

## Unit 7: Gender and Parliamentary Participation

### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the role of committees in parliamentary work;
- Understand what makes an effective parliamentary committee;
- Understand why gender representation in parliamentary committees is important.

### Introduction and Overview

Women offer an opportunity for parliament to be more representative of the overall population of a nation, to consider more seriously issues that impact women, and to share perspective on national issues. But women also confront political, socio-economic, ideological and psychological obstacles when entering parliament that do not so seriously burden their male counterparts. In this unit we consider both the opportunities and obstacles for women in parliament and make suggestions for leveling the playing field.

### Women in Parliament

If democracy means governing by the people, it cannot exist without policies, measures and practices that reduce inequalities between men and women. Capacity building on gender equality and women's empowerment in electoral processes, political parties, constitution-building processes, democracy and development processes are the building blocks for

integrating women into the political process. Women parliamentarians theoretically have the opportunity to realize this gender equality goal in the political sphere, especially through parliamentary committees.

## Parliamentary Committees

Parliamentary committees, sometimes called commissions or councils, are units of organization within the legislature that allow groups of legislators to review policy matters or bills more closely than would be possible by the entire chamber. The roles of the committees vary from country to country depending upon the governing system, strength and organization of political

parties, available resources, and other political factors.

As we have discussed in the committees module and others in this series, parliament undertakes much of its business using a network of parliamentary committees. Committee membership varies with different parliamentary

<b>Box 26: Women in Parliament</b>			
	<b>Single House or Lower House</b>	<b>Upper House or Senate</b>	<b>Both Houses Combined</b>
<b>Nordic Countries</b>	42.1%		
<b>Americas</b>	22.5%	22.6%	22.5%
<b>Europe – OSCE member countries</b>	22%	19.4%	21.5%
<b>Asia</b>	18.6%	16.4%	18.4%
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	18.3%	20.4%	18.6%
<b>Pacific</b>	13.2%	32.6%	15.3%
<b>Arab States</b>	9.2%	7.9%	8.9%

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

## Box 27: Common Characteristics of Parliamentary Committees

- Groups of MPs set up within Parliamentary System
- Focal point of legislation and oversight
- Not a decision-making body, except in respect to its own internal proceedings
- Is not independent of the legislature
- The committee reports conclusions to from the work of the committee to the chamber, often with recommendations for decision

*Source: Committees Learning Module*

systems. In most parliaments committee members are appointed by political parties based on their expertise or interest.

### **Box 28: Functions of Parliamentary Committees**

1. Initiating and managing legislation
2. Controlling the executive
3. Drafting legislation
4. Communicating with the executive
5. Representation of constituents
6. Investigating policy initiatives yet to be brought for ratification
7. Reviewing and approving the budget and expenditures for the government's policy agenda

*Source: Committees Module*

The choice of committees poses a challenge for new parliamentarians, particularly women who may feel intimidated by the perceived male members' wider knowledge of issues. As a result, most women parliamentarians end up joining committees related to social welfare issues. Money Committees such as the Public Accounts Committee require extensive knowledge of the Audit and Exchequer Act, or similar legislation, and the functioning of civil service functions. Due to the social roles adopted by women, most women's experiences lie in professions unrelated to finance. The lack of broad experience manifests itself in the low levels of female representation in committees requiring technical expertise; thus explaining the concentration of women in welfare committees such as education, health

and gender. In developed countries there is greater women representation in the technical committees as the gender gap has narrowed in education. The changing level of representation in committees confirms the importance, not only of education, but gender mainstreaming in all aspects of human relations in most developed countries.

## **Function of Committees**

Committees are a forum where the concerns of the constituency can be brought to the attention of parliament and through parliament to the government. National or community issues are brought to the attention of parliamentarians through meetings, political rallies, by civil society groups, the media and through audit reports. In some countries, it is the Clerk of Parliament's responsibility to draw up the committee calendar in consultation with the committee chairpersons, who in turn are responsible for consultation with the committee

members. Some gender sensitive committee chairs will allocate more time to female members of the committee to speak during committee sessions due to women's low representation in parliament. It is also the chairperson's responsibility to ensure that women members are not discouraged by male counterparts.

The major role of committees is to scrutinize bills proposed by the government. The committee members, who put items on the agenda, are expected to lead the discussion on that issue, which requires research and in some cases may involve allowing relevant individuals or organizations to present to the committee. In order to gain a better understanding of a problem or issue, committee work may also involve on site investigations or visits. For instance, a Public Accounts Committee can visit a country's diplomatic mission to investigate the utilization of public funds or the competence of the staff representing the interests of the nation. On the basis of the committee's findings, a recommendation can be made to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to increase or reduce staff at a specific mission or to increase the budget allocation.

The Public Accounts Committee's role is to ensure utilization of public funds in accordance with the budget law of the country. In most countries information is provided to the committee by the Office of the Auditor-General (where such an office exists) and the committee summonses the head of the ministry to respond to their questions. Some of the issues addressed by the Public Accounts Committee include: flouting of tender regulations, incurring of unauthorized expenditure by ministries, non-adherence to reporting procedures and the effectiveness of the accounting system. If the committee is not satisfied with the ministry's responses to the committee's inquiries, it can recommend that the ministry execute the policy or action as stipulated in the budget law or can demand the resignation of the minister in charge of the ministry concerned.

## **Gender Dimensions of Committee Operations**

As discussed earlier, the low representation of women in parliament is also seen in committees, particularly in the technical committees. Most of the technical committees are chaired by men.

Due to the distorted perception that gender is about biological differences as opposed to social roles, most women *are* expected to be members of Gender Committees. While the committee can assume a leadership role on gender issues, gender is multi-dimensional and women parliamentarians can identify and advance gender issues through other committee more effectively than through an isolated gender committee. It is more advantageous for women to be represented in technical committees such as Public Accounts and Budget Committees, which provide an opportunity to analyze and recommend changes to the budget in accordance with gender issues. Such committees may initially be intimidating, but working with their male counterparts and experiencing how technical committees operate can help women parliamentarians advance.

### **Enhancing Effectiveness of Committees**

Trade, health, education and commerce affect all aspects of gender equality. Having obtained the relevant information, the challenge is to organize it in a way which is comprehensible and concise, and keep arguments and presentations on gender issues to less than 30 minutes so that listeners can retain and remain interested in the content.

In some countries, committee reports are published, while in others they are kept secret. Where reports are published, it is essential for committee members to bring such information to the attention of their constituencies. Feedback to the electorate maintains the interest in governance issues and also helps to mobilize support for bills that may be introduced as a result of committee's discussions.

## Unit 7 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. Using one specific issue, elaborate on how not having female representation in the political sphere impacts the community.
2. Explain how gender could be integrated in a budget, education, healthcare, and trade committee?
3. Why is a gender committee not enough to ensure gender become an integrated issue into all parliamentary issues?
4. What steps, from your own experience, facilitate an effective presentation and argument?

### Select Bibliography

Parliamentary Committees module

Parliament in Commonwealth Countries Module

### Internet Resources

<http://www.idea.int/gender/>

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