



## Gender equality on the legislative agenda: The role of women presiding over parliaments

A meeting of women Speakers of Parliament organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

New York, 27 February 2006, Room 5 at United Nations Headquarters

### SUMMARY REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS

The Inter-Parliamentary Union organized a half-day meeting of women Speakers of Parliament entitled *Gender Equality on the Legislative Agenda: The role of women presiding over parliaments*. This meeting coincided with the opening of 50<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York on 27 February 2006. It provided a forum for discussion among women speakers on how they are contributing to reaching the goals of gender equality. The meeting sought to understand how women presiding officers have, and can, make a difference to the functioning, conduct and rules of parliaments.

The meeting was convened as a follow-up to the meeting of Women Speakers that took place in September 2005 in New York on the occasion of the Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments.

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#### Opening Remarks

**Hon. Margaret Mensah-Williams, Vice-President of the IPU Executive Committee and Vice-Chairperson of the National Council of Namibia**, opened the meeting. She welcomed the 11 Speakers of Parliament present on behalf of Mr. Pier Ferdinando Casini, President of the IPU and Speaker of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, who was unable to attend.

Mrs. Mensah-Williams began by highlighting that being a Speaker of parliament was no easy job, but it was one increasingly handled by women. Unfortunately, in many parts of the world, women faced obstacles that did not affect men when assuming leadership positions. There were cultural as well as social and economic factors at play that made it difficult for women to enter politics and to climb to the top echelons of government.

At the same time, however, there had been positive developments not only in terms of the number of women parliamentarians, which had reached its highest level ever, but also in terms of the 27 women who presided over parliamentary chambers. Women had found ways to achieve full recognition as leaders but were also distinguishing themselves as different kinds of leaders – strong when needed, but also amenable to listening to all points of view and supportive of those groups in society that have suffered from discrimination. This resulted in a distinct women's perspective on various political issues.

Mrs. Mensah-Williams ended by highlighting the symbolic importance of meeting at the home of the United Nations. The United Nations and the IPU had become genuine partners in a common struggle for democracy and human rights, of which gender equality was a crucial component.

**Ms. Louise Fréchette, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations**, expressed her delight at attending the meeting of women Speakers of Parliament on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> session of the CSW. She found it particularly encouraging that women Speakers met on a regular basis and sought to promote gender equality in partnership with the United Nations.

Despite some progress, there was still a long way to go in terms of achieving gender equality in politics. The report of the United Nations Secretary-General to the CSW identified ongoing challenges. These included the persistence of stereotypical attitudes, inequalities in terms of family responsibilities, the absence of an 'enabling' environment in politics and the exclusion of women from the policy domain.

However, gender equality was firmly rooted in the international agenda and the international community supported the fundamental principle that both women and men must be engaged in decision-making at all levels and in all areas. Nevertheless, some positive trends had been noted:

- Women's political participation had reached its highest level ever at over 16 per cent, up from ten per cent in 1975;
- There was a high number of countries that had emerged from conflict and had recorded between 25 and 30 per cent of women in politics. Rwanda topped the ranks with 48.8 per cent.
- Twenty countries had reached or exceeded the 30 per cent target of women in parliament; and
- The number of parliaments where women represented less than 10 per cent of members had decreased over the past ten years.

Ms. Fréchette recalled the declaration that was adopted at the 49<sup>th</sup> Session of the CSW, which called for increased representation of women. The IPU and UNDAW have enjoyed collaborating on several activities, including the production of the Handbook for Parliamentarians entitled *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol*, training sessions and information seminars, the global map on *Women in Politics: 2005* and the organization of parliamentary meetings during the CSW.

**Ms. Ingrida Udre, Speaker of Parliament, Republic of Latvia**, emphasized that the second specialized meeting of women Speakers of Parliament was a most welcome initiative on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Session of the CSW. It followed the previous meeting held in September 2005, which she had had the pleasure of chairing, which discussed cooperation with the United Nations. The presence of women speakers was indeed an honour, and Ms. Syringa Marshall-Burnett was given a special welcome as a Speaker who had served for more than eight years in Jamaica. She was one of the longest serving Speakers in the Caribbean.

### **Session 1: Equality between Men and Women in Decision-Making**

*This session examined the status of women and men in decision-making, one of the themes of the CSW, and considered special measures, such as quotas, that have been implemented around the world. It considered how quotas worked best, what were the consequences and what other mechanisms existed to promote women's participation in politics.*

*Presentations included addresses by Ms. Immaculée Nahayo, Speaker of the National Assembly of Burundi and Professor Drude Dahlerup, University of Stockholm, Sweden.*

#### ***Burundi reaches thirty per cent women in parliament***

The case of Burundi was presented, focusing on the mechanisms established to increase the participation of women in politics. There was a widespread perception that democratic policy-making required consultation with all population groups, especially with vulnerable groups in society. Emphasis was placed on the particular role that women could play in the governance of the country.

In the 2005 elections, which had restored the parliament after years of conflict, the percentage of women parliamentarians had increased by 12 percentage points. Women held 36 of the 118 parliamentary seats, which made Burundi one of only 20 countries to reach the 30 percent target of women in parliament. The Speaker and two Vice-Presidents of Parliament were women. In addition, there were seven women in high-ranking government positions, including the areas of commerce and justice.

The factors responsible for these positive results were discussed, and included first and foremost the political will of the transitional authorities that recognized that there could be no sustainable democracy without gender equality. An important institutional factor was the constitutional provision providing for 30 per cent of the seats in parliament to be held by women. Article 38(3) of the Electoral Code stipulated that electoral lists submitted by political parties should take into account gender equality, and required that at least one-quarter of the candidates be women.

In addition, women developed other strategies. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political associations sought to raise public awareness, and many women's associations sought to work together to actively promote the participation of women. Ultimately, there was an ethos that underpinned and motivated all efforts: positive action was needed to combat the injustices that women had suffered, the interests of women had to be defended and their participation secured in democracy, and development agendas had to take into account the needs of women.

As women had taken up their seats in parliament, the next challenge was to ensure their effective participation in all areas of decision-making. A strategy of lobbying, capacity-building of leaders and networking would be embarked upon with a view to gender equality. Parliamentarians had an important role to play in that regard. It was important to analyze the extent to which gender equality was taken in account in the budget and in the passage of legislation. It was hoped that women would attain 33 per cent representation at all levels of decision-making, and with the support of the international community and NGOs, ultimately reach parity in parliament.

### ***Special measures***

Progress with regard to the participation of women in parliament had been slow but steady. In 2001 women had accounted for 14 per cent of parliamentary representatives, a figure that rose to 16.3 per cent in February 2006. That progress had been the result of the sustained work and mobilization of international and national organizations, since gender balance in parliament was not an automatic consequence of the broadening of political participation.

The positive trend was in part attributable to institutional engineering, such as electoral system design, to increase the representation of women. There was a growing trend for countries to introduce special measures, such as quotas, to bolster the representation of women. Some 40 countries had legislated quotas and in a further 50 countries, political parties had voluntarily adopted quotas for women. On a regional basis, there had usually been one country that had taken the lead in implementing quotas. It was Argentina that had first introduced quotas in 1991, and a further ten countries in Latin America followed suit during the 1990s. Rwanda led in Africa, and indeed the world, with 48.8 per cent women in parliament, which partly resulted from a special measure reserving an allotted number of seats for women ahead of its transitional elections in 2003.

An important consideration was the type of gender quota used in keeping with the electoral system. Special reserved seats were usually implemented in a majoritarian-based electoral system; legislated candidate quotas (where political parties were required to field a certain percentage of women candidates) were most often used in proportional representation electoral systems, as were quotas adopted voluntarily by political parties. In terms of regional patterns, there was a tendency for Latin America to implement legislated party quotas, the Arab States and Asian countries opted for reserved seats together with several countries in Africa. Western Europe did not have a pattern of legislated quotas but political parties had voluntarily adopted their own quotas.

The introduction of quotas had often resulted in an "historical" jump in terms of the number of women taking seats in parliament, as in Argentina, Costa Rica, Burundi, Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa, which had all reached the "critical mass" of 30 per cent of women in parliament. However, it was not always necessary for a substantial number of women to be elected in order for there to be changes in the parliament - one woman could make a significant difference. That point highlighted the particular role that women Speakers of Parliament could play, especially in those countries with a low representation of women, through their profile as Speaker of the House and moderator of debates between rival political factions. The voice of one can have a significant impact on many in the chamber.

## **Discussion**

In the ensuing debate, many delegates reported on developments in their respective countries with regard to women's parliamentary participation. Several delegates underscored the important role the electoral systems played and their own country experiences with regard to special measures.

The highlights of the debate included the following salient points:

- First-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral systems made it difficult for women to be elected, especially if there was a tendency for political parties to field women candidates in constituencies where they were unlikely to win. Quotas were extremely difficult to implement in FPTP electoral systems and consideration needed to be given to how to support women's candidacies. One initiative that had been tried included "twinning" (where two constituencies group together and agree to nominate one man and one woman candidate).
- It was noted that in countries undergoing electoral system reform, special attention should be paid to gender aspects so as not to negatively affect women's chances of being elected. In one country for example, after an electoral system review, a mixed electoral system (combining elements of PR and FPTP elections) was agreed upon. However, that did not result in a substantial increase in female representation, and women tended to rely on PR lists to be elected.
- In some countries there was strong opposition to implementing quotas. Some delegates noted however, that it was a basic human right that women should take part in the decision-making process as men do, and that the public must understand that political parties should include women in their lists of candidates for election. In several countries political parties successfully implemented voluntary party quotas without having to legislate.
- Several delegates noted that it was not just the electoral model that was important, but also political will to bring about change at the highest levels. Political parties maintained control over the nomination of candidates and their support for women's candidacies was key.
- While the election of women was a first step, parliament as an institution had to become gender-sensitive. Implementing structures such as childcare facilities greatly assisted the participation of women.
- The perspectives and participation of both women and men was vital in parliaments. It was important that the views of women were considered as having value and legitimacy. In some parliaments there was still resistance to women holding high-profile political posts, and indeed women Speakers were not immune to the challenges other women parliamentarians faced. Cases were thus quoted of instances where obstruction took the extreme form of a vote of no confidence in the woman Speaker.

## **Session 2: How women are transforming parliaments: The specific contribution of women Speakers**

*That session examined how the increased presence of women parliamentarians had changed the nature of parliaments. It considered the role and particular contributions of women Speakers of Parliament and assessed how the presence of women had changed procedures, rules and norms in parliaments to make them more gender-friendly.*

*Presentations included addresses by Mrs. Syringa Marshall-Burnett, President of the Senate of Jamaica and Ms. Colleen Lowe-Morna, Executive Director of Gender Links, an organization based in South Africa.*

## **Institutional transformation in Jamaica**

Women were beginning to make inroads into the Parliament of Jamaica. There were seven women in the Lower House (11.7%) in March 2006, and close to 20 per cent of the nominees in the 21-member Senate were female. Women were also holding various ministerial portfolios, such as education, tourism and industry, local government and sport. Those could no longer be considered "soft" portfolios given the sizeable budget they received and the fact that tourism was the greatest foreign exchange earner.

While it was recognized that parliamentary transformation "was a work in progress, a journey, not a destination", it was noted that changes regarding women's participation had come about as a result of several factors.

First, in terms of context, it had been a long process that had started since independence for women to gain positions of influence in the parliament. However, dramatic changes had occurred and women had presided over both houses of parliament. A combination of the support of male leadership, mobilization by women both within and outside parliament, and socio-economic upliftment had been some of the reasons behind political change. Within Parliament itself, the mere presence of women had brought about changes in its functioning. As the Speaker noted, "We transform parliament by being ourselves" and by providing the first-hand experience of women. The legitimacy of parliaments is enhanced in the eye of the public by a representative parliament.

Second, the involvement of women in the administration of parliament is influential. With increasing numbers of women in parliament, specific committees are able to channel different perspectives to create a parliamentary infrastructure that is equipped for the needs of both women and men. For example, sitting times have changed to be more amenable to parliamentarians with family responsibilities, and in the committee to discuss a new parliament building, women in Jamaica were able to voice their demands for the construction of the new parliament building.

In addition to contextual and administrative factors, presiding officers had an influential role to play in the conduct of legislative debates. Women had highlighted the perspectives and needs of women in parliamentary debates and in the parliamentary committees and presiding officers were able to influence consent and passage of legislation. Finally, Speakers had an important protocol and public relations function being involved in interactions and exchanges at the highest levels. That had raised the profile of women Speakers in Jamaica, and they had been able to use their participation in events outside Parliament to highlight the perspectives and needs of Jamaican women.

The newly elected Prime Minister, Ms. Portia Simpson-Miller, would take up her office in March 2006 - a landmark event that was applauded by all. She would join a growing number of women heads of State and Speakers of Parliament elected during 2005 and 2006, in countries such as Chile, Germany and Liberia.

### ***"Ringling up the changes" in southern African parliaments***

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) was a region that had made great strides and encountered some setbacks, in terms of women's parliamentary participation over the past ten years. As a sub region, SADC recorded an average of 22.4 per cent women in parliament, second only to the Nordic countries. There had been notable increases in women's participation in the Executive, which had reached 42.0 per cent in South Africa. Several women were also Speakers or Deputy Speakers of Parliament.

The findings from a research study entitled *Ringling up the Changes: Gender in Southern Africa Politics* were presented. They shifted the discussion from the question of numbers to an examination of the changes that the increased presence of women in parliaments had brought about. There was a tendency for women to be scrutinized in a way that men rarely were, such as questioning whether women would make a difference in parliament. It was agreed that a more pertinent question to ask was *how* women were making a difference, as their mere presence had changed the dynamics of parliaments.

Evidence from SADC suggests that women brought different issues to parliament because of their own experiences. Women had begun changing the institution of parliament by way of sitting times, dress code and facilities for women. The presence of women had also changed the power distribution within committees, giving rise to new structures for women's input, such as specialized committees on gender equality and women's caucuses.

In essence, the study found that "women, in substantial numbers, working in enabling environments, make a difference." By precipitating change in institutional norms and culture, the attitudes of male parliamentarians had changed. Parliaments had redoubled their efforts to mainstream gender equality, although there was still much work ahead. And at a time when only twenty countries had reached the 30 per cent target of women in parliament globally, it was useful to remember that the efforts of a few women, and men, could go a long way to bringing about change for many.

### ***Discussion***

In the ensuing debate, many delegates reported on developments in their respective countries with regard to parliamentary transformation and their own specific contributions as women Speakers of Parliament.

The highlights of the debate included the following salient points:

- One delegate reported that upon assuming her position as Speaker of the House in 2005, her opening speech to parliament underscored the importance of the participation of women in politics. She emphasized the need to change working methods and procedures so as to implement family-friendly sitting hours and encouraged women's participation.
- Several delegates noted that as Speakers of Parliament had a specific influence, they had a particular role to play in keeping certain issues at the top of the parliamentary agenda. That may include ensuring that the voices of women were heard in parliamentary debates, so that both women and men discussed issues such as combating human trafficking and violence, poverty, economic empowerment and health care.
- Women were able to change the institutional discourse to make it reflect the society that they wanted to create. That entailed changes in language and vocabulary that originated in more patriarchal thinking.
- One delegate noted that she used her influence as Speaker to open a discussion on gender equality in parliament and political parties. As a result, some political parties had changed their constitutions to incorporate gender equality principles and a women's caucus in parliament had been formed.
- It was reiterated that parliaments had an important oversight function. It could be used to scrutinize the reports submitted by countries to the CEDAW Committee and reporting bodies. Those reports should be tabled and examined in parliament.
- Several delegates felt that women Speakers acted not only as role models, but also helped raise the profile of parliament and women's leadership in the public domain. While the Speaker played a neutral facilitating role within the chamber, moderating debates between rival political factions, outside the chamber the Speaker was well-placed to highlight the problem of gender inequality and promote the interests of women.

In summary, women needed to be in parliament in order to bring about changes. However, the barriers to their effective participation must be removed, hence the important contribution that women Speakers had to make. Parliaments needed to operate in a "gender-sensitive" way to enhance the participation of women so as to ensure that the laws and policies developed took into account their impact on both women and men.

Participants concluded by underscoring the importance of continuing to convene meetings for women Speakers in the future. It was proposed that a meeting of women Speakers be held annually, to coincide with the CSW and the themes under discussion. Additionally, it was proposed that the possibility be explored of hosting specialized meetings with male Speakers of parliament.

The findings and conclusions of the meeting were presented by Ms. Ntlhoi Motsamai, Speaker of the National Assembly of Lesotho, at an IPU and UNDAW parliamentary event entitled *Gender Equality: Making a difference through parliament*, which took place at United Nations Headquarters on 1 March 2006.