

## Case Study: The IPU

# Promoting Partnership between Men and Women in Parliament: The Experience of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

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### ***Partnership and Democracy***

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) works for the enhancement and strengthening of democracy through the institution of parliament. It does this based on the understanding that there is a fundamental relationship between gender equality in politics and democracy, and that more precisely the involvement of women in all aspects of political life is key to a more just and equitable society, as well as to stronger, more representative democracy. In 1997, the IPU consolidated these views in its Universal Declaration of Democracy, article 4 of which explicitly endorsed the link between democracy and a 'genuine partnership between men and women in the management of public affairs'.

Accepting that genuine democracy cannot exist without the equal participation of men and women in politics, the IPU has been at the forefront of efforts to support women in this field. More specifically, in working positively towards the promotion of women's participation in parliament, the IPU has also taken on board a number of the key strategies discussed by Karam and Lovenduski (see the preceding chapter). This case study presents the work of the IPU in enhancing the participation of women in parliament, and is divided into three sections, each mirroring different aspects of this work. Continuing the IPU's tradition of 'raising awareness' and 'collecting data', the case study begins with a brief empirical analysis of the progress made and setbacks encountered by women parliamentarians over the past ten years. This is followed by an examination of the ways in which the IPU has used its *own* structures to establish best practices for parliaments in facilitating the participation and particular contribution of women. The final section reflects on a number of capacity-building efforts in national parliaments, and outlines the strategies employed by the IPU in encouraging these institutions to address the question of gender equality.

‘We believe that true equality between the sexes can only be achieved if both women and men pull forces together to break the barriers of age-old belief that women and men have different roles to play and therefore have an unequal stand in society ... A man of quality should not fear women who seek equality.’

*Mose Tjitendero, former chair of the IPU Gender Partnership Group  
and speaker of the National Assembly of Namibia*

### **Women in Parliament 1995 to 2004: A History of Gradual Progress**

#### *An International Framework Conducive to Change*

The history of women in parliaments over the last ten years is one of steady, gradual progress. In many ways, this progress has been underpinned by a greater prominence of gender equality issues on the international agenda.

When women met in Mexico City in 1975 for the First United Nations World Conference on Women, the question of women in decision-making bodies was hardly raised. At the time, women accounted for only 10.9 percent of parliamentarians worldwide. Ten years later, at the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi, the question of women in decision-making bodies raised more interest. There, participants were confronted with a lack of adequate data and a greater consciousness of the existing gender gap in this field. Women’s representation in parliament had increased by just 1 percentage point in the preceding ten years. Despairing of this situation, the conference in Nairobi marked the beginning of more sustained action and growing awareness. Governments and parliaments began to make a series of commitments to promoting gender equality in all areas of political life.

In 1995, with the proportion of women in parliament actually having decreased (see table 17), the commitments of governments were consolidated in the Beijing Platform for Action, which paid particular attention to the question of how women were involved in decision making. In this regard, states were called on to take measures to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision making, and to increase their capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

One of the most significant expressions of action has been the nearly universal endorsement of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). One hundred and seventy-nine countries are now party to the convention and one other state has signed the treaty, binding itself not to contravene its terms.

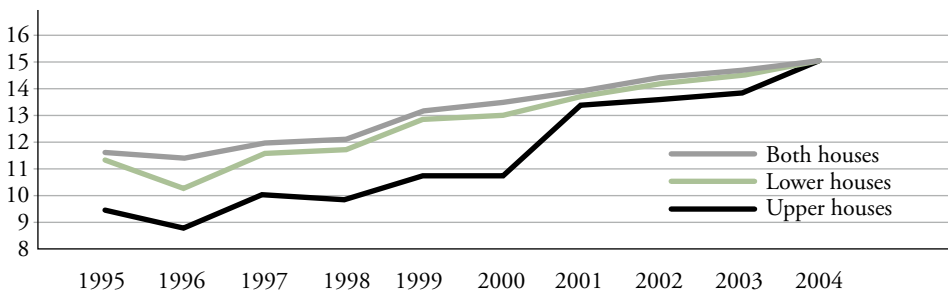
In 2000, the United Nations also recognized the fundamental role of women in the development process when it established the empowerment of women as one of its Millennium Development Goals. The proportion of seats held by women

in national parliaments is now considered one of the key indicators in measuring progress towards this goal.

### *World Trends*

Having perceived the need to fill a gap in terms of research and data collection, the IPU set out to collate and analyse information on the status of women in parliaments worldwide. Its earliest research effort in 1975 synthesized the experiences of women in 32 countries. Today, the IPU is the world's leading source of data on the proportion of seats held by women in 183 national parliaments. Using these data, the IPU has been able to monitor the trends in the participation of women parliamentarians and to present an accurate depiction of their situation.

**Figure 7: World Average of Women in Parliament, 1995–2004**



\* Situation in January of each year, except in 1995 (July) and 1996 (April). Percentages do not take into account the situation of parliaments for which data were unavailable.

The rise from 11.3 to 15.2 percent across both houses of parliament over the ten years 1995–2004 is a sign of progress, not least because women's parliamentary representation today is at an all-time high.

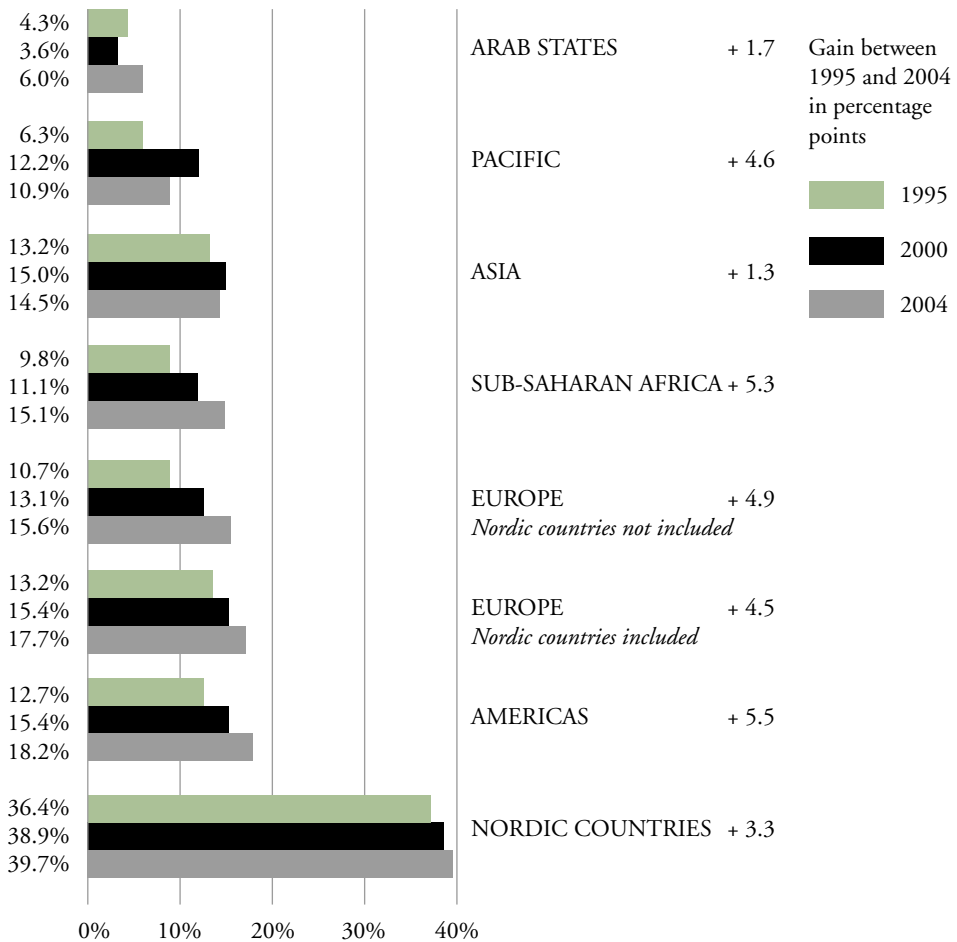
For many years, the record for women's representation worldwide was that of 1988. With the collapse of communism in 1989, however, the proportion of women represented in the parliaments of the states concerned fell drastically. Not surprisingly, the world average followed suit: the percentage of women in lower or unicameral houses fell from 14.8 percent in 1988 to 10.3 percent in 1993. Whereas many communist governments and one-party states had effectively ensured the selection of large percentages of unopposed women (and men) candidates, the move towards multiparty democracies in the 1990s made the electoral process far more competitive for women.

The world average has only recovered to its 1988 level in the last two years. Each of the world's regions has seen some improvement in the proportion of women elected to national parliaments.

*Regional Improvements and Contrasts*

Progress has been marked, however, by interesting regional contrasts. Throughout the past ten years, the Nordic countries have maintained their exemplary position, with averages consistently over 38 percent. In contrast, women continued to be least represented in the parliaments of the Arab states, despite an encouraging incremental trend which has led to the current average of 6 percent. Outside these two regions, averages have tended to stabilize at between 10 and 15 percent. The most significant progress has been evident across the Americas (+5.5 percentage points), in sub-Saharan Africa (+5.3) and in Eastern Europe (+4.9) (see figure 8).

**Figure 8: Regional Averages of Women in Parliament, 1995, 2000 and 2004**



• Situation in July 1995, January 2000 and January 2004, both houses combined.

Ranking in ascending order of 2004 averages.

\* Percentages do not take into account the situation of parliaments for which data were unavailable.

*National Parliaments at a Glance*

In the same period, there has been a significant change in the ranking of national parliaments that include the highest proportions of women. In 2003, Rwanda replaced Sweden as the champion in this respect, following the election of women to nearly half the seats in its National Assembly. In fact, over these ten years, women's parliamentary representation in Rwanda increased by almost 32 percentage points, to 48.8 percent. At the other extreme, the greatest setbacks were encountered in Chad and Bangladesh, where women's representation fell by 10.6 and 8.6 percentage points, respectively.

Positively, the percentage of parliaments with a substantial proportion (30 percent or over) of women members has increased threefold over the past ten years (from 2.4 percent in 1995 to 6 percent in 2004) while the percentage of parliaments where less than 10 percent of representatives are women has fallen by nearly half (to 37 percent from 63.5 percent in 1995).

Worldwide, the number of parliaments in which there are no women has not changed dramatically. Ten years ago, there were 12 countries with no women in parliament. Today (as of August 2005) there are nine, in just two regions, the Pacific and the Arab world.

Much of this is linked to the evolution of democracy in these two regions. Women in Kuwait were only granted the right to vote in May 2005. While men in Saudi Arabia voted for the first time ever in 2005 to elect local representatives, women were excluded from the exercise. As of August 2005, elections for the members of the consultative councils in Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates have never been held. Similarly, in the relatively new legislatures of the Pacific Island states (many of which were established only after independence, between 1977 and 1993), women have only recently been granted the right to vote. In 1960, Tonga was the first country in the Pacific to give women the right to vote and stand for election. It would take another 30 years for all women in this region to secure the same voting rights.

*Introducing Quotas: The Need for Political Will*

In circumventing the absence of a 'gender-sensitive culture', a number of countries have introduced affirmative action measures. These measures have been used not only to ensure women's presence in parliament, but also to implement commitments made under international instruments, including CEDAW.

In the process of democratization, many nations emerging from internal conflict have succeeded in increasing the percentage of women in their new or restored parliaments. Recognizing the importance of including women in reconstruction processes and in cementing women's participation in new democratic institutions, various affirmative action measures were introduced. The reviewed national constitutions—of Rwanda and Burundi, for example—now include provisions to reserve seats for women; in South Africa and Mozambique, quota mechanisms have been introduced by political parties. At a regional level, the Southern African

Development Community (SADC) countries have now set a target for women's representation in parliament of at least 30 percent by 2005. These efforts have meant that, alongside the Nordic states, post-conflict countries now rank among those with the highest levels of women's representation in the world. In South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, Uganda and Eritrea, women's representation in parliament now ranges from 22 to 33 percent.

The impressive 5.5 percentage point increase in women's parliamentary representation in the Americas over the past ten years is in large part attributable to the enthusiasm with which many countries in the region have implemented affirmative action measures. Various legislated quotas now exist in 11 countries of the Americas. In several of these, over 20 percent of parliamentarians are women (Argentina, Costa Rica and Mexico). Additionally, several political parties have adopted voluntary party quotas.

Driven mostly by political elites, efforts in the Arab world were first made in Morocco when an agreement was made between political parties whereby the electoral law was amended to reserve 30 seats for women in parliament prior to the 2002 elections. Thirty-five women were subsequently elected to the Moroccan parliament. Since that time, Djibouti and Jordan have followed suit. In Djibouti, a quota law was adopted in December 2002 stipulating that among the candidates presented by each party, at least 10 percent must be of either sex. The results of the 2003 elections there saw the unprecedented arrival of seven women in parliament, accounting for more than 10 percent of the newly-elected parliamentarians. In Jordan, the electoral law was amended prior to the 2003 elections to reserve six seats for women in the Lower House of the Majlis. Since the approval of a referendum held in 2001 in Bahrain, women can vote and stand for office in that country.

#### *In the Absence of Quotas: The Need for Political Awareness*

The case of Bangladesh, conversely, illustrates the particular difficulty women can face in gaining acceptance as legitimate political actors in the absence of quotas. In 2001, women's representation fell from 9 percent to 2 percent when a quota law reserving 30 additional appointed seats for women expired. The paucity of that result, however, actually led to the recent introduction of a stronger constitutional provision, reserving 45 additional parliamentary seats for women. The measure is valid for ten years.

This case points to a certain weakness in the adoption of special 'temporary' measures: 'fast-tracking' women into parliament is not necessarily accompanied by sufficient sensitization among parties and voters to the need for women in political life. For their part, political parties play an ever-increasing role in the management of parliamentary politics, and it is therefore at the party level that the principle of equality must be put into practice. Political parties, which are traditionally male bastions, need to be further encouraged to revise their statutes, admit more women

into their internal structures and include them as candidates in elections (see in particular chapter 3).

The examples of France and Belgium are illustrative. From a paltry 5.6 percent in 1995, women now represent 17 percent of the French Senate (an increase of 11.4 percentage points). Over the same time period, women's parliamentary representation in the Belgian House of Representatives increased from 12.2 to 35.3 percent (23.3 percentage points). In both countries, the electoral laws were amended (France's in 2000; Belgium's in 2002) to oblige political parties to present an equal number of men and women on their electoral lists.

Some political parties in France showed tremendous resistance to complying fully with the law. In some instances, they even preferred to pay a fine rather than include women on their electoral lists. While change has come gradually, the results of the latest elections to the French Senate, which saw women's representation improve from 11 to 17 percent, give cause for some optimism. These results suggest that political parties in France may yet understand the fundamental importance of including women in prominent positions on electoral lists. (The situation of France is further elaborated in the case study in this Handbook.)

Electors too must be sensitized to the importance of facilitating women's entry into parliament and access to this institution. To this end, a noticeable trend has developed in a number of countries holding elections over the past few years: awareness-raising campaigns have been run among voters to highlight gender issues, and among women to encourage them to exercise their right to vote. In the lead-up to the 2002 elections in Pakistan, it was particularly important to encourage women to stand as candidates and to vote in more conservative parts of the country, where female participants had to defy local rulings that prohibited them from voting. For the 2002 elections in Lesotho, special campaigns and workshops were held to sensitize women and men to adopt a more gender-balanced political approach.

Ultimately, both affirmative action measures and inclusive, gender-sensitive social norms have a role to play in promoting a more equitable representation of women in national parliaments.

### ***Making Women Count at the IPU***

'The IPU provides a good example of the change towards more democratic institutions: cooperation between women of different persuasions and backgrounds is one of the real plusses of this organisation of world parliaments.'

*Mrs Rita Süßmuth, former president of the German Bundestag (1988–98)*

**Table 17: Women in Parliaments and at the IPU****A. Women in Parliament: 1945–2000**

|  | 1945  | 1955  | 1965  | 1975   | 1985   | 1995   | 2000  |
|--|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Number of parliaments  | 26    | 61    | 94    | 115    | 136    | 176    | 177   |
| Percentage of representatives who were women (lower house or unicameral) | 3.0 % | 7.5 % | 8.1 % | 10.9 % | 12.0 % | 11.6 % | 13.4% |
| Percentage of representatives who were women (upper house)               | 2.2 % | 7.7 % | 9.3 % | 10.5 % | 12.7 % | 9.4 %  | 10.7% |

**Sources:** Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 1997. Men and Women in Politics: Democracy Still in the Making, Study No. 28; and IPU, ‘Women in National Parliaments’, available at <<http://www.ipu.org>> (regularly updated statistical data on women in parliament, worldwide, by region and by country).

**B. Women at IPU Conferences: 1947–2000**

|                             | No. of parliamentarians | No. of women parliamentarians | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|
| 1947 Cairo (36th Conf.)     | 241                     | 3                             | 1.2%       |
| 1950 Dublin (39th Conf.)    | 209                     | 10                            | 4.8%       |
| 1961 Brussels (50th Conf.)  | 419                     | 29                            | 7 %        |
| 1965 Ottawa (54th Conf.)    | 390                     | 25                            | 6.4%       |
| 1970 The Hague (58th Conf.) | 469                     | 33                            | 7%         |
| 1975 London (62nd Conf.)    | 502                     | 39                            | 7.8%       |
| 1980 Berlin (67th Conf.)    | 560                     | 40                            | 7.1%       |
| 1985 Lomé (73rd Conf.)      | 386                     | 28                            | 7.3%       |
| 1990 Nicosia (83rd Conf.)   | 444                     | 57                            | 12.8%      |
| 1995 Madrid (93rd Conf.)    | 600                     | 115                           | 19.2%      |
| 2000 Amman (103rd Conf.)    | 648                     | 139                           | 21.5%      |

**Source:** IPU. See the web site at <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/dlgtns.htm>>.

Today, women account for almost 30 percent of the parliamentarians who take part in IPU statutory assemblies. Some 50 years ago women represented a mere 1.2 percent. How can this change be explained?

One of the IPU’s biggest successes has been its proactive stance on the need to ensure gender equality in politics, and more particularly in parliament. This early commitment was followed by a series of measures and actions that were first implemented at the IPU itself. Very early on, the IPU stated its commitment to ensuring partnership between men and women in politics. Today’s Statutes ensure

that gender equality is the IPU's ultimate objective for participation by men and women.

Women have benefited from a strong current of favourable political will within the IPU and a growing awareness of the need for, and benefits of, gender equality within its member parliaments. This was the background to the establishment of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians (see box 3). The institution of the meeting at the IPU bears witness to both the ability of women to make positive change and the commitment of the IPU to accept that change. It is the result of women's intensive lobbying for a space of their own so as to make a greater impact on the overall work of the organization.

The sustained growth of women's participation corresponds to the increasing prominence attributed to the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians. From 1985 to 1995, the increase in women's presence at IPU assemblies was exponential. However, despite the structures now in place and a clear political will within the organization to see a greater presence of women parliamentarians, the participation of women began to plateau. Meeting the set objectives would clearly require stronger action.

The IPU is one of the first international organizations to have adopted affirmative action measures within its own structures to ensure stronger participation of women. Implementing these measures mainly came as a result of a three-year consultative process initiated by the Gender Partnership Group, itself comprising two men and two women from the IPU Executive Committee. Ultimately, a series of measures effectively amounting to quotas and targets were included in the IPU Statutes and Rules. These relate to the IPU's three main bodies: the Executive Committee, the Governing Council and the Assembly.

- A straightforward quota system was introduced for elections to the Executive Committee: 20 percent of its elected members now must be women (article 23.2 of the Statutes).
- For the Governing Council, a gender-neutral target was adopted which, if strictly applied, would ensure that at least 30 percent of its members would be of each sex: each delegation of three members is called on to include both men and women. Where this target is not respected, the member of parliament's voting rights are reduced by a third (Rule 1.2 of the Governing Council).
- Another gender-neutral target was adopted for the Assembly: where delegations attend IPU assemblies without representatives of both sexes three times in a row, their voting rights and officially registered numbers are reduced (articles 10.3 and 15.2(c) of the Statutes).

Over the past years the IPU has tackled the question of women's participation within its own structures from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

‘The single greatest success of this Assembly will be hard to determine. But I can say ... that one of its most outstanding achievements has no doubt been the fact that nearly all the discussions held here, whether in plenary, in Standing Committees or at other specialized meetings, have shown consummate interest in gender issues. I mention this because I feel that this is the best way of celebrating 20 years of work by the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians. For over and above the ceremonies there is no greater reflection of the inherent value of the Meeting than its practical effect.’

*Philippine Senator Pia Cayetano, President of the Manila session of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, 112th Assembly*

### **Box 3. The Experience of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians in Changing the Rules**

It has taken time and sustained dedication on the part of women, but today the IPU Meeting of Women Parliamentarians is a success story in ‘changing the rules’. The meeting ensures women’s participation, visibility and influence in the decision-making processes of the IPU and allows women to play a decisive role in the development of the IPU’s programme on the status of women.

#### *Ambitious Beginnings*

The idea for a Meeting of Women Parliamentarians came from a small but active group of women, determined not only to become acquainted with one another and discuss their experiences as members of parliament but also to encourage women to participate more actively in the work of the IPU. Women delegates from Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany held a first meeting in Bonn in 1978, during the 65th Inter-Parliamentary Conference, to discuss mechanisms to put gender equality on the IPU’s agenda and to ensure that women participated in its conferences in greater numbers. While this group recommended that as many women parliamentarians as possible who were present in Bonn should be included in the delegations to the next IPU Conference, subsequent conferences saw the level of women’s participation drop from 7.8 percent to 5.9 percent.

#### *Learning the Rules (1978–82)*

This first initiative effectively marked the beginning of a ‘women’s movement’ at the IPU. Women continued to meet informally during IPU statutory sessions. Often held during lunch breaks, these events were coordinated by women parliamentarians from the conference’s host country or by women delegates to the Inter-Parliamentary meetings. They were held without any fixed agenda

simply to allow women parliamentarians to exchange experiences and learn about each other. Inevitably, this period gave women an opportunity to learn the rules of the IPU.

#### *Using the Rules (1983–90)*

With a better understanding of the IPU's structures, in 1983 women parliamentarians expressed a desire to establish, under IPU auspices, an association of women parliamentarians. A nine-member preparatory group was tasked with studying the question and coming up with recommendations. Consultations between the group and the IPU secretary general took place, and it was decided that the participation of women would be promoted by establishing a group that would meet at the start of each IPU conference. The underlying idea was that the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians would influence the organization's working groups, plenary discussions, policies and decisions.

The IPU's governing bodies approved this decision in 1984, thereby ensuring that the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians would have adequate funding, technical coordination and support, including the provision of premises and secretarial and interpretation support from the IPU Secretariat.

The first Meeting of Women Parliamentarians coordinated by the IPU Secretariat was held in Lomé during the 73rd Inter-Parliamentary Conference in 1985, seven years after the first informal meeting of women parliamentarians. Since then, traditionally, the host parliament has organized a luncheon for the meeting's participants so as to facilitate dialogue among women and the development of personal contacts.

#### *Changing the Rules (1991 to the present)*

The creation of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians provided women with a forum through which they could voice their opinions and apply pressure within the IPU to push their agenda. One of their objectives was and still is to ensure that gender issues are addressed by the IPU as a whole and mainstreamed in all of the organization's work. For example, following its own constructive debate on HIV/AIDS in April 2005 during the 112th IPU Assembly, the meeting was able to contribute gender-related elements to the IPU's unanimously adopted resolution on the issue. This process has seen women contribute to a wide range of debates, from financing for development to migration to conflict resolution. Upon the initiative of women parliamentarians, the following institutional changes have taken place, each aimed at ensuring a greater role for women within the IPU:

- the establishment of a formal mechanism through which the Meeting of

Women Parliamentarians reports on its work and presents recommendations to the Governing Council of the IPU;

- the amendment in 1995 of the language of the IPU Statutes and Rules to eliminate any wording likely to convey a message of superiority of one gender over the other;
- the creation of a Gender Partnership Group in 1997 to ensure that in all its activities the IPU takes into account the need to act in a spirit of partnership between men and women;
- the amendment in 1999 of the union's Statutes and Rules, to officially recognize the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, assisted by a Coordinating Committee, and the adoption, in 2000, of the Rules of the Meeting and of its Coordinating Committee; and
- the amendment in 2004 of the Rules of the Assembly, allowing the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians to submit amendments to draft resolutions during IPU assemblies so as to ensure that the work of the meeting and gender issues in general are reflected in the organization's work. The amendment establishes the meeting as the only body with this right.

From its humble beginnings, the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians has thus succeeded in increasing significantly the number of women taking part in IPU assemblies. In 1947, women comprised only 1 percent of all delegates to the Conference. While slight progress was made by 1975, when 8 percent of all delegates attending the 62nd Conference were women, the overall percentage skyrocketed to 29 percent of delegates by the time of the 111th Assembly in 2004. Today, women parliamentarians are in fact better represented at IPU meetings than they are in national parliaments.

What has been the impact for women parliamentarians worldwide?

In addition to changes in the rules, the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians has provided:

- a forum for the exchange of experience among women members of parliament;
- an opportunity to showcase development for women MPs at the national level; and
- a think-tank for strategies to improve women parliamentarians' presence at IPU meetings and in parliaments more generally.

### ***Applying Changes at Home: Assisting Women Parliamentarians at the National Level***

If the changes made at the level of the IPU's own structures serve as a case study in terms of establishing international precedents and regional and national mechanisms, it is also true that focused action was required at the national level. For this reason the IPU has also extended its work in this field.

Over the past few years, the IPU's strategies have evolved to address specific needs of women at the national level and to enhance the capacities of parliaments to address gender issues. Gender issues are understood as those which impact upon, and concern, society as a whole, rather than women specifically or individually. Violence against women, for example, is seen as a gender issue rather than a women's issue in that addressing it requires addressing roles women and men might play in a society and looking at the impact on both men and women. In a sense, most issues could be analysed from a gender perspective and be seen to have a differential effect on different groups of men and women.

In addition, the research carried out by the IPU on the situation of women in parliament, their difficulties and successes, has provided useful insight into the development of national support strategies. Along these lines, several main strategies can be highlighted.

#### *Enhancing the Capacities of Women Members of Parliament*

One leitmotif in the history of women in politics is their initial lack of experience when entering the parliamentary arena. Building women's confidence and strengthening their capacity to fulfil their mandates appropriately is thus crucial at both the pre-electoral and the post-electoral stages. Recently, the IPU's attention has focused on countries emerging from conflict. A seminar for Rwandan women candidates enabled women parliamentarians and future candidates to exchange information with other women parliamentarians from the region, as well as representatives of the media and political party leaders, on campaigning mechanisms and strategies.

Activities carried out in Burundi and Rwanda were aimed at strengthening contact with the electorate, and more particularly with women. Women parliamentarians benefited from donor support to organize field trips in their constituencies and to participate in popular debates. In many instances this made them sensitive to their constituents' concerns and helped them to explain the political processes under way: in Burundi, for example, women parliamentarians were able to explain the intricacies and implications of the Arusha peace agreements to women.

In Burundi, Rwanda and Timor-Leste, newly-elected women expressed a wish to develop their leadership and communication skills. IPU training activities subsequently focused on public speaking, the preparation and delivery of campaign speeches, and the development of communication strategies and techniques.

Training on parliamentary procedures was also provided. In Djibouti, IPU

training seminars were organized on the role and mandate of parliamentarians. These seminars were attended by both men and women parliamentarians. In Timor-Leste, a seminar on the role of parliament in the budgetary process, including from a gender perspective, was organized prior to the opening of the budget session in parliament so as to help parliamentarians prepare for the second budget review in Timor-Leste's history.

### *Caucuses and Networking, Including with Women's Organizations*

The strength of newly-elected women legislators can lie in their solidarity and capacity to unite, beyond their party structures, to tackle specific gender issues. Generating such unity among women from all parties is not, however, an easy task. In Rwanda and Burundi, these structures already exist: the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (FFRP) and the Association of Women Parliamentarians from Burundi (SOFEPA) serve to mobilize women around specific gender issues. IPU support has served merely to strengthen the legitimacy of these associations and their capacity to generate change.

IPU activities have also focused on ensuring that contact is made between different national partners working on gender issues. In the case of Rwanda, a seminar organized during the constitutional process brought together members of the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians, members of the Legal and Constitutional Committee of the Transitional National Assembly, members of the Ministry of Gender Issues and representatives of civil society organizations. One of the positive outcomes of this activity has been to consolidate cooperation between these different national actors.

### *Enhancing Parliaments' Capacity to Address Gender Issues*

The sharing of expertise on gender issues of particular concern to newly-elected women is often necessary to assist women legislators in addressing specific national gender priorities. To respond to this need, experts were fielded to assist women members of parliament in dealing with these concerns. Training seminars on specific gender issues, bringing together men and women parliamentarians and experts from other countries, were also organized. The pooling of experience between members of parliament of different origins has proved very constructive and useful.

Access to adequate background information on specific gender issues is key to parliamentarians' legislative and oversight functions. In all parliaments which have benefited from IPU assistance, documentation centres on gender issues have been established. While this particular type of activity benefits women parliamentarians first and foremost, it also contributes to the strengthening of the parliament's research capacity as a whole. Where the parliamentary library is open to the public, the documentation centre also serves civil society organizations working on gender issues.

IPU training activities have often included segments for parliamentary staff, with

a view to enhancing the institution's capacity in addressing gender issues.

### *Mainstreaming Gender*

Advocated in a number of key international instruments, the concept of gender mainstreaming has become increasingly important. The IPU has applied this concept most successfully to the budgetary process. In fostering the need to promote the role of women in parliament and in processes leading to good governance, the IPU has organized a series of seminars on parliament, the budget and gender. Organized together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank Institute and a host parliament, five regional seminars have now been held in Africa, Asia and the Arab region.

### *Work in Partnership with Men*

The IPU has long held the view that consolidating a sense of partnership between men and women on gender issues contributes to an appreciation that they are not and should not be the exclusive domain of women. For this reason activities aimed at supporting women parliamentarians have often included segments designed to sensitize men to gender issues and establish alliances between men and women in favour of gender equality, thus avoiding the marginalization of gender issues.

In those parliaments where women's entry in high numbers has changed the initial or traditional gender balance, seminars for men and women have provided an opportunity for all parliamentarians to work together in their new environment. In Djibouti, for example, women were elected to parliament in significant numbers for the first time in 2002. Together, the IPU and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) organized a seminar for both men and women, to familiarize new members of parliament with the idea of working together.

## **Conclusion**

### *Equality in Politics: Not a Question but a Necessity*

It cannot be assumed that women's increased representation in parliament will necessarily lead to a positive change for women in the electorate and that women will bring a different approach to politics. Parliaments are not gender-neutral institutions; they have their own cultural norms and rules. Women parliamentarians are expected to work within these norms and rules, and any change they may bring will inevitably involve a great deal of effort and time.

Women's involvement in political institutions, however, remains crucial. Women constitute over 50 percent of the population of most countries and on that basis they should be represented in all legislatures and decision-making bodies. It is also clear that women's presence in parliament broadens priorities on the political agenda to include a range of previously unconsidered issues. At their initiative, issues such as childcare, women's health, violence against women and sex discrimination, to name

but a few, have been given far greater prominence. To varying degrees, women have also been quite successful in pointing to the inadmissibility of sexist or demeaning language in the parliamentary environment and changing the mores of parliamentary life.

Ultimately, the need for women in politics remains unquestionable. What can be questioned is the existence and operation of a parliament without women: how can politics possibly be defined without women; how can decision-making bodies effectively address the needs of a society without the participation and involvement of half of its population? A gender-balanced approach to politics is what the IPU believes in and defends. Anything less can only amount to a democratic deficit.