



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

# The value of women's participation in parliament

## Enhancing the evidence base

### A research project

**Terms of Reference**  
**September 2018**

## Background

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has been a global leader in research on women in parliament for the past forty years. Initial work began in 1975, when global data on women in decision-making positions was not yet collected systematically. At this time, the aim was to collect statistical data on women in parliament and the various factors that influence their access to parliament and their work in the institution. Since 1997, the IPU has published monthly updates on the national, regional and global percentages of [women in parliament](#) and since 2004, [a yearly analysis](#) of women's electoral progress and setbacks.

Over the past two decades, this work has been complemented with cross-national research products that identify trends, challenges and good practices. For example, IPU global research projects have:

- showcased the personal experiences of women parliamentarians based on individual testimonials (*Politics: Women's Insight*, 2001),
- compared the political experiences of men and women parliamentarians (*Equality in Politics*, 2008),
- assessed the role of parliaments, as institutions, in embodying and delivering on gender equality (*Gender-sensitive Parliaments*, 2011), and
- unveiled the prevalence of sexist behaviour targeting women parliamentarians (*Issues brief: Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, 2016).

This research continues to serve as an evidence base for the IPU's programmatic work in support of women in parliament.

As the representative and legislative body, parliament remains a cornerstone of democracy the world over. A democratic parliament reflects the views and interests of the society from which it is drawn, in its composition, agenda setting, and policy direction. A representative parliament also allows the different experiences of men and women to shape policy priorities and legislative outputs, thereby influencing the social, political and economic future of society.

The trend in terms of women's access to parliaments over the past decades has been one of gradual but steady progress. In 1975, at the time of the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico City, women accounted for 11 percent of MPs worldwide. In 2018, more than four decades later, women's share of parliamentary seats has more than doubled, at just over 23 percent. Despite the increase in the global average, however, there continues to be a great deal of volatility and variability in the number of women in parliament. Years of analysis show that gains made in any one country can still be lost in successive elections, and that in all regions, there remain countries in which women find it particularly hard to win more than a few seats in parliament – if that.

This volatility and variability clearly points to the need for further international advocacy and programming to support the entry of more women in parliament worldwide.

## Problem statement

The achievement of gender equality and the full and effective participation of women in decision making are key indicators of democracy. In 1997, the IPU consolidated its views and experience of women's political participation in the Universal Declaration of Democracy, Article 4 of which explicitly endorses the link between democracy and "a genuine partnership between men and women in the management of public affairs".

Women's political participation is therefore first and foremost a question of democracy and human rights. The equal rights of men and women to participate in political decision-making processes are enshrined in a number of international human rights instruments including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as most national constitutions. There is, then, no question as to *whether or not* women have the right to, or should, participate in politics.

Given the significant investments made the world over to promote women's inclusion in political processes, however, a different set of questions might be asked:

***What is the particular contribution of women in parliament?***

***How can we better measure this contribution?***

***How can we more effectively promote and give visibility to it?***

These questions are particularly important in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the monitoring and evaluation processes that are currently taking place as part of the United Nations' Agenda 2030. While the IPU's consistent and methodical quantification of women's presence in parliamentary bodies is today a core indicator of SDG 5 on Gender Equality, it is still not clear what the qualitative value of those numbers is. We may know how many women there are in parliament, but we are less clear about how much of an influence they have in the parliamentary arena and what they contribute. We are equally unsure how best to gauge that contribution: what indicators should we use and/or develop, and what actions, processes or outputs should we measure?

With this research project, the IPU aims to:

- showcase women's contribution to the political and parliamentary arena in selected countries;
- highlight concrete outputs of their presence and work, across a diverse range of policy areas, and from diverse positions of leadership;
- identify potential indicators that link women's presence in parliament to positive outcomes in terms of parliamentary culture, processes, policies and outputs;
- highlight enabling factors that facilitate women's particular contribution to the parliamentary environment, as well as the critical barriers;
- contribute to enhancing the development of support programmes for women parliamentarians; and
- contribute to promoting investment in programmes aimed at building their capacity and facilitating their access to parliament.

## Definitions

There are various terms that can be, and have been, used to study women in politics. For the purposes of this research, the following distinctions<sup>1</sup> are made:

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<sup>1</sup> These definitions are adapted from the Cambridge English Dictionary, available at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>.

- **'Impact'** is understood as in the effect that women, as mostly newcomers and different actors (to men), have on parliament.
- **'Contribution'** is what women bring, or do, to help produce or achieve a particular outcome, together with other people.
- **'Influence'** is understood as the power of women to have an effect on people or processes.
- **'Value'** is how useful or important women are to the parliament.

The subject of these interventions need not be pre-determined. Women may seek to contribute to, or influence, any number of outcomes, such as the promotion of gender equality, other specific policy issues, procedural change, more harmonious debate, improving the perception of parliament among the electorate, and so on.

## Research context

Since the 1970s, feminist academics have been concerned with the impact women have made in (and on) politics. The concept itself is quite contested, evidenced in the various ways it has been operationalised by researchers. Impact has been understood as the difference women make to politics (both in terms of policy and process) and the implied result of a certain percentage of women in parliament. More recently, academic discussions about women's impact have been contextualised by an acknowledgement of the institutional constraints of parliament.

### Descriptive versus substantive representation

The distinction between descriptive and substantive representation has been used to explain women's proclivity and ability to make an impact in parliament. Descriptive representation is understood as women reflecting the demographic characteristics of being a woman in parliament. Women representatives bring their experience of being a woman to the decision-making process, and in the process, legitimise democracy by contributing to a more 'representationally diverse' parliament. Substantive representation, conversely, requires women (and/or men) to 'act on behalf' of other women. Substantive representation implies active representation of a female constituency through participation in parliament (e.g. debates, legislative proposals and votes).

In investigating the substantive representation of women, academic scholars have looked, *inter alia*, at the:

- number and type of bills introduced by men and women legislators;
- success rate of bills introduced by men and women legislators;
- voting records of legislators;
- frequency of male and female references to specific issues (e.g. paid maternity leave, violence against women) in parliamentary debates;
- likelihood of men and women in presenting gender equality motions in parliament; and
- perceptions of male and female MPs in terms of their responsibility to represent women and promote gender equality.

This research framework has been useful in demonstrating that the mere presence of women in parliament (descriptive representation) has not always translated into the representation of women in parliament (substantive representation). While some studies showed that women were generally more likely than men to introduce legislation focussed on so-called 'women's issues', and that women were more likely than men to consider it their responsibility to represent women, it is also clear that there are constraints on women's ability to fulfil this 'mandate'. In many countries, political parties strongly influence policy, which impacts the level of influence any individual parliamentarian – including women – can have.

### Critical mass, actions, actors

For some authors, the disconnect between descriptive and substantive representation could be understood as a factor of the number of women in parliament. A theory of

'critical mass' was developed in the 1980s, premised on the earlier work of Rosabeth Moss Kanter, linking the ability/proclivity of women in pursuing a women-friendly policy and procedural agenda, to their percentage in parliament. That is, the critical mass theory expected that:

women are not likely to have a major impact on legislative outcomes until they grow from a few token individuals into a considerable minority of all legislators: **only as their numbers increase** will women be able to work more effectively together to promote women-friendly policy change and to influence their male colleagues to accept and approve legislation promoting women's concerns (Childs and Krook, 2008: 725, emphasis added).

Critiques of the critical mass theory showed that other variables were instrumental in mitigating the impact of women (and men) MPs in the promotion of women-friendly legislation and procedural reform. These included political party affiliation, committee membership, institutional norms, legislative inexperience, and the external political environment including the electoral system. Childs and Krook argued that rather than asking how many women it takes to evidence 'a difference', other questions ought to be asked. They argued for a shift of focus to discussions of the conditions under which impact might be achieved – that is, what are the critical acts that catalyse change, and who are the critical actors (women and men) that make those changes happen.

### **Gender-sensitive parliaments**

From the 1990s onwards, an academic stream known as 'feminist institutionalism' has centralised the role of parliaments, as political institutions, in understanding the ability/proclivity of women and men legislators pursuing feminist or women-friendly policy and procedural change. The IPU's 2011 flagship report on [Gender-sensitive Parliaments](#) (GSP) represents research under this school of thought. Based on globally disseminated questionnaires, interviews and national case studies, the report argued that parliaments, as institutions, ought to take responsibility for the achievement of gender equality, rather than relying solely on the initiative of women MPs. The IPU defined a gender-sensitive parliament as one that embodies gender equality and delivers on it; it is a parliament that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and work.

In parliament's promotion of gender equality, this research explored the effects of:

- leadership positions of women within the parliament;
- policy and legal frameworks;
- dedicated infrastructure within the parliament – i.e. committees, caucuses, research units – that drive a gender mainstreaming mandate; and
- cultural and social norms – language, sitting hours, relational dynamics between men and women.

## **Significance of the research**

### **Addressing the gaps**

Mindful of the theoretical and methodological difficulties in analysing the impact of women, there is still a need to collect evidence and illustrate the value of having more women in parliament. Specifically, there is a case to answer for the promotion of women in politics, given women and women's organisations are frequently the beneficiaries of international development programmes and other forms of assistance.

### *Testing assumptions*

Assumptions are frequently made about the nature of women's contribution/impact:

- The electorate regards a parliament that includes women as 'more legitimate';
- Women in parliament present a credible role model to other women, including young women, and encourage other women to participate in politics;
- Women's inclusion in parliament works to eliminate derogatory gender stereotypes and cultural attitudes about women's role in public life;

- Women have a different approach to politics than men (e.g. style, policy priorities);
- Women's meaningful participation (both in terms of numbers and positions of influence) makes the parliamentary environment more gender-sensitive and less prone to harassment, sexism and violence towards women;
- Women naturally/automatically bring a gender perspective to the analysis of legislation;
- More women in parliament will result in greater gender related outcomes.

Importantly, these assumptions have not been tested on a global scale, but need to be. The research project will aim to provide some level of comparative data that should form a good basis for testing these hypotheses.

#### *Taking an open-ended approach*

This research project aims to fill gaps in current understandings of women's value to politics, without pre-empting either the method, or the outcome of that value. That is, this research will not expect women to make any specific kinds of contributions – it will, rather, take an open-ended approach to discovering the nature of that contribution.

#### *Identifying better measurements*

The political empowerment aspect of SDG 5 on gender equality is currently measured by the IPU's data, regularly and systematically collected and published, on the percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments. This data also forms a key component of the United Nations' Gender Inequality Index (GII), in addition to measurements of women's economic status and health. However, one cannot establish a clear correlation between higher percentages of women in parliament and women's higher economic and health status or other social improvements.

This data points to a need for more comprehensive measurements of women's political empowerment. If we cannot necessarily expect reductions in gender or social inequality as a consequence of the number of women in parliament, then additional indicators of women's activity in parliament might allow for more effective monitoring and evaluation of their impact. New indicators would aim to assess the performance of the entire parliamentary institution, rather than individual MPs, and to establish a baseline of existing examples of contribution that could be compared over time. They may, for example, be categorised by the nature of change (institutional, policy, structural).

#### *Incorporating national specificities and cross-national comparison*

Previous research has focussed more on women's experiences within national parliaments, and with some exceptions, has been less successful in identifying indicators that can be used to compare women's experiences across different contexts. This research will aim to identify both indicators that are context specific (to be explored through case studies) and common denominators across different contexts.

#### *Longitudinal impact*

A great deal of research on women in politics has analysed women's contribution at a particular point in time, rather than considering impact as a process that may improve (or not) over time. There is then scope to analyse women's value to the political process over a period of time, assuming that women's ability to influence and contribute increases the longer they are in parliament.

### **Contribution of the research**

Creating an advocacy tool based in empirical evidence will be a significant goal of the research. The research aims to present supportive evidence of the importance and merit of women's presence in parliaments. Additionally, the research will contribute to stronger programming outcomes for the IPU's technical cooperation and gender partnership units.

### *Advocacy objectives*

As research findings emerge, these will serve to inform national-level advocacy on the value of women's inclusion in parliament in the countries where research has been carried out through case studies. IPU, research partners, and/or the specific national parliaments concerned may be involved in such advocacy. It is envisaged that advocacy will engage stakeholders in productive dialogues to challenge negative gender norms that hinder women's full and effective participation in parliament, and thus consolidate existing gains or pave the way to further progress in this area. Advocacy will be contextualised and will respect the confidentiality and safety of research participants.

### *Programming objectives*

The research will inform IPU's programming, by providing an evidence base of women's activity within parliament in a set of selected countries. This will support the design, implementation and monitoring of IPU projects in the area of women's political empowerment in these countries. The research findings will also allow IPU to use its position as a global leader on women in politics research in identifying useful entry points for further technical assistance with parliaments and parliamentarians – undertaken either independently or in conjunction with other assistance providers.

The research will be linked to the Agenda 2030 framework.

## Research questions

The research will aim to address the gaps identified above by addressing the following research questions:

*What is the particular contribution of women in parliament?*

*How can we better measure this contribution ?*

*How can we more effectively promote and give visibility to it?*

### **Value of women's participation in parliament**

- What have women been able to bring to, and achieve in, the parliamentary environment, in terms of both parliamentary processes and outputs?
- What is lost when women are not present in parliament?
- What are the key obstacles to women's contribution in this environment, and how will more women in parliament or in key parliamentary positions eliminate those obstacles?

### **Indicators of women's parliamentary contribution**

- What indicators emerge in specific countries to better monitor and evaluate women's contribution to parliament?
- What common denominators could be tested as cross-national comparative indicators in future research?
- How, and by whom (i.e. parliamentary secretariats, parliamentary monitoring organisations, political parties, etc.) should these measurements be tested at the national level?

### *Explanatory variables*

The research should take into account a range of explanatory variables in measuring women's proclivity and/or capacity to contribute, including:

- Parliamentary system, including the parliament's relationship with the executive
- Electoral system (including TSMs) and MPs' understanding of representation
- Existing legal and policy framework at national level
- Degree of political party discipline and possibility for cross-party collaboration

- Political economy of the country (conflict, economic crisis, political stability)
- Socio-economic indicators (education, poverty level, gender pay gap, etc.)
- Cultural norms of the parliament
- Strength of civil society
- Role of international community in country's development
- Number, age, years of experience and positions of women in parliament
- Incidence and recurrence of violence against women (in general, and in politics)
- Existence of non-parliamentary oversight institutions
- Existence and effectiveness of gender equality structures/mechanisms in parliament (e.g. caucus, committees, mandate of committees)

The specific research question(s) will be further refined by the successfully appointed research team in conjunction with IPU.

## Research methods and activities

While the appointed researchers will further refine the research methods, it is expected that the data for this project will be generated through a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, and will ensure that women are empowered through the research process to tell their own stories of success.

The main research subjects will be women and men parliamentarians, as well as parliamentary staff. However, it is expected that policy and procedural change will be the result of the combined efforts of multiple stakeholders. Research should therefore aim to include the views of as many of these stakeholders as possible (e.g. civil society, women's movements, private sector, government administrations, media representatives, women's caucus, interested and involved citizens).

Research methods will include:

- **A survey** of men and women MPs, as well as parliamentary staff, using questions from the IPU's *Equality in Politics Survey* (see Annex 1), seeking perceptions of women's contribution and examples of specific instances of 'contribution' (e.g. a law passed; a parliamentary process changed);
- At least four politically and geographically diverse **national case studies**, including **interviews** with key stakeholders. (Examples of 'contribution' need not necessarily be related to a gender-equality focussed outcome.)

## Research timeline and deliverables

Over a period starting in October 2018 and ending on 15 December 2018, the following deliverables are expected from the Research Team:

- Submission of a **research plan**, including criteria for the selection of national case studies;
- Development of a **survey** questionnaire, collection and analysis of responses;
- Conduct of **case studies** in at least four geographically and politically diverse countries;
- Submission of a preliminary **analysis of survey results** (maximum 5-8 pages);
- Submission of the **case studies** (maximum 5-8 pages each).

## Research team

The Research Team is expected to:

- Refine the research questions
- Identify national case studies in consultation with the IPU
- Lead development of the research proposal and design
- Ensure implementation and data collection
- Lead data analysis
- Lead survey analysis and case studies' writing

An experienced **Research Team Leader** must be nominated as part of the team. The Research Team Leader will be responsible for managing other team members' inputs, quality assuring the work of the team and ensuring it meets a high standard, and will act as the principal liaison with IPU.

Proposals may be submitted either by an individual Research Team Leader or by a research team of up to three core members. Additional country researchers may be recruited once the core team or team leader has been selected, in consultation with the IPU.

### **Desired experience and qualifications**

Specific requirements for the Research Team:

- A post-graduate degree in law, political or social sciences, or equivalent research experience;
- Ability to conduct desk research and interviews in French, English and Spanish;
- Significant knowledge of the sector(s) as demonstrated by a track record of publication of academic standard literature and/or research publications;
- Excellent research design and analysis skills including a proven track record using relevant methodologies, including quantitative and qualitative methodologies;
- Significant experience in developing country contexts;
- Significant experience in research implementation;
- Experience in reviewing and quality control of research; and
- Excellent report writing skills including the ability to simplify complex concepts.

For more information, please contact:

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Gender Partnership Programme

## Annex 1. Research questions from *Equality in Politics*

29. What impact has the presence of women had on influencing the passage of legislation in the following areas?					
	Great deal	Fair amount	Not very much	None	Don't know
Combating domestic violence					
Childcare provisions and support					
Economic and trade matters					
Education					
Employment and equal pay					
Environment					
Finance					
Foreign affairs					
Maternity/paternity leave					
National security, defence, military affairs					
Political participation					
Reproductive healthcare					
Other, specify					
Please explain your answers					
Can we quote this answer in our study?				Yes	No

37. Has the presence of women in parliament, in your opinion, brought about a change in the following?					
	Substantial change	Noticeable change	Small change	No noticeable change	Don't know
Parliamentary language and behaviour is less aggressive.					
Rules and practices of parliament have changed.					
Sitting hours of parliament have changed to take into account the needs of women and men.					
Dress codes take into account needs of women and men.					
Maternity/paternity leave provisions have been introduced.					
Introduction of child care facilities.					
More training opportunities are provided.					
Other, specify					
Please explain your answers					
Can we quote this answer in our study?				Yes	No