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What will it take to reach gender parity in political participation in a post-COVID-19 world?

A parliamentary event organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Virtual, 23 March 2021

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Introduction

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the world's main policymaking body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the advancement of women. In 2021, the 65th CSW session for representatives of Member States was held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The session was to assess progress and setbacks, identify what remains to be done, and formulate new policies.

The IPU–UN Women parliamentary meeting at CSW has been held for more than 10 years. It provides a forum for parliamentarians to contribute to the Commission's work and ensures that the Commission includes a parliamentary perspective in the issues it considers. The 2021 event was linked to the priority theme of the Commission's 65th session, *Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls*.

The IPU and UN Women recognizes that concrete and bold government and legislative actions are urgently needed to reach gender parity in decision-making. As a result, the theme of their annual parliamentary meeting at the 65th CSW was: *What will it take to reach gender parity in political participation in a post-COVID-19 world?*¹

The objectives of the meeting were to give Members of Parliament (MPs) an opportunity to:

- Share good practices on achieving and overcoming challenges to reaching gender parity in their respective parliaments, especially in light of the gendered impacts of the pandemic;
- Stimulate dialogue that can help scale up political will and transformative actions towards gender parity in political participation;
- Provide an opportunity to contribute to CSW debates from a parliamentary perspective;
- Discuss strategies on the engagement of parliaments in light of the main theme of the 142nd IPU Assembly, *Overcoming the pandemic today and building a better tomorrow: the role of parliaments*.

The event brought together 164 parliamentarians (155 of whom were women) from 88 countries, as well as 566 observers, including parliamentary staff, government officials, and representatives of international organizations and civil society.

The 2021 parliamentary meeting took place online using a virtual event platform. To accommodate multiple time zones, the meeting was held in two sessions at different times on the same day, but with the same agenda. Both sessions featured diverse parliamentarians from all over the world, who were invited to discuss strategies for reaching gender parity in political representation amidst the pandemic.

Each session had a panel of parliamentary presenters, followed by a moderated discussion. Parliamentarians discussed their countries' experiences of women's participation in parliament in 2021 and the impact of COVID-19, as well as priority actions for gender parity in parliaments. The first session of the meeting was addressed by: Ms. Meera Sultan al-Suwaidi, Member of the Federal National Council (United Arab Emirates); Ms. Binda Pandey, Member of the House of Representatives (Nepal); Ms. Arlette Contreras, Member of the Congress of the Republic (Peru); Ms. Beline Uwizeza, Member of the Chamber of Deputies (Rwanda); and Ms. Laura Farris, Member of the House of Commons, and Co-Chair of the Women and Work all-party parliamentary group (United Kingdom).

The second session was addressed by: Ms. Martha Lucía Micher, Senator, and Chair of the Gender Equality Committee (Mexico); Ms. Mergane Kanouté, Member of the National Assembly (Senegal), and Member of the IPU Executive Committee and IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians; Ms. Heather McPherson, Member of the House of Commons (Canada); and Ms. Irma Luz Herrera Rodríguez, Member of the House of Representatives, and Vice-Chair of the Women's Equality Committee (Colombia).

¹ The webcast of the parliamentary meeting is at: media.un.org/en/asset/k1p/k1pwrugq52.

Some presentations and additional documents on the meeting can be found at: www.ipu.org/event/what-will-it-take-reach-gender-parity-in-political-participation-in-post-covid-19-world#event-sub-page-documents/.

The respective sessions were opened by: Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women; Ms. Ása Regnér, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women; and Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General. The meetings were chaired by Ms. Susan Kihika, Senator (Kenya) and President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians. Ms. Patricia Ann Torsney, Permanent Observer of the IPU to the United Nations, was the moderator.

Context of the meeting

The impacts of crises are often felt most keenly by women, and COVID-19 is no exception. Beyond the public health crisis, the pandemic has become a full-fledged economic and social crisis. Persistent obstacles have exacerbated the low participation of women in political decision-making and leadership. Violence against women and girls – the shadow pandemic – has worsened due to lockdown measures and economic pressure.

An effective response to the pandemic and its social and economic consequences requires strong and sustained leadership, action, and the participation of everyone affected. In this context, achieving equality between women and men in decision-making is more crucial than ever. Yet women remain substantially underrepresented among decision-makers globally. Women make up only a quarter (25.5 per cent) of members of national parliaments worldwide² and 36.3 per cent of elected officials in local deliberative bodies.³ As of 1 January 2021, only 21.9 per cent of ministers across the world were women. Women make up at least 40 per cent of ministers in only 30 cabinets worldwide.⁴ Women’s underrepresentation as health ministers is especially concerning in the midst of the ongoing pandemic. While women make up 70 per cent of health-sector workers, only 24.7 per cent of the world’s health ministers were women in 2020,⁵ and they held just 25 per cent of senior roles in health institutions.⁶

During the pandemic, many women have been shouldering additional domestic and care work at home, which negatively impacts their ability to fully participate in public life. For politicians, both women and men, online platforms have become effective tools for interaction with their constituents. To a degree, this has helped facilitate work-life balance for some; but it has also revealed gender discrimination and violence against women legislators.

Responses to COVID-19 benefit from women’s participation. Gender-responsive policies and women’s leadership are vital for mitigating the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and ensuring a more equitable recovery. Without women’s participation in current decision-making, the fragile gender-equality gains of the past 25 years risk being lost.

Parliaments are challenged to demonstrate much-needed political will, produce gender-responsive legislation, conduct gender-sensitive oversight of government action, and allocate adequate resources during the crisis. They are also key players in driving gender parity in political decision-making and leadership, and mobilizing popular support in that direction. MPs should contribute robustly to build support within their own political parties and prevent barriers to women’s equal participation in political decision-making and leadership.

The virtual segments of the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament and the 13th Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament, both held in 2020, highlighted the importance of these issues. The Declaration adopted by the Speakers of Parliament underlined a commitment to “work towards achieving full, effective and equal participation of women in parliaments and all State institutions, including in positions of leadership”, and to continue embodying gender equality in their structures, operations and working methods to ensure “all barriers to women’s participation in politics are removed”. The women Speakers of Parliament emphasized the call for gender parity (50/50) in parliament and political decision-making positions.

² IPU, *Women in Parliament in 2020: The year in review* (2021): www.ipu.org/women-in-parliament-2020.

³ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Global SDG indicators database* (2021): unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database.

⁴ IPU and UN Women, *Women in Politics* (2021): www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/women-in-politics-map-2021.

⁵ UN Women, *COVID-19 and women’s leadership: From an effective response to building back better* (2020): www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/policy-brief-covid-19-and-womens-leadership#view.

⁶ Data as of 1 January 2020 (IPU and UN Women, 2020).

Meeting report

Opening remarks

Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (Executive Director, UN Women) emphasized the IPU's strong cooperation and collaboration with UN Women. The work was not yet done, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic had disproportionately hit women and girls. Currently, the world was witnessing an increase in violence against women, online harassment, the burden of care and job losses, and a high girls' dropout rate. Two thirds of those who had lost their jobs during the pandemic were women. Eleven million girls were at risk of completely dropping out of school and never coming back. On leadership, there were low levels of women in legislatures, inadequate numbers of women Heads of State or government, and limited amounts of gender-balanced cabinets.

Going forward, the situation of women and girls should be built back stronger to withstand future risks. She called on parliamentarians to intervene because they held the power to ensure change. That was all the more important, as having more women in leadership positions would allow the impacts of the pandemic on women to be adequately addressed and appropriate remedies to be developed.

She urged participants to attend the Generation Equality Forums in Mexico and Paris, as they provided opportunities to set an agenda for the next five years in accelerating the status of women and girls.

Mr. Martin Chungong (IPU Secretary General) highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic had had a deep effect on women in all regards. Domestic violence had increased, and women were shouldering the bulk of unpaid care work, which was on the rise. Women had also been harder hit by income loss in the informal sector, and had narrower access to IT. During the pandemic, 70 per cent of care workers had been women; but women only accounted for a quarter of the world's MPs.

The pandemic had led to increased violence against women in politics, so that the chances of their running for office had decreased. Currently, only 25.5 per cent of MPs were women, and there were only 23 countries with a woman Head of State or government. Those were all-time highs, but were not good enough.

The gendered impacts of the pandemic needed gender-responsive measures. They required strong and inclusive leadership, as gender parity in parliament drove stronger governance, better outcomes, and gender-responsive policies that were long-term drivers for growth and development.

Accordingly, temporary special measures should be used, such as legislated quotas to drive up the percentage of women's representation in political office. Parliaments should use their constitutional mandates to ensure accountability and enable adequate resources to be allocated to promoting gender equality.

Ms. Åsa Regnér (Deputy Executive Director, UN Women) said that, when women were a critical mass in parliament, priorities and resource allocation changed. Resources were directed more towards social sustainability and the implementation of rights (children's and women's rights, stronger health systems), which was exactly what the world was crying out for.

Although 70 per cent of health workers on the pandemic frontline were women, in pandemic-related decision-making bodies, they rarely represented an equal percentage compared to men. Out of a total of 225 task forces across 137 countries, women made up only 27 per cent of members, and less than a quarter of the forces were led by women.

Failure to accelerate women's participation in 2021 would endanger delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Transformative change would only be attained if more women and girls were represented in public life – in all cultural, social, economic and political sectors, and at all levels of power.

Ms. Susan Kihika (Meeting Chair, President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians) said that investing in gender-equal political participation, especially during and after COVID-19, was imperative for advancing women's rights, addressing gender-based violence, and promoting women's empowerment.

The full and effective participation of women in decision-making was essential to avoid any slowdown of the 25 years of gains achieved since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Instead, opportunities should be harnessed to do better and accelerate gender equality.

After COVID-19, parliaments should drive up gender parity in decision-making, as it led to developing gender-responsive legislation, as well as ensuring policies that protected and advanced both gender equality and resource allocation to the gender-equality agenda.

Where do we stand on the road towards gender equality?⁷ ⁸

Ms. Zeina Hilal (Manager, IPU Gender Partnership Programme) reported that globally, on 1 January 2021, women made up 25.5 per cent of parliamentarians, 20.9 per cent of Speakers of Parliament, 5.9 per cent of Heads of State, 6.7 per cent of heads of government, and 21.9 per cent of ministers. Therefore, there were now more women than ever before at the highest levels of political power.

However, progress had been slow and some losses had been noted. Currently, only Cuba, Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates had at least 50 per cent of women MPs in their lower or single chamber of parliament, which was one less country than in 2020.

The number of countries where women held at least 50 per cent of the ministerial positions had also dropped from 14 in 2020 to 13 in 2021. Moreover, the number of countries with no women ministers had increased from 9 to 12.

On regional averages, the 30-per-cent threshold of women in lower chambers or unicameral parliaments had been passed only in the Americas (32.4 per cent) and Europe (30.4 per cent).

Currently, 23 parliaments had lower or single chambers composed of at least 40 per cent women. That was one less country compared to last year. In 2021, 11 countries had also significantly increased the ratio of women in their parliaments, and had therefore joined the group of countries in the 25–30 percentile range.

Despite that, the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted politics for women. In 2020, 20 countries had postponed parliamentary elections, and women had faced enduring or new obstacles in running for office. Setbacks in campaigning and elections had been identified, including an increase in violence against women in politics, higher exposure to online harassment and abuse, unequal access to online platforms, and decreased access to funding.

However, backsliding had been prevented due to various forms of statutory gender quota in 25 out of the 57 countries that had held parliamentary elections in 2020. Also, parliaments applying those quotas had elected 11.8 per cent more women to their single or lower chambers and 7.4 per cent more to their upper chambers compared to parliaments that had not applied the quotas.

In 2021, the goal of achieving gender parity in decision-making and leadership was more crucial than ever before. Achieving gender parity was key to:

- Removing barriers to gender equality;
- Opening up politics to women from diverse backgrounds;
- Transforming the political space into a more enabling environment for women;
- Addressing and reflecting on the equality demands of societies;
- Having more efficient, effective and legitimate political institutions.

⁷ IPU and UN Women, *Women in Politics* (2021): www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/women-in-politics-map-2021.

⁸ IPU, *Women in Parliament in 2020: The year in review* (2021): www.ipu.org/women-in-parliament-2020.

Strategies to achieve gender parity in politics by 2030 should therefore include:

- Legislating gender quotas;
- Crafting, adopting and implementing national gender-parity action plans;
- Reforming legislation to prohibit all forms of discrimination;
- Capping electoral campaign spending;
- Adopting laws to prevent gender-based violence, especially in politics;
- Targeting parity in all aspects of public life and the private sector;
- Mandating and allocating adequate resources to gender mainstreaming mechanisms in parliament.

National experiences in legislating towards gender parity

Overview

Panellists presented recent developments in women's participation within their respective parliaments. They shared good practices and lessons learned, including from parliaments that had taken legal measures to increase women's political participation. Examples included: adopting legislation that involved temporary special measures, such as implementing gender quotas with enforcement mechanisms; enhancing existing gendered electoral quotas by introducing a parity provision; legislating financial incentives for political parties that complied with statutory quotas or sanctions for failure to comply, as well as funding for women's campaigns. Presentations were followed by contributions from MPs around the world.

Ms. Meera Sultan al-Suwaidi (Member, Federal National Council (FNC), United Arab Emirates) said that women now accounted for 50 per cent of FNC members, which was the highest level of women's parliamentary participation in the Arab world. The level had been due to Presidential Resolution No. 1 of 2019, which had increased the quota of women in the FNC to 50 per cent. As a result, women running for office in the latest elections (2019) had increased to 39 per cent of all candidates, up from 24 per cent previously. In the FNC, women members were also empowering women from their communities, and raising their awareness of their rights, as well as of electoral campaigns and the importance of participating in public life.

In the future, a new educational curriculum would be adopted to encourage women to participate in politics. Also, the Emirati Children's Parliament had been created to focus awareness on the needs and rights of children. Mathayel Mohammed al-Saridi had been elected as its first female child Speaker.

Ms. Binda Pandey (Member, House of Representatives, Nepal) said that, in the 1990s, a women's movement had started a campaign advocating for the increased participation of women in public life based on the 1995 Beijing conference. In 2008, when Nepal had become a republic, the Parliament had unanimously adopted a motion mandating that at least one third of parliamentarians should be women. And in 2015, a new Constitution had stipulated that women should account for one third of all federally and provincially elected officials.

The Constitution also stipulated that either the Speaker or Deputy Speaker should be a woman, while in local municipalities, either the Chief or Deputy Chief was to be a woman. As a result, among the 753 municipalities, there were 731 women in those roles – 713 Deputy Chiefs and 18 Chiefs.

No political parties had complied with the requirement that at least one third of their executive committee members must be women. As a result, the Supreme Court had ruled in 2020 that a party's registration with the election commission was to be contingent on that requirement.

Ms. Arlette Contreras (Member, Congress of the Republic, Peru) said that the country's Quota Act (initially introduced in 1997) provided for the participation of 25 per cent of women in parliament. In 2002, a 30-per-cent quota had been introduced both for the list of candidates for the national Congress, and for local and regional governments.

Most recently, in the context of the pandemic, women in the Congress of the Republic had succeeded in obtaining the passage of the Alternate Parity Act, which was being applied in the upcoming 2021 elections. The law mandated gender parity and alternation of men and women on candidate lists. While the law had initially been planned for progressive implementation requiring parity by 2031, parity had been reached immediately, showing that it could be achieved as an urgent objective.

Currently, only 34 out of 130 members were women in the Congress of the Republic. In regional governments, women were not represented, underlining that they still had a long way to go towards parity. However, there had been some progress in 2015, as a law against violence and harassment of women in politics had been passed.

Ms. Beline Uwineza (Member, Chamber of Deputies, Rwanda) said that women represented 61 per cent of members in the lower house of Parliament, 38 per cent in the Senate, 53 per cent of cabinet members, 48 per cent of judges, 45 per cent of district council members, and 42 per cent of sector councillors.

To reach 61 per cent of women in Parliament, Rwanda had used key enablers, including political will and leadership, and gender-responsive legal frameworks. The 2003 Constitution (revised in 2015) enshrined the principles of gender equality and women's empowerment, and provided that at least 30 per cent of seats in all decision-making organs should be for women.

The national gender machinery also worked in synergy with various partners from civil society and the development sector to mobilize and build capacity among potential female political candidates. Likewise, the gender monitoring office in Parliament ensured accountability for gender equality as mandated in the Constitution, and the Forum of Women Parliamentarians helped to mainstream gender in parliamentary processes.

All those mentioned were currently working collectively towards mentoring girls and young women to achieve their full potential as future leaders. However, the continued challenges that women in leadership faced in the country included the low engagement of men in domestic settings, structural barriers in society, and competition among women.

Ms. Laura Farris (Member, House of Commons, and Co-Chair, Women and Work all-party parliamentary group, United Kingdom) explained how the two main political parties (Conservative and Labour) had taken direct action to improve the number of women in their systems, with mixed results.

For some but not all seats, the Labour party used all-women shortlists. That meant only women were considered as prospective candidates for a vacant seat when an MP retired. As a result, just over half of Labour's 202 MPs were women, making it the most gender-balanced party.

The ruling Conservative party did not use all-women shortlists. Due to emergency elections linked to Brexit, the party's central office had reduced the normal list of 12 prospective candidates to 3. A woman prospective candidate was always in the final three, but it was up to her to prove herself as the best candidate. The strategy had increased women's participation (23 per cent), but the party was still behind on achieving parity.

Women were also facing societal barriers to gender equality in politics, including online abuse, and sexual and physical violence. For example, the MP Ms. Jo Cox had been murdered in a politically driven attack. Women were also disproportionately affected by difficulties in balancing their political roles with family and domestic responsibilities, particularly when late-night voting occurred. However, voting had now moved online due to COVID-19, and conversations were planned with Prime Minister Johnson to continue with that method.

Ms. Martha Lucía Micher (Senator, and Chair, Gender Equality Committee, Mexico) said that Mexico had used quotas since 1995, but initial gains had later moved backwards. Parity should exist at three levels – federal, state and municipal – as well as in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of power. Parity meant that equality and human rights should always be understood with a gender perspective.

Ms. Mergane Kanouté (Member, National Assembly, Senegal, and Member of the IPU Executive Committee and IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians) shared that in 2010, Senegal had established statutory quotas, and had seen an increased representation of women in the National Assembly.

In 2012, there had been 104 women deputies, which had increased to 110 in 2017. The country had not achieved full parity, even though the law provided for it. However, the Bureau of the National Assembly was gender balanced.

To achieve success, it was important to involve men, especially religious men (including Catholics, Muslims and traditional leaders), to advocate for women's participation in politics. In addition, women parliamentarians and rural women continued to be trained and educated on their rights with the help of international partners such as UN Women. Importantly, parliament had also passed anti-rape legislation in 2020.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Member, House of Commons, Canada) argued there was a growing number of women assuming leadership roles. For example: Chrystia Freeland, Canada's first woman Finance Minister; Audrey McLaughlin, the first woman leader of a major political party; Theresa Tam, the Chief Public Health Officer; and the Chief Public Health Officers in 5 out of 10 provinces.

However, greater efforts were needed, as women still had unequal access to political opportunities, especially indigenous women, women living with disabilities, and young women. Also, violence against women had to be combated, particularly towards racialized or marginalized women.

Solutions to curb such issues should include: putting forward candidates from underrepresented groups and encouraging them to run in campaigns where they could be successful; legislating to mitigate violence against women; financially supporting campaign processes; and providing childcare services for women in leadership positions. Although Canada had the right policies in place, it did not dedicate the resources needed to ensure the policies led to successful outcomes.

Ms. Irma Luz Herrera Rodríguez (Member, House of Representatives, Colombia) noted that the Women's Equality Committee on which she served as Vice-Chair was an inter-parliamentary, cross-party and mixed-gender body, which worked on achieving equality. Recently, in the context of COVID-19, the country had updated its Electoral Code and had incorporated sections on parity. From now on, 50 per cent of all electoral lists for different campaign positions must be composed of women.

Interventions from the floor

After the presentations, the floor was opened for interventions from participants. MPs from around the world shared their countries' experiences in working towards achieving gender equality in leadership.

Experiences in promoting and improving legislation to enhance women's participation in parliament included:⁹

- In **Morocco**, five electoral laws had been ratified in March 2021. That had resulted in the proportion of parliamentary seats available for women increasing from 20 per cent to 25 per cent (a total of 95 women's seats). In the same month, Zineb el-Adaoui had been appointed as head of the Court of Auditors, which showed the country's seriousness in increasing equality.
- In **Zimbabwe**, legislated quotas had raised the representation of women from 18.2 per cent in 2008 to 35.4 per cent in 2018. Conversations about legislating a 30-per-cent quota for local government had led to agreement by the cabinet. Other interventions on gender equality had included strengthening the operations of the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, educating the public on the Domestic Violence Act, and allocating more resources to programmes on women's empowerment.
- **Bangladesh** had 50 reserved seats for women in Parliament that had been introduced by the father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
- In **Portugal**, a 2006 law on parity stipulated that at least 33 per cent of parliamentarians must be women. In 2019, the figure was revised to at least 40 per cent.

⁹ Countries are listed by order of intervention.

- In 2020, the Chief Minister of Penang, **Malaysia**, Mr. Chow Kon Yeow, had introduced a top-up women-only additional seats system. It would ensure women made up a minimum of 30 per cent of the State Legislative Assembly.
- In **Italy**, particular attention had been paid to Article 51 of the Constitution (on equal access for women and men to elected posts) by changing the regional, national and local electoral systems. Equal opportunities had been promoted in the most recent updates to provisions governing the conduct of political parties. Women parliamentarians were working with women outside parliament to call on the Government to increase the number of women in government task forces. At a committee hearing, the MPs had also engaged with women who had previously worked on those taskforces. Their advice had since been accepted and developed into legislative proposals that had been included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.
- In the **United Kingdom**, the Labour party had increased its percentage of women MPs through all-women shortlists. That had mitigated the unconscious or conscious bias towards picking men because they were perceived to look more like a politician.
- In **Mexico**, crucial gender parity developments had included the first gender-equal Congress in the world, gender-equal local congresses, building strategic alliances across party lines, and redesigning policies in favour of equality.
- **Azerbaijan** had been the first country in the Islamic east to ensure women's equal suffrage in 1918. Mr. Elgun Safarov, the first Azerbaijani Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, would further contribute towards increasing the political role of women.
- In June 2021, the **Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean** was set to vote that all delegations be composed of one man and one woman. It was also to create a Women's Forum, which would further the gender-equality agenda with regard to peace, security and stability.

Beyond quotas, legislative advancements, such as the eradication of violence against women and the inclusion of diverse groups in public life, might **create a more conducive and inclusive environment** in the path towards gender parity:

- In **Lebanon**, a law criminalizing sexual harassment had been approved in 2021 after 20 years of debate. Substantial modifications had also been made to the country's law on domestic violence. While quotas had yet to be approved, conversations were ongoing.
- In **Cyprus**, a Bill had been submitted by women MPs that criminalized sexism and sexist behaviour. It had been unanimously approved by Parliament. The Parliament was also ready to further develop a law to prohibit sexual violence, harassment, rape, revenge pornography and other related violence.
- In **Turkey**, a change in the Constitution now enabled both men and women to be elected at the age of 18, increasing the ability of young people to participate in politics. After the change, the percentage of young women elected had increased.

Aside from celebrating achievements, participants also shared their challenges:

- In **Seychelles**, there were only eight women in parliament and five women in cabinet. Evidently, more work was needed to increase the number of women in leadership positions. It was reported that women were reluctant to participate in politics due to fear of online harassment, and domestic responsibilities.
- In **Syria**, the rate of women in parliament was also unsatisfactory. However, there was hope that more women would be inspired through those who currently occupied leadership positions, such as the Vice-President of the Republic, Ms. Najah al-Attar and other women ministers.

COVID-19 and women in politics

Overview

The impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and the COVID-19 crisis is no exception. Beyond the public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a full-fledged economic and social crisis. Rampant inequalities have once again been revealed and further exacerbated. The parliamentarians discussed the gendered impacts of COVID-19 in their countries, and how effective responses to the pandemic and its social and economic consequences require strong and sustained leadership, action, and the participation of everyone affected. Their presentations revealed how achieving balanced power between women and men in decision-making is more crucial than ever.

Participants shared the gendered impacts of COVID-19 that may negatively affect women's participation in politics in their countries:

- In **Syria**, the number of women in parliament had fallen compared to before the pandemic. That indicated a need to cushion the economic impacts of COVID-19 on women's income and employment, and adopt measures to ensure that women were both represented in decision-making and capable of leading their country through a pandemic.
- In **Cyprus**, the pandemic, and ineffective countermeasures implemented by the State, had exacerbated the magnitude and intensity of domestic violence and contributed to an increase in domestic tasks done by women. That demonstrated the need for legislation on equal pay and more support for childcare structures. Similarly to the sentiments of other participants, it was felt that women's participation in public must be holistic, involving all aspects of women's public and private lives.
- In **Mexico**, the lockdown had led to more violence, a revival in the stereotyping of traditional gender roles, and increased unpaid care work. Lockdown had had a huge impact, especially on young girls, many of whom had had to stop schooling to focus on household work. Economic instability, especially in the informal economy, had increasingly forced women and girls into precarious positions.
- In **Seychelles**, where COVID-19 cases had increased, circumstances had been very difficult for many women. Employment had become a concern and new government reforms were not necessarily to women's advantage. Single mothers had been the most affected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, participants also highlighted the important role that women played in addressing the gendered impacts of the pandemic:

- In the **United Kingdom**, women MPs had been crucial in drawing the Prime Minister's attention to the gendered aspects of COVID-19. Issues included violence against women, the disproportionate impacts of the economic downturn on women's unemployment (due to longer closures of feminized sectors, such as beauty, hospitality, leisure and retail), and the growing burden of domestic work. Those issues needed to be addressed in Parliament. It was up to women parliamentarians to speak up.
- In **Zimbabwe**, COVID-19 had had a devastating impact on women and girls. However, for current women MPs, it had enhanced their use of digital technology, as meetings were now held virtually. It had also meant they were more connected with their communities, which had increased their visibility and changed the narrative about women leaders being ineffective.
- In **Bahrain**, the silver lining to COVID-19 was that women's contributions had become more visible and recognized. Women had been crucial in the healthcare and educational sectors. Women's movements had made major breakthroughs; it was hoped that those would be translated into enhanced opportunities during elections.
- In **Turkey**, 44.7 per cent of the members of the COVID-19 scientific commission were women.

Participants also presented gender-responsive strategies that were being carried out by their countries to address and recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- In **Bangladesh**, the Government had accelerated packages for women affected by COVID-19, particularly with respect to those working in hard-hit industries such as the garment sector. Larger stimulus packages had been allocated to women entrepreneurs. Vaccination had also been a key strategy for recovery, especially through working at the grassroots level for its success.
- **Morocco** brought up the need to reward women for everything they had provided in terms of household care. Morocco had also delivered an efficient COVID-19 response due to the participation of women in State bodies.
- In **Italy**, a cross-party group of MPs in the Chamber of Deputies working on equal opportunities had vowed to give paramount importance to increasing gender equality at a time when the pandemic had exacerbated the suffering of women in terms of both employment and gender-based violence.

Main findings and recommendations¹⁰

Panellists and participants affirmed that gender parity in decision-making was key to adequately addressing the gendered impacts of the pandemic. However, women remained substantially underrepresented among decision-makers worldwide.

COVID-19 had affected women's political participation in many ways, providing both challenges and opportunities. During the pandemic, as women were increasingly shouldering domestic and care work and had less access to financial resources, their ability to fully participate in public life had been further limited. For politicians, both women and men, online platforms had become effective tools for interaction with their constituents. While online parliamentary work had helped facilitate work-life balance for some, it had also revealed the gender divide in access to technology for others, and exacerbated online violence against women legislators.

Some parliaments had seized the opportunity to promote women's leadership and gender parity in decision-making. However, much more needs to be done, in particular:

- Enhance or adopt new gender quotas to achieve gender parity at all levels of decision-making. For electoral gender quotas to work, they must be well designed, ambitious and combined with strong enforcement mechanisms.
- Promote additional measures, such as targeted incentives to political parties, educational and sensitization work, and capping of campaign financing.
- Strengthen the key role parliaments have to play in building a more inclusive political and parliamentary environment, and in combating violence against women MPs, including online. This should start with a strong anti-discrimination and anti-harassment regulatory framework within parliament, as well as strong national legal frameworks.

¹⁰ As presented to the IPU Forum of Women Parliamentarians, 31st session (virtual), May 2021: www.ipu.org/event/142nd-ipu-assembly#event-sub-page-documents/.