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GUIDANCE NOTE

Strategies and good practices in promoting gender equality outcomes in parliaments

United Nations Development Programme

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As an essential institution in the democratic landscape of a country, parliament has an obligation to reflect the diverse needs, interests and experiences evident across all societies.

Parliament also has an obligation to ensure that all outputs – legislation, recommendations, debates or motions – actively work to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

Women's inclusion and effective participation in parliament is a key indicator of an open society – one that accepts the right of all people to contribute to the determination of their own future. Women's presence in decision-making is also critical in ensuring that their particular needs, interests and experiences are captured in the decision-making process.

Introduction

An effective parliament is an integral part of any democracy and a strong indicator of an open society.

Supporting a parliament to ensure it operates democratically can have a major impact on all aspects of the lives of citizens, including the empowerment of women and girls. It is through parliament that laws are passed, funding allocated, human rights guaranteed, transparency is promoted in government and international conventions are adopted and implemented.

While women comprise at least half the population in most societies, this proportion is not matched in positions of leadership and decision-making. Globally, women represent less than a quarter of all national parliamentarians (23 per cent, as of April 2016), 17 per cent of the world's Ministers, and as of August 2015, 11 women served as Head of State and 10 served as Head of Government. Among other things, this means that women's views and perspectives are marginalized or ignored in the work and policies of political institutions, including parliaments.

Women's political participation and leadership are in many cases hindered by a range of institutional or structural constraints, underpinned by cultural and attitudinal barriers that suggest women should not have a role in public life. Electorates and media organisations perpetuate negative gender stereotypes about women's competence to run for political office; certain kinds of electoral systems reduce the opportunity for women to compete with men on an equal footing; political parties resist the inclusion of women in their candidates; and women are frequently less able to mobilise the same amount of resources – financial and human – required to fund an electoral campaign.

These challenges notwithstanding, women have the right, enshrined in a number of human rights instruments, to political participation and leadership (see Annex 1). Indeed, studies have clearly asserted that women are important agents of policy and cultural change in parliaments.ⁱ For these reasons, global, regional and national commitments to increasing the number of women in politics have been made and reaffirmed for decades.

A key strategy in the promotion of women to parliament has been the adoption of electoral gender quotas (reserved seats, candidate and political party quotas). When appropriately designed and effectively implemented, quotas have made a significant difference to the numbers of women elected, improving what is commonly referred to as women's 'descriptive representation'.

Once elected, however, women have continued to face obstacles in performing their parliamentary roles and thereby their 'substantive representation.' Parliaments, as institutions, are often steeped in norms, practices and policies that discriminate against women and which make it difficult for women to effect change, including policy change, from within. From relatively simple concerns such as sitting hours to more complex issues such as the adversarial nature of the debates or the means by which experts and citizens are consulted, the rules and processes of the parliament can provide a significant barrier to women MPs.

Purpose and objectives

Identifying good **practices** in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment through parliamentary bodies in national legislatures has been an increasing focus of study, as more legislatures have employed different and innovative approaches. This Guidance Note explores the strategies and good practices used by the UNDP in supporting parliaments in their own promotion of gender equality. This Guide is intended to inform future internal discussions and decision-making by examining the different modalities through which UNDP has been promoting gender equality in its parliamentary development support and providing direct support to legislative bodies to promote gender equality. It aims to assess the strengths and weaknesses of this work. More specifically, the Guide:

- contributes to the body of knowledge on parliamentary structures that promote gender equality;
- captures and analyses existing programming approaches including good practice and lessons learned from UNDP;
- positions UNDP to better support Country Offices (and their partners) in mainstreaming gender equality throughout parliamentary assistance programs and to share good practices that can be leveraged for future success; and
- offers recommendations to the UNDP on how to enhance gender responsiveness of their parliamentary development support and thereby increase women's parliamentary participation.



Skills training held for female community activists in Khyber Pass. Photo: UNDP/Pakistan

Methodology

To date there has been little systematic tracking of UNDP's gender and parliamentary development programming in Country Offices and limited baseline data to measure results in this area. Consequently, a study was undertaken to provide an overall picture of UNDP's recent, current and planned work to support and strengthen legislative bodies to promote gender equality. Information was sought on UNDP programming on gender sensitive parliamentary development through a survey of UNDP Country Offices. The questionnaire was divided in three parts:

- I. General questions on parliamentary development programming and CO information on gender mainstreaming;
- II. Specific questions related to programming on gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in parliamentary development; and
- III. Partnerships and lessons learned.

Country Offices were asked to elaborate on the nature of programming implemented to promote gender equality in parliaments, and to share lessons learned in that process. Responses to the questionnaire were both quantitative and qualitative. A total of 28 country offices (including one regional hub) responded to the questionnaire.ⁱⁱ A response rate is difficult to gauge precisely, because not all UNDP country offices provide gender responsive parliamentary assistance. UNDP works in 70 country offices in the area of parliamentary development, it is estimated that around 40 include a component on women's political participation.

This survey is contextualised by reviewing the gender mainstreaming strategies and collaboration partnerships of existing bodies established across parliaments worldwide to promote gender equality. This research was compiled using the relevant literature and the IPU's database on specialised bodies dealing with gender equality.

Structure of the Guidance Note

This Guidance Note is divided into three parts:

Part A presents a range of strategies to ensure gender equality outcomes can be reached in parliaments, and outlines the key features of parliamentary bodies mandated to promote gender equality across the world.

Part B is a review of assistance provided to parliaments on gender equality by the UNDP and explores the nature of activities implemented, where demand for the programme originates from, funding dedicated to this area of programming and where it commonly fits on the UNDP's 'gender marker' score.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is followed by a more in-depth discussion of the support currently provided and planned to be provided to gender equality focused parliamentary bodies, and to gender equality advocates who support those bodies. This investigation also identifies knowledge products developed to assist in the implementation of these programmes. Finally, this section considers the partnerships developed to provide technical assistance, and considers their effectiveness through lessons learned.

Part C looks at the lessons learned from these programmes and presents recommendations for the UNDP at global, regional and country office levels.

Part A: Strategies to ensure gender equality outcomes in parliaments



Women in Papua New Guinea take part in a *Practice Parliament* training. Photo: UNDP/ Papua New Guinea.

Introducing Gender Sensitive Parliaments

A number of strategies have been devised to address the challenge of supporting elected women MPs and in improving the gender sensitivity of parliament. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2011 [Gender Sensitive Parliaments](#) report highlights good practices that can improve the conditions under which women MPs operate within a parliament, and which aim to ensure that men also see gender equality and women's empowerment as transformative development goals. In addition to the important need to increase the number of women in parliament – including in leadership positions – these include:

- adopting gender mainstreaming strategies to ensure that the parliament as a whole considers all of its policies and process from a gender perspective;
- establishing dedicated gender equality infrastructure, such as a parliamentary committee on gender equality or a women's parliamentary caucus; and
- ensuring that linkages to gender equality advocates outside the parliament are strengthened and that communication is regular and institutionalised.

These three important and mutually reinforcing factors aid political institutions in the promotion of gender equality. First, parliaments need to implement the strategy of **gender mainstreaming** across both the processes and outputs of the parliament. Gender mainstreaming is a United Nations-recognised strategy to promote gender equality and involves an assessment of the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policy or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. Gender mainstreaming in parliaments ensures that women's and men's concerns, needs and experiences are taken fully into account in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all activities.

Through this process, the parliament seeks to reduce the gaps in development opportunities between women and men and work towards equality between them as an integral part of the organization's strategy, policies and operations, and the focus of continued efforts to achieve excellence. This strategy can be mandated in the rules of procedure or a strategic plan, but always requires the cooperation of all members of parliament and parliamentary staff.

An essential aspect of gender mainstreaming is the inclusion of women in the discussion and deliberation of issues that are typically male-dominated, such as security, defence, counter-terrorism, legal policy and justice. These issues and relevant committees can have a higher impact on the decision making process of the state and the rule of law in the country, and it is important that women also have a say on those issues.

Second, parliaments require **dedicated mechanisms** that focus the attention of the parliament on the goal of gender equality (or parliamentary gender equality bodies). These may be gender equality committees, a multi-portfolio committee that has also responsibility for gender equality, or a women's caucus. It could be a technical gender unit or research service. Gender equality focused parliamentary bodies vary widely in design, structure, activities and degrees of formality. Some structures, such as cross-party women's caucuses, are recognized as important forums for representing women's interests across political party lines. Parliamentary committees represent a more formal mechanism to enable both male and female MPs to influence legislative and policy agendas, both through reviewing bills to ensure they are gender sensitive, but also by holding inquiries into gender equality issues.

Finally, gender equality outcomes cannot be achieved without the **support and collaboration** of bodies outside the parliament who monitor the parliament's progress in reaching these goals and supply necessary data and technical advice. "Policy and legislative change on gender equality issues ... has frequently been the result of concerted, collaborative efforts between women inside and outside parliament,"^{iv} in particular, through the efforts of civil society organisations (CSOs) in advocating and lobbying for gender equality issues with MPs.

Women's movements and organizations often facilitate the establishment of women's parliamentary bodies, providing women MPs with expertise and first-hand knowledge of gender issues, and connecting them to the electorate. Furthermore, women's movements often serve as the institutional memory of past achievements, current realities, and lessons learned in the struggle for women's rights and gender equality.^v

An important tool of strengthening the role of women in parliaments by CSO's is also the involvement of women parliamentarians in their board/executive committee.

Gender mainstreaming within the legislative branch is the internal transformation of the institution ("how work is done"), of its results ("what is legislated" and "what content the legislation has") and of its links ("who it has a dialogue with", "who it controls", "to whom is it accountable").

These three factors are mutually reinforcing in the sense that none are sufficient without the others. The strategy of gender mainstreaming cannot be effective without institutionalised mechanisms and collaborative partners to take responsibility for its implementation, and to ensure accountability.

Mapping parliamentary gender equality bodies

As of November 2015, the IPU has recorded 144 parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality across 116 countries.^{vi} These bodies are categorised either as parliamentary committees, or women's parliamentary caucuses. A further category, not compiled by the IPU, might also be added in the form of technical gender units or research services. These are further explained below, considering their constitution, working methods including options for gender mainstreaming, and relationships with external bodies.

Dedicated gender equality committees

Parliamentary committees concerned with gender equality are distinguished by their remit. Some have an exclusive focus on gender equality while others include gender equality as one of many topics considered by their members (that is, 'multi-portfolio' committees). A strength of all parliamentary committees dealing with gender equality is that they are all permanent committees of their respective parliaments. That is, each of these parliaments has chosen to dedicate resources to the issue of gender equality rather than appoint a select or ad hoc committee to deal with issues on an as needs basis. For example, in Pakistan, an annual budget is allocated to ensure smooth functioning of the committee.

Examples of dedicated gender equality committees include the Belgian Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women, the Indian Committee on the Empowerment of Women, the Spanish Committee on Equality, the Dominican Republic's permanent Gender Committees in both the House of Representatives and Senate, and the Task Forces on the Rights of Women and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women in both the French Senate and the National Assembly. These are permanent bodies of their parliaments, constituted under internal rules, with membership reflecting the representation of political parties (or parliamentary party groups) in the parliament. As is the case with any parliamentary committee constituted by standing orders, dedicated gender equality committees may **hold public hearings and consult with their policy communities** to determine the effects of policies, programmes and legislation on women and men, girls and boys. Ministers and government officials may be brought before the committee to answer questions.

Dedicated parliamentary committees can make an important contribution to gender mainstreaming. These committees have had considerable success in **initiating gender equality laws**, and in **ensuring other legislation does not discriminate** against women and girls, men and boys. The French Task Force drafts reports containing recommendations on the bills and draft laws submitted to it. These reports are made public. Where necessary, the Task Force makes proposals on enhancing legislation and regulations in areas that fall within its sphere of competence.

Most important are the **relationships established** between the committee and the women's machinery bodies. In the Republic of Korea, for example, a number of women's machinery bodies and research institutes have established good working relationships with Korean parliamentarians and the Standing Committee on Gender Equality and the Family, resulting in initiatives such as the inclusion in 2006 of a gender budgeting clause in the *National Finance Act*. In the Dominican Republic the Permanent Gender Committee of the House of Representatives has a strong association with women's civil society movements, academia and the Ministry for Women. In Moldova, the Women's Committee has sought expertise, specifically on temporary special measures, from the Gender Equality Platform comprised of 19 prominent NGOs. The Mexican Committee enjoys close collaborative relations with the National Institute of Women and the Commission on Human Rights (Comisión de Derechos Humanos) including with respect to the regular organisation of joint forums, seminars and workshops, and the release of publications. In Monaco, the Committee regularly seeks the opinion of NGOs involved in women's issues and these groups may request that the Committee include certain issues on its agenda.

Dedicated gender equality committees have also been tasked with auditing national women's machinery. In India, the Committee may assess the reports, organisation and functioning of the National Commission for Women as well as other statutory organisations with regard to welfare programmes for women. The Nigerian Committee oversees budget appropriations and budget implementation by the Ministry of Women and Youth Development. In Pakistan, the Committee's audit reports are sent to the Minister for action (implementation and report).

Multi-portfolio committees that include gender equality

Multi-portfolio committees that include gender equality as one of their areas of competence and interest exist in most parliaments. Sectoral interests such as the family or children, health, social affairs, labour, education and welfare are commonly combined with women or gender equality.

The IPU data suggests that there are two predominant sub-groups of multi-portfolio committees that include gender equality concerns: those that have a heavy emphasis on social affairs and the family (such as the Committee on Families,

Women and Children in El Salvador; the Committee on Family and Social Policy in Poland, and the Norwegian Parliament's Standing Committee on Family and Cultural Affairs), and those that are more interested in human rights, and legal and constitutional matters. In this latter category are the Estonian Constitutional Committee; the Irish Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality; Rwanda's Political and Good Governance Commission; and Zambia's Committee on Legal Affairs, Governance, Human Rights and Gender Matters.

The analysis suggests that the lack of gender exclusivity can have both positive and negative implications. A clear advantage to the multi-portfolio committee is that its members will be able to apply gender mainstreaming methods to a broader range of issues. Moreover, in theory, there is the **potential for members** of the multi-portfolio committee **to implement mainstreaming strategies** to their work on other committees of which they are members. This is the principle at play in Sweden where all parliamentary committees are responsible for considering gender equality issues within their respective fields of work. In addition, the *Riksdag Act* sets out that the Committee on the Labour Market has special responsibility for overseeing issues relating to equality between women and men in working life. A practice has also developed whereby gender equality issues that do not belong within any other committee's area of responsibility are referred to the Committee on the Labour Market, which also prepares appropriations falling within expenditure area 13, 'Integration and gender equality'.

The case of Sweden, however, is an exception. It is more often the case that multi-portfolio committees are **expected to address gender equality issues as one set, among a large number of others**. In practice, this simply means that the committee has less time to dedicate to specific gender related concerns. Moreover, many of these committees may not specifically mandate a focus on gender equality – that is, the social affairs variant may link women to these other issue areas at the expense of gender equality.

Membership and leadership of committees

Parliamentary committees with a gender equality remit are commonly comprised of more women than men members, and women are far more likely to chair the dedicated committees than multi-portfolio committees. While it is important for women to hold positions of leadership, in the interest of gender balance and gender mainstreaming, it could be argued that there is **scope to improve the participation of men** in these committees^{vii} as well as women's leadership across other parliamentary committees, including those with responsibility for security and defence).^{viii} In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Nepal and Romania, men chair the gender equality committee, which can send an important message that gender equality is about ensuring that women and men are not discriminated against or disadvantaged. Opportunities to share the leadership positions among men and women, as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the chair is held by a man, and the deputy chair is held by a woman.

In some countries, the committee's membership is not restricted to parliamentarians. In Nepal, for example, it is composed of a group of six people: one representative from each of the three main political parties, one from the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth, one from the Human Rights Commission and one woman representative. Members are appointed by the parliament on the recommendation of the Speaker. In addition to the 13 parliamentary members of the Croatian

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