

Unit 3: Women in Parliament

Learning Objectives Women as Equal Leaders for Progress

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the attitude of the Commonwealth to women's participation in all aspects of life;
- Discuss the reasons for the small proportion of women Members in Commonwealth parliaments;
- Describe the barriers to the fuller participation of women in Parliament.

Introduction: Women in the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Group developed from an informal meeting of women parliamentarians held at the 35th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Barbados in 1989, initiated by Senator Norma Cox Astwood of Bermuda.

The main function of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) is to provide an opportunity for the women Members of the Commonwealth community and other interested parties to meet together to share experiences, discuss problems, seek solutions and discuss topics of particular significance or relevance to women, as a minority in the parliaments and legislatures of the Commonwealth. It provides an extra means of networking for individuals beyond the scope afforded by the program of the annual CPA Conference.

A further opportunity to raise the profile of women in Parliament was availed of when the Association conducted a satellite Workshop to the Seventh Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs in Fiji in June 2004. Participants of the Workshop entitled 'Gender, Development and Democracy' concluded that Parliamentarians are strategically placed to provide leadership in advancing gender issues in political and decision-making processes. The participants forwarded a Communiqué to Ministers who were finalizing the new Commonwealth Gender Plan of Action 2005-2015. The key message that participants conveyed to Ministers was that Commonwealth parliamentarians could play a crucial role as partners of government and

civil society in achieving gender equality. They also urged Ministers to recognize that parliamentarians have a special responsibility to advocate equality, accountability and sustainable development.

At the 2004 Meeting of Commonwealth Minister's Responsible for Women's Affairs, Ministers reaffirmed the 30 percent target of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors by the year 2015 set by Heads of Government in 1997. However, it was recognized that most Commonwealth countries would have to make radical changes in the next few years if they were to meet that target. The numbers of women in Commonwealth parliaments is still low, having hovered around 12 to 13% for long periods. The numbers vary heavily from region to region and, within regions, there are significant variations between member countries. For example, some parliaments in the Caribbean (for instance, Saint Kitts and Nevis – IPU data from 2005) do not have any women MPs.

One possible method that countries are applying to incorporate more women into positions of leadership is the quota system. In this controversial practice, political parties reserve a number of their safe or winnable constituencies for women candidates. Some countries, like the UK, reserve spots on the voting ballots for women so certain percentage of the spots will be reserved for women.

Quotas are an attempt to minimize the inequality gap. By the end of 2004, 81 countries had adopted some form of affirmative action, such as party quotas or reserving seats for women in parliament to ensure their political participation. Most Commonwealth countries have continued to strengthen their democratic systems by increasing women's representation through adoption and implementation of quotas and affirmative action measures. For example, Uganda introduced a constitutional reform measure to provide for one woman MP per district and one third of local political positions for women.

The Commonwealth recognizes that decisions on these matters are for each country to take and that the association can only make suggestions as to targets and other matters of broad policy. It has, however, initiated training and development programs for women candidates in

countries and regions that have welcomed such activities. These programs have achieved remarkably high levels of success.

The Commonwealth has created a Commonwealth Plan of Action (PoA) for Gender Equality 2005-2015. It is placed in the Commonwealth's overall framework and agenda for development, democracy and human rights. The plan focuses on four critical areas:

1. Gender, democracy, peace and conflict;
2. Gender, human rights and law;
3. Gender, poverty eradication and economic empowerment;
4. Gender and HIV/AIDS.

This new plan provides the framework within which the Commonwealth will advance its commitment to gender equality and equity. The PoA incorporates the Commonwealth response to the different impacts of global changes on women and men, builds on achievements to date and seeks to close persistent gaps. Despite progress, there is still a clear need to accelerate the implementation by member countries of both key international conventions and treaties and national gender equality policies and programs.

Overall the position of the Commonwealth for ensuring greater participation of women in

Box 1

Women's Representation in World Parliaments

<i>Region</i>	<i>Single or Lower House</i>	<i>Upper House or Senate</i>	<i>Both Houses Combined</i>
Nordic Countries	40%	---	40%
Americas	20.6%	21.6%	20.7%
Europe OSCE (including Nordic)	19.2%	16.9%	18.8%
Europe OSCE (excluding Nordic)	17.3%	16.9%	17.2%
Sub-Saharan Africa	17%	17.6%	17.1%
Asia	16.4%	17.6%	16.5%
Pacific	12.1%	27.4%	14.1%
Arab States	8.2%	6.0%	7.7%

Source: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

parliamentary spheres is that it is ultimately a matter of human rights and should be key to any country's agenda for development.

Inside Commonwealth Parliaments

Parliament represents the highest law-making institution, but women who constitute the majority of the population are often marginalized from that decision-making process. Women's representation in parliaments in the Commonwealth is usually much lower compared with men (See Box 1). Within parliament, women often occupy less powerful positions, which are often a reflection of unequal access to education, especially in developing countries, and social roles assigned to women in general. The socialization process tends to steer women along the study of subjects related to their expected roles and hence their involvement in parliamentary committees or appointment to ministries often reflects those roles.

Recent work in the Commonwealth and elsewhere has identified the obstacles to the fuller participation of women MPs within their legislatures as falling into four categories: political, cultural, institutional and psychological. This work is described below.

Political Obstacles

Historically, men have dominated politics in Commonwealth and other countries. In effect, positions within parliaments almost naturally became reserved for men and accordingly, procedures were established on this premise. When new legislatures were established, they freely borrowed patterns of work from the older ones and therefore, perhaps unwittingly, tended to continue the same traditions, which left women out of political decision making structures.

The victims of gender inequality alone cannot overcome the burden of changing attitudes; the support of male parliamentarians is crucial. Gender sensitivity training is, thus, important for both men and women parliamentarians. An attempt to change attitudes during an election campaign may not be pragmatic since both men and women parliamentarians will be competing for political office. It may be more advisable for parliamentarians to take advantage of the normal constituency meetings and political rallies to promote gender equality issues.

Once elected, women politicians are often faced with entry into a male-dominated bastion. Parliaments have tried to compensate for this to some extent through orientation programs that recognize the particular conflicts for women members. In some parliaments, a Minister in charge of Women's Affairs or other central figure arranges for women members to meet and discuss common conflicts specific to women without reference to party loyalties.

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Recommendations have been made in certain countries for all parties to have women's caucuses to look after the interests of women. Discussion of gender issues in a women's caucus can improve women's confidence and their ability to articulate and address issues within their committees. Within the caucus, women are able to assist each other with information and access to women's organizations. The Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA) is a good example of women working together on gender issues. UWOPA has also taken the initiative and conducted workshops to educate specific target groups on content of the bill and its benefits to families.

Parliaments may also elect to examine draft legislation for its impact on women. Gender analysis entails a process of studying information to ensure that benefits of policies are equally distributed to all target groups. In regards to finance, the Commonwealth Secretariat has taken a leading role in encouraging countries to initiate gender responsive budgeting. Gender budgeting takes into account the inequalities that arise due to the different roles assigned to different groups in society. National budgets are developed as gender-neutral, but there is increasing recognition by governments that budgetary policies have different impacts on men and women. The budget, as an instrument for allocation of resources in a society, is probably the most effective mechanism that can be employed towards the attainment of objectives such as gender equality.

Cultural Obstacles

Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are context and time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is a part of the broader socio-cultural context.

Creating a broader understanding of gender issues may help to break down cultural obstacles to allow for fuller participation by women in parliament. For example, just as the budget can be analyzed in terms of gender, so could all legislation and proposals put before parliaments and governments. This would help to ensure that gender sensitivity is entrenched in those who are called upon to make the decisions. Parliamentarians ought to understand that not all legislation affects the two genders in the same way or to the same extent. For example, poverty affects both men and women but it is often experienced differently by the two sexes because of the different social roles assigned to men and women. The social roles traditionally allocated to women often translate into reduced opportunities, security, and capacity as well as disempowerment.

Working together in the preparation of new versions of codes of conduct has also been suggested as a means in which both men and women may cooperate in achieving gender sensitization.

Traditional cultural barriers, which operate in certain countries against the interests of women MPs, have to be reversed. While this may not be achievable through legislation alone, it has been suggested that laws can emphasize, where possible, that the rights of men and women are the same. Legislative reform can help ensure the protection of women's rights and equal access to justice. However, additional obstacles remain despite significant progress, thereby limiting the ability of many women to realize equality. For instance, poor women lack

information, education and access to legal processes, resulting in a gap between having equal rights conferred on them by legislation and the ability to enforce and enjoy those rights.

Institutional Obstacles

In many countries the procedures of parliaments have been put together over decades and many pre-date the times when matters relating to the rights of women were openly discussed. As a result, there are many rules and practices in parliaments that make the work of women MPs more difficult. These vary from the unsocial timing, for example arranging for debates during work hours so women MPs who have families can attend them, to the availability of services, such as baby and child care facilities in parliamentary buildings. Likewise the wording of Standing Orders often does not make a woman MP feel welcome. The use of gender-neutral language is a case in point. For example, titles such as 'Chairman' may be changed to 'Chair' or 'Chairperson.'

Institutional barriers may also be overcome by the availability of suitable training programs for both men and women MPs. Media work, for instance, is often a high priority for newly elected women MPs. In certain cultures, journalists interviewing women MPs may not be at ease with the concept of women in positions of power. Consequently the atmosphere could be damaging to the interview and to the resulting report. Training programs for interacting with the media may prepare women MPs with the interviewing skills needed to effectively communicate both their points and their political stature to the interviewer.

Women MPs in International Forums

There is still a notable paucity of women representatives at international gatherings. Organizations like the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) publish a list of conference delegates according to gender in an effort to create a name-and-shame operation for those who have a less representative parliament. However, the situation is unlikely to be

remedied by such means alone since many conferences held abroad constitute a major call on an MP's time and may not reach the majority of parliamentarians.

Conclusion

As representatives of the people, parliamentarians are the bridge between the electorate and the government. This unique position presents parliamentarians with an opportunity to be change agents through their representational, oversight and legislative roles. There are signs that things are changing in Commonwealth Parliaments in regard to the position, treatment and standing of women. Such changes cannot be achieved by women alone, but in partnership with their male counterparts. Every person must have equal access to political, legal, and traditional institutions.

Unit 3 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. What would be a realistic assessment of the number of women Members in the Parliament of your country in five years' time?
2. Does the number of women Parliamentarians matter or is it a question of quality of those elected?
3. What role can the media play in helping women to attain their full potential in public life?
4. Discuss methods whereby staff may assist women Members to play a fuller role in Parliament.

Relevant Abbreviations

CHRI	Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
ComSec	Commonwealth Secretariat
CPA	Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
IntIDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WBI	World Bank Institute

Relevant Internet Resources

Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender

http://www.cpahq.org/GenderPoA20052015_pdf_media_public.asp

ILO Mandate for Gender Equality

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/gender.htm>

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