



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

Third Committee Agenda item 64: Advancement of Women United Nations, 14 October 2009

STATEMENT by Ambassador Anda Filip, Permanent Observer

Mr. Chairman,

Next year is 2010 - fifteen years after Beijing and 35 after the first world conference on women held in Mexico; yet another milestone. The world conferences on women have had the merit of giving political visibility to women's rights worldwide. Thirty-five years on, can we be satisfied with the pace of change?

Today, women account for 18.6 per cent of members of parliament. This is progress, but not enough. Eighteen per cent falls short of the 30 per cent target set at the Fourth World Conference on Women. It is, however, a fair number compared to other decision-making positions. Only 9 per cent of the world's mayors, 16 per cent of its government ministers (in 2008) and 4.5 per cent of its Heads of State (also in 2008) are women.

So is parliament actually more open to women than other areas of decision making? More importantly, is parliament not the obvious place to require and benefit from a balanced participation of men and women?

In view of the forthcoming session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which will review the status of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the IPU launched an appraisal process focusing on progress made in the area of women in decision-making positions, and in particular on women in parliament.

The process began with a meeting held in Geneva two weeks ago for members and chairs of parliamentary committees dealing with gender issues. Some 80 members of parliamentary committees dealing with gender issues and women's rights from 35 countries attempted to provide an answer to an apparently simple question: is parliament open to women?

I would like to share with you the beginnings of an answer, as expressed by the participants.

A first way to consider the question was to focus on percentages and figures. In this light, it is fair to say today that yes, parliament is open to women. Only nine parliaments are exclusively composed of men although 41 have less than 10 per cent women. Parliaments are no longer an exclusively male domain but they are far from being gender balanced.

Participants acknowledged that women's political participation remains hindered by multiple factors, for instance balancing private and public responsibilities, funding, political party support, cultural attitudes and stereotypes, etc.

On an encouraging note, over the past decade solutions have emerged and a variety of special measures have been implemented. Electoral gender quotas, for instance, have become an increasingly used policy measure to promote women's participation in parliaments. Of the 25 countries to have reached 30 per cent or more women members of parliament, 22 have applied quotas in some form or another.

In terms of other special measures, participants also discussed other incentives to promote women, such as political finance. Funding can be used as an incentive to encourage women's participation, whether it is public, private or a combination of both. Finance legislation can include incentives for political parties to earmark specific allocations to support women's candidatures. Spending limits can also be implemented as a way of levelling the political playing field. The option of including a gender-sensitive finance component in laws and policies on political participation was also mentioned.

The role of political parties was underscored. Internal party democracy leads to more inclusiveness and can thereby favour women's increased participation. Parties should be encouraged to implement specific training programmes (such as communication or leadership training) that specifically target women. Mentoring between women can also serve as an important way of cultivating new leaders.

Another potential entry point for enhancing women's participation in national politics is experience gained in local government. Local government may serve as a launching pad for women to become national leaders and a stepping stone for accessing national parliament. Furthermore, measures adopted to encourage higher participation of women at the local level can open the way to implementing such measures at the national level. It was recognized that this is an area that requires further research.

A second way of responding to the question required going beyond the numbers and assessing to what degree women have real, as opposed to symbolic, opportunities to contribute to the work of parliament.

Participants noted that when women take up their seats in parliament, they usually enter a male domain with a potential set of new challenges. Parliament's rules and procedures were typically established by men, and "men's clubs" still in operation in some parliaments by nature exclude women.

The need for a critical mass of women, of at least 30 per cent, was also underscored. In parliaments with low numbers of women members, there sometimes are not enough women to take part in all parliamentary committees, or women have to spread themselves thinly by taking on several committee assignments. A critical mass of women members is also needed to begin to change political priorities and place women's concerns on the parliamentary agenda.

Women must display solidarity and support each other. Participants highlighted the advantages and benefits of acting together and uniting for change, even across party lines. In addition, the importance of engaging and collaborating with men as partners

for change was noted and participants called for greater efforts to be made to involve men in gender equality work.

Lastly, the role of parliamentary committees dealing with gender issues was highlighted. Much of the detailed policy work and oversight is done in parliamentary committees and it is here that gender equality strategies need to be implemented. Specialized parliamentary committees on gender equality are an important mechanism for gender mainstreaming.

The third dimension that was considered was to look at the institution of parliament itself. How gender-sensitive are parliaments? How do men promote gender equality? Is there a common platform for gender equality in parliament? Are there mechanisms that facilitate the mainstreaming of gender issues in parliament?

The participants also discussed parliaments as workplaces, acknowledging that places of power such as parliaments contain inherent male biases, which have to be identified, challenged and reconstructed. Parliaments themselves have to implement family-friendly and gender-sensitive measures. The level of gender sensitivity should also become a measure of good institutional performance.

I hope that these preliminary results will provide some food for thought and avenues for strengthened action when preparing for the Beijing+15 review, which will be held in March 2010. This is the first stage of the IPU's appraisal. We will continue with more initiatives which we hope to report on in the near future.

Thank you.