 41 50



+41 22 919 41 60



postbox@ipu.org

Chemin du Pommier 5
CH-1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva
www.ipu.org