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UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

Parliaments and women's rights: Implementing the CEDAW Convention, realizing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all

A parliamentary round table organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Office of the
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**IPU Headquarters, Geneva
22 June 2023
(hybrid event)**

Meeting report

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Overview

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), based on their longstanding cooperation, joined forces to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by bringing together parliamentarians from around the globe for a round table entitled, *Parliaments and women's rights: Implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, realizing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all*. The round table was held on 22 June 2023 at the IPU Headquarters, in hybrid format.

Parliaments were invited from countries that have a history of collaboration with the IPU in advancing gender equality and women's human rights at the national level. The round table was part of the year-long *Human Rights 75* initiative launched by the OHCHR in December 2022. It aimed to rejuvenate the centrality of human rights globally, and advance the promise of freedom, equality and justice for all. The June 2023 spotlight was specifically focused on women's rights. Furthermore, the meeting was an opportunity to launch the 2023 handbook for parliamentarians on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol, jointly developed by the IPU and OHCHR. It is the second edition of the IPU-UN handbook, which was first developed in 2003.¹

Participants included 35 parliamentarians from 23 countries (28 women and 7 men), many of whom were involved in parliamentary human rights, gender equality committees and women's caucuses. There were also 38 observers (parliamentary staff, government officials, and representatives of international organizations and civil society).

The round table enabled a lively and open exchange of good practices, challenges, and opportunities related to national parliamentary action. It resulted in the endorsement of concrete transformative pledges² that participants and other interested parliamentarians may submit ahead of the December 2023 *Human Rights 75* high-level event in Geneva, and could be the subject of initiatives undertaken by parliamentarians vis-à-vis their realization.

During the round table, the role of parliaments in promoting and safeguarding national-level human rights was highlighted as being of paramount importance in several ways. First, parliaments are the cornerstones of national human rights protection systems and have a crucial role in ratifying international human rights treaties. Second, they ensure compliance with human rights obligations, including from a gender perspective, and translate them into national legislation and policies. Third, parliaments oversee the executive branch, hold it accountable for its human rights impact, and establish parliamentary committees on human rights and gender equality to effectively carry out these responsibilities. Fourth, they maintain direct links with grassroots civil society organizations and individuals, including women human rights defenders, and interact with national human rights institutions. This allows human rights developments and concerns to be fed into a parliament's legislative and oversight functions.

Additionally, parliaments play a vital role in institutionalizing women's rights and gender equality, as well as ensuring their realization in society. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a particularly effective tool in this regard. It has proven invaluable in combatting discrimination against women and its effects, including gender-based violence against women, poverty,

¹ See: www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2023-06/new-handbook-mobilizing-parliaments-eliminate-discrimination-against-women

² See: www.ipu.org/file/17100/download

exclusion from decision-making processes, lack of legal protections and access to justice, discrimination relating to marriage and family relations, unequal access to education and employment, and being denied one's inheritance, property rights and access to credit.

The round table emphasized the role of parliaments in advancing women's rights to political participation, decent work, and education on an equal basis with men, as laid down in the UDHR and codified within the CEDAW Convention. The meeting also considered the interconnectedness of these rights and the intersection of gender-based discrimination with other forms of inequality.

Programme

Joint OHCHR-IPU *Human Rights 75* parliamentary round table: Parliaments and women's rights: Implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, realizing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for all

- **Chairperson:**
 - **Ms. Cynthia López Castro**, President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians; member of the Chamber of Deputies, Mexico
- **Opening statements:**
 - **Mr. Volker Türk**, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
 - **Mr. Martin Chungong**, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union
 - **Ms. Nicole Ameline**, Member of the CEDAW Committee
- **Session I panelists:**
 - **Mr. Abdoul Thioye**, Chief of the Rule of Law, Equality and Non-Discrimination Branch, OHCHR
 - **Ms. Zeina Hilal**, Manager of the Gender Partnership and Youth Participation Programmes, IPU
 - **Ms. Laurence Fehlmann Rielle**, Member of Parliament, Switzerland
 - **Ms. Catherine Gotani Hara**, Speaker of the National Assembly of Malawi (online)
- **Session II panelists:**
 - **Ms. Chidi King**, Chief of the Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch, International Labour Organization (ILO)
 - **Ms. Maryam Aldhain**, Member of Parliament, Bahrain
 - **Ms. Sandra Božić**, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia (video message)
- **Session III panelists :**
 - **Ms. Adriana Quinones**, Head of Human Rights and Development, Deputy Head of UN Women Geneva (represented by Ms. Gabriella Borovsky)
 - **Mr. Kletus Karondo**, Member of Parliament, Namibia
 - **Ms. Annie Koutrakis**, Member of Parliament, Canada (online)
- **Wrap-up, pledges and closing remarks**
- **Launch of the 2023 OHCHR-IPU handbook for parliamentarians on the CEDAW and its optional protocol**
 - **Ms. Nicole Ameline**, Member of the CEDAW Committee
 - **Ms. Kareen Jabre**, Director of the Division of Programmes, IPU
 - **Mr. Mahamane Cissé-Gouro**, Director of the Human Rights Council and Treaty Mechanisms Division, OHCHR
 - **Ms. Ana Peláez Narváez**, Chair of the CEDAW Committee (online)

Meeting report

Opening the meeting, **Ms. Cynthia López Castro** (MP, Mexico; President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians) emphasized the centrality of parliaments in advancing women's rights, and the urgent need to implement CEDAW. She encouraged multilateral engagement in this endeavour. Drawing attention to the IPU's close cooperation with the CEDAW Committee, Ms. López Castro announced the launch of a joint handbook on CEDAW. It provides practical guidance to parliaments on advancing gender equality and implementing CEDAW. She expressed the IPU's commitment to continuing close engagement with relevant UN bodies to further promote women's rights.

"There is a promise to be fulfilled, a promise to close the gap. In some regions, progress is extremely low, and impunity prevails in a system that fails to deliver justice. Implementing CEDAW and the UDHR is not just essential; it is our roadmap for progress. Let us always remember that nothing is impossible!"

- Ms. Cynthia López Castro

Ms. López Castro further highlighted the persistent gender gaps, the unfulfilled promise of achieving equality, and the prevalence of impunity within justice systems that fail to deliver true justice to victims of gender-based violence. In this context, Ms. López Castro stressed how important it is to implement CEDAW, as it offers a comprehensive roadmap for progress on women's rights and for reaching parity. She cited Mexico as an inspiring example of a country that had made significant strides in this regard, and was currently enjoying gender parity in parliament.³ She outlined the purpose of the round table, calling on all participants to engage constructively so as to identify effective practices, address challenges, and explore strategic approaches to collaborating.

Opening statements

Mr. Volker Türk (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) highlighted the importance of parliamentary action in raising awareness about human rights on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UDHR and the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration. Mr. Türk emphasized the significance of women's empowerment and of girls' inclusion in decision-making processes, referring to the drive of young political leaders to have a significant impact on policies. He further noted the contribution of Hansa Mehta, who ensured that gender-inclusive language was part of the development of the UDHR 75 years ago.

Highlighting the global consensus on the universality, interdependence and indivisibility of human rights, Mr. Türk acknowledged that political factors sometimes lead to the questioning of fundamental elements of human rights. Nevertheless, these rights should be deeply embedded in plans to address current and future global challenges, such as climate change and the impact of the digital and industrial revolutions. Mr. Türk referred to multiple mechanisms and organizations working towards the promotion and protection of human rights, including the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and regional entities like the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the African Union. He emphasized the importance of a holistic human rights ecosystem and its role in

³ According to IPU data as of June 2023, Mexico is one of seven countries that has achieved or surpassed gender parity in their single or lower house of parliament. The seven countries are: Andorra, Cuba, Mexico, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Rwanda, and the United Arab Emirates.

safeguarding human rights, particularly in relation to gender issues. He warned of the pushback against human rights achievements, and stressed the need for vigilance.

Addressing the *Women, Peace and Security* agenda, Mr. Türk expressed concerns over the lack of sufficient progress, emphasizing the importance of the meaningful participation of women in sustaining peace, and highlighting the crucial role of parliaments in ensuring such participation. He invited parliamentarians to use the round table to make meaningful pledges in the context of the *Human Rights 75* initiative that reflects the importance of human rights for all.

Mr. Martin Chungong (Secretary General, Inter-Parliamentary Union) emphasized the close cooperation between the IPU and OHCHR. He subscribed to the ambition of creating a human rights ecosystem, with parliaments having an integral role. Mr. Chungong highlighted the significant contribution of women in globally institutionalizing women's rights when the UDHR was adopted.

" Women's rights are not solely about equality and fairness but also a path to a sustainable world." - Mr. Martin Chungong

He addressed the pushback against achieving gender equality on time, noting that gender equality and equality for all are essential for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), democracy and justice. Transformative action for gender equality must be prioritized, as leaving half the population behind hinders real progress for all. Mr. Chungong further emphasized the importance of revitalizing the UDHR and human rights monitoring mechanisms. He highlighted in particular the IPU's close cooperation with the CEDAW Committee.

Expressing concerns about the position of women in political and public life, Mr. Chungong acknowledged that only 26.5% of current members of parliament are women. Parliaments must mirror society and be representative of all its aspects. Serving as chair of the Global Board of the International Gender Champions (a leadership network that brings together decision makers determined to break down gender barriers), Mr. Chungong emphasized the two mandatory pledges made by the gender champions, and called for robust engagement to ensure safe and gender-equal spaces for women.

To conclude, he recalled that ensuring women's rights is not solely about equality and fairness, but a comprehensive pathway to a sustainable future. He highlighted the significance of the pledges that could come out of the round table in developing a parliamentary roadmap ahead of the *Human Rights 75* high-level event.

Ms. Nicole Ameline (Member of the CEDAW Committee) acknowledged the importance of parliamentarians in the application of human rights, and emphasized the significance of cooperating with the IPU. She highlighted that a central objective of an upcoming CEDAW general recommendation is to create a universal momentum for gender parity, and

" The objective of parliaments is not only to ensure the implementation of human rights but also to enable women to make decisions for their own lives and bodies." - Ms. Nicole Ameline

address the exclusion of women from political decision-making systems. She noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that women's rights are not consolidated. She also called for a new vision of egalitarian and inclusive governance. In addition, Ms. Ameline highlighted significant gender gaps in various

domains, explicitly referring to artificial intelligence and other new technologies, and underlining that technological advances come with new challenges on gender equality.

Touching upon how to address challenges such as climate change, extremism and conflict prevention, Ms. Ameline emphasized the essential role of women and girls in peacebuilding. Successfully implementing the SDGs relies largely on the equal inclusion of women in decision-making processes. Ms. Ameline stressed the importance of every single parliamentarian in driving systemic change. She called on members of parliament across the globe to consider CEDAW and international human rights treaty provisions as a comprehensive toolbox with immense potential.

Ms. Ameline commended the partnership with the IPU, emphasizing the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaborative efforts to bring about systemic changes in electoral systems and to eradicate violence. She said the launch of the handbook should be a clarion call for the evidence-based guidance that both the IPU and the CEDAW Committee are promoting to deepen parliamentary involvement in international human rights mechanisms.

The Human Rights 75 initiative⁴

In December 2022, OHCHR launched a year-long initiative, *Human Rights 75*, with the aim of rejuvenating the centrality of human rights globally, and advancing the promise of freedom, equality and justice for all.

The year's activities include dialogues and consultations between all national, regional and international actors to generate concrete pledges, takeaways on the future of human rights, and stories reflecting the achievements of the past 75 years. Monthly thematic spotlights will focus on critical themes for the implementation of the UDHR. June 2023 was dedicated to women's rights.

The initiative will culminate in a **high-level event on human rights** (11–12 December 2023, Geneva, Switzerland) connecting with hubs in Panama, Nairobi and Bangkok. The event will bring together UN Member States, civil society and other stakeholders for dialogue, and to present transformative, innovative and catalytic pledges for action.

⁴ For more information, see: www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights-75

Session 1: Article 21 of the UDHR: The role of parliament in eliminating barriers to women's full and equal participation in political decision making at all levels

Overview of the session

This session discussed the importance of women's equal participation in political decision making and the need to address the barriers they face. It highlighted examples of progress, challenges and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in politics. The role of legislation, awareness campaigns and international frameworks was emphasized as essential for achieving gender parity and empowering women in political spheres.

1. Presentation: The state of women's participation in political decision making

Mr. Abdoul Thioye (Chief of the Rule of Law, Equality and Non-Discrimination Branch, OHCHR) said that every woman's right to equal participation in public and political life is enshrined in major human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UDHR and CEDAW. He emphasized the need to refocus policy aims: parity should not only be a question of justice for women, but also a way of responding to the multiple interlinked crises the world is facing today. Mr. Thioye referenced research showing that, when women contribute to peace negotiations, there is a higher chance of reaching agreements and successfully implementing them. He highlighted the example of the 2016 Colombian Peace Agreement, where women leaders had a central role in including strict conditionality on gender equality provisions, such as the denial of amnesty to perpetrators of sexual violence. He further highlighted the impact of gender-based violence on the fulfilment of women's political rights. For example, online violence was currently rampant, with an exponential growth in the targeting of women in politics and women journalists. Mr. Thioye emphasized multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on age, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation, all of which further exacerbate the violence faced by women engaged in politics. To ensure women's equal participation in public and political life, Mr. Thioye called for stronger legal frameworks to ensure gender equality and non-discrimination in the public and the private spheres, the protection of women from violence on and offline, freedom of opinion and expression, access to information, the right to peaceful assembly and association, and access to justice. He also said that legislative measures, such as quotas, were essential to achieve gender parity.

"Structural discrimination, stereotypes and gender-based violence, among others, constitute serious obstacles to women's political participation." - Mr. Abdoul Thioye

Ms. Zeina Hilal (Manager, Gender Partnership and Youth Participation Programmes, IPU) indicated that, according to the latest data from the IPU *Women in Parliament in 2022* report⁵ and the IPU-UN *Women in Politics* map⁶, 26.5% of parliamentarians are currently women. This is a 0.4 percentage-point increase compared to a year ago. While progress is taking place, it is still lower than what is needed to achieve gender parity any time before 2063. Only seven countries have achieved parity in their parliaments. Regional variations exist, particularly in the Americas, where significant improvements are occurring. Parliaments in

⁵ See: www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2023-03/new-ipu-report-shows-women-mps-have-never-been-so-diverse

⁶ See: www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2023-03/women-in-power-in-2023-new-data-shows-progress-wide-regional-gaps

all countries now include members who are women. However, setbacks have been observed in the Middle East and North Africa region. Lessons learned show that quotas remain essential for advancing gender equality in parliament. She further noted that only 22.7% of Speakers of parliament are women. This indicated progress compared to the previous year, but still fell short of parity. Ms. Hilal highlighted that women's parliamentary leadership is most common in gender equality, social protection, and family affairs committees, whereas women are less represented in defence and budget committees. Only 11.3% of countries have women Heads of State or government.

Women face significant barriers and challenges when entering parliament and pursuing a political career. The IPU has worked to uncover the issue of sexism and harassment. It has gathered data indicating that more than 80% of women parliamentarians have faced psychological, sexual and physical violence. Perpetrators include mainly male parliamentarians. Violence occurs mostly within parliament, but also online. Ms. Hilal highlighted that the IPU not only aims to address the prevalence of these challenges but also to provide solutions and guidelines on the basis of which parliaments can act. This can include parliaments adopting survivor-centered internal policies that address harassment, establish monitoring and investigation procedures, raise awareness, and act against violence.

Ms. Laurence Fehlmann Rielle (MP, Switzerland) presented national policies designed to ensure gender equality and address gender-based violence against women in politics. She mentioned that Switzerland has instituted constitutional provisions on gender equality between women and men. She also underlined the gap between law and practice for gender equality, particularly on ensuring equal pay, an issue that needs to improve in the private and public sectors. She highlighted Switzerland's national strategy for gender equality,⁷ and focused on its provisions that promote equality at work, improve the balance between private and work life, and prevent gender-based violence. The Swiss Federal Office for Gender Equality is the institution responsible for implementing this strategy.

Regarding gender-based violence, Ms. Fehlmann Rielle said that Switzerland has ratified the Istanbul Convention and has been working to implement it. Sexual offences in the penal code have been revised to redefine rape and eliminate the need for victims to prove self-defence. Civil society has played a significant role in advocating for these changes, making progress by moving away from outdated notions of sexual determination, and emphasizing consent. Support services for victims, such as psychological and legal support, have improved.

On women's political participation, Ms. Fehlmann Rielle emphasized the role of the media, noting that women are less often interviewed as experts, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes. She highlighted a high potential for gender equality, as women from new generations are more politically engaged.

Ms. Catherine Gotani Hara (Speaker of the Parliament of Malawi) provided national examples of promoting the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and highlighted that inequalities contribute to conflict. She said that women play a crucial role in building sustainable peace, due to their profound understanding of the needs and balances of their communities and society in general. Empowering women is an investment in peace and sustainability.

She highlighted national efforts to support women's leadership through training and financial assistance. For example, the Parliament of Malawi allocates a budget for programmes related to gender equality, and

⁷ See: www.ebg.admin.ch/ebg/fr/home/documentation/publications-en-general.html

collaborates with civil society organizations. Ms. Gotani Hara mentioned the introduction of several bills (now acts) into parliament, such as the Gender Equality Act, the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act, and the Trafficking in Persons Act, all of which contain strong gender-sensitivity. Malawi has also ratified important international protocols and charters, such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2005), and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008).

2. Interactive Discussion

Ms. Tulia Ackson (Speaker of the National Assembly of the United Republic of Tanzania; Chairperson of the IPU African Group) highlighted intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender and other grounds. She emphasized the impact of cultural and religious norms on women's political participation. She also highlighted the need to improve the meaningful participation of women in decision making, and made a specific reference to women's leadership in peace negotiation delegations, which are primarily male dominated.

Ms. Mergane Adji Diarra Kanouté (MP, Senegal) referred to her country's gender parity law of 2010 and the CEDAW Convention, both of which have been catalytic in promoting gender equality in Senegal. She pointed to difficulties in the lead up to adopting the 2010 law, especially backlashes from some religious communities that do not accept the concept of parity. Ms. Kanouté acknowledged that achieving parity is a continuous struggle, and that achievements need to be defended. She underlined the importance of parliamentary collaboration with civil society organizations in this regard, and noted that the country had experimented with quota systems.

Mr. Akmal Saidov (First Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Chamber, Uzbekistan) mentioned recent legislation enacted in Uzbekistan to strengthen gender equality. In particular, one law aimed to eradicate all forms of gender discrimination, and ensure equal opportunities between men and women in public and political life. Additionally, Mr. Saidov emphasized the digital gender gap. He underlined the need to scale up investment in infrastructure, and gender equality in STEM education, both of which were important aspects of boosting women's political participation.

"Our main goal is to fully support women, protect their rights and freedoms, their legitimate interests, and strengthen their role in government and society." - Mr. Akmal Saidov

Ms. Farida Illimi (MP, Algeria) emphasized the importance of legislative protection and honouring international obligations where promoting women's rights were concerned. She mentioned the significance of the fact that the SDGs placed gender equality and women's rights at the centre of sustainability.

Ms. Latifa Gahouchi (MP, Belgium) highlighted the importance of promoting women's leadership at the highest political level, emphasizing the need to shape a new paradigm shift, and instil in future generations a deeper understanding of gender equality in politics. She mentioned that, since 2020, Belgium had seen its first female prime minister, two women serving as presidents of the House of Representatives and the Senate, and a woman minister of defence. She emphasized the importance of collective efforts to ensure that women occupy the positions they deserve.

Ms. Joana Lima (representative of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean) emphasized the recent progress of parliaments in Cyprus, Montenegro, Romania and Slovenia towards increasing the number of their women members. She underscored the role of education in ensuring equality for women – particularly

young women – and the importance of international parliamentary cooperation to achieve substantial progress on the equal representation of women in politics.

A member of the Parliament of South Sudan discussed the centrality of parliaments in ensuring the implementation of CEDAW and the UDHR. She emphasized the importance that the Parliament of South Sudan attached to promoting women’s participation in parliament, and encouraging women in leadership positions. Good quality education was highlighted as having a fundamental role in promoting women’s rights and encouraging women to realize their full potential.

Key takeaways

- Structural discrimination, stereotypes and gender-based violence, among others, constitute serious obstacles to women’s participation that particularly affect women in politics and women human rights defenders.
- Electoral quotas and reserved seats in parliament are crucial steps towards improving women's participation in political decision-making processes.
- Whereas electoral quotas are necessary to ensure gender parity in parliament, they should be regarded as an important step among a series of other measures that aim to transform parliaments into gender-sensitive institutions.
- Cooperation between parliaments, civil society organizations and international bodies is essential to ensuring the application of the provisions of international treaties on gender equality and women's rights, and must be maintained and enhanced.
- Women in leadership positions have an important role in incentivizing more women to pursue their career goals, while also leading efforts against gendered phenomena that aim to marginalize women.

Recommendations

- Parliaments need to capitalize on their potential to reverse gender stereotypes in society by addressing discrimination, harassment and violence within their own ranks, while also advancing parity among their membership and leadership.
- Instituting ambitious, enforceable and measurable electoral quotas is an important first step to ensure women’s meaningful participation in decision making, with the ultimate aim of achieving parity.
- Parliaments should also invest in awareness-raising campaigns to challenge stereotypes, promote equal sharing of caring responsibilities, and change societal attitudes towards women's participation in politics.
- Strengthening the legal and policy framework to combat gender-based violence against women in politics, both online and offline, is crucial to protecting women against such violence, safeguarding their freedom of expression, and ensuring prompt and adequate responses that prioritize their well-being and rights.
- Parliaments should lead the collection of sex-disaggregated data across their work in order to ensure inclusive and informed lawmaking that delivers for all.

Session 2: Article 23 of the UDHR: The role of parliament in ensuring women's equal access to decent work

Overview of the session

This session focused on the advantages of achieving gender equality in the workforce and touched on key challenges. In particular, it discussed the gender pay gap, workplace gender discrimination, stereotypes and their impact on women's careers, traditionally attributed gender roles, and the impact of gender-based violence and harassment, including in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions covered the solutions and initiatives in place to ensure a gender-responsive social protection scheme, as well as safe working environments for women across sectors. The session emphasized the need for policies, legal measures and transformative agendas to address these challenges and promote gender equality.

1. Presentation: Women's equal access to decent work

Ms. Chidi King (Chief of the Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch, ILO) said that, according to ILO data, the gender pay gap currently stands at 40%, and that it would take 155 years to close it. Discrimination, stereotypes and traditional gender roles contribute to women facing limited access to social protection, as well as lower pay when entering the labour force. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, leading to a drop in women's labour force participation. Ms. King also highlighted the importance of addressing gender stereotypes to ensure good quality jobs for women. Gender-based segregation in the workforce, particularly in care-related roles, perpetuates inequalities. It leaves women vulnerable to lower wages and less social protection. In many countries, motherhood is still considered a disadvantage for the workforce (making it a major contributor to the gender pay gap), whereas fatherhood is largely rewarded. As women are frequently exposed to gender-based violence and harassment, addressing both is key to creating safe working environments that favour equal opportunities. The ILO has published a report on people's experiences of employment-related gender-based violence. One in five individuals in employment experiences it, and women face significantly higher levels of such violence. Ms. King stressed the need for a transformative agenda that includes policies and legal measures to address these challenges and promote gender equality. She referred to the ILO Convention of 2019 (No. 190), which focuses on the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work, and called for its ratification by States.

Ms. Maryam Aldhain (MP, Bahrain) shared a national example of ensuring equal pay and social protection. She highlighted that new legislation in Bahrain prioritizes women's rights, and provides women in the workforce with a pay subsidy, thereby ensuring a more stable financial situation. She also said that social policies are being planned for widowed women that will allow them to inherit their husband's salary and social security contributions.

In a video message, **Ms. Sandra Božić** (Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia) highlighted national efforts to combat trafficking and exploitative forms of labour. She emphasized the importance of streamlining within institutions and laws the gender equality provisions that regulate and protect women's rights. She mentioned the strategic cooperation framework with the IPU on upholding basic democratic principles, including on the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of gender equality. She referred to the [2017 self-assessment exercise on SDG implementation](#) as a key moment. Ms. Božić referred to crucial initiatives in Serbia, such as the implementation of a gender-responsive budget, and amendments to criminal and family law aimed at preventing and eliminating violence against women. The government has taken steps

to enable and empower women, including through the enactment of a 40% gender quota. She said that Serbia was committed to promoting gender equality in decision making, and highlighted that, since 2017, several important positions in the country had been held by women, such as the presidencies of the Constitutional Court, the public prosecutor's office, and the national bank of Serbia. Ms. Božić noted that the implementation of the [EU Gender Equality Index](#) was crucial to formalizing the collection of sex-disaggregated data. She also highlighted Serbia's strategy to combat violence against women and domestic violence.

2. Interactive discussion

Ms. Sarah Achieng Opendi (MP, Uganda) emphasized the importance of monitoring and evaluating laws related to promoting women's rights and gender equality, in particular Uganda's [Domestic Violence Act](#), [Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act](#), and [Employment Amendment Act](#). She stressed the need to ensure caring facilities and provision for breastfeeding women in parliament. She also noted the lack of clear legislation to protect women migrant workers from exploitation and abuse. Ms. Achieng acknowledged the financial barriers faced by many women entrepreneurs. She shared as a good practice the launch of the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme, which aims to support women in business.

Ms. Khalia Ahmat (MP, Chad) echoed other participants in stressing that gender-based violence is a major violation of human rights. Violence against women is experienced by all women, irrespective of their education, colour, background, political affiliation or other characteristics, making it a global challenge.

Lessons learned:

- Gender inequality in the workforce is fed by the gender pay gap, discrimination, stereotypes, traditionally attributed gender roles, and gender-based violence. These are key factors that contribute to structural inequality across sectors.
- Roles that are socially imposed on women as sole care givers, and other factors such as race, ethnicity, disability, migration and age, contribute to the exclusion of women from the labour market. These factors affect women's welfare by limiting their access to social protection, perpetuating insecurities related to informal work, and limiting their potential to pursue their professional goals.
- Women employed in the informal sector are exposed to significant risks and vulnerabilities that are highly gendered in nature. These include (but are not limited to) a higher risk of sexual harassment and exclusion from adequate social protection, which seriously affect women's access to good quality reproductive health care.
- The COVID-19 pandemic, while exacerbating existing gender inequalities in the workforce, has shed light on the invaluable contribution of women's informal care work worldwide. Nevertheless, the pandemic has also led to a substantial drop in women's participation in the labour force, and highlighted the impact of gender stereotyping on pursuing job opportunities.
- The structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's empowerment and political representation should be removed without further delay.
- Addressing stereotypes and traditionally attributed gender roles in relation to accessing education is a fundamental step towards achieving gender equality.
- Women are often the targets of gender-based violence linked to their financial capabilities.

Recommendations:

- Ratify the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) and ensure gender-sensitive legal provisions that extend good quality social protection to women employed in the informal sector.
- Ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). This is an important step towards better protecting women's rights, as it recognizes the right to be free from violence and harassment in the workplace.
- Adopt and enforce legislation to ensure equal pay for work of equal value.
- Critical issues, such as the situation of breastfeeding women in the workplace, need to be addressed. It is imperative that employers provide breastfeeding facilities.
- Ensuring and promoting women's political participation and parliamentary representation is key to ensuring gender-sensitive lawmaking on labour rights.
- Ensuring good quality education to address stereotypes and traditionally attributed gender roles in relation to accessing education is a fundamental step towards gender equality in the labour market.
- Ensuring economic empowerment and financial independence for women can contribute to reducing violence, and promote a culture of equal opportunities. This includes addressing systemic inequality in inheritance law to ensure women can exercise their full rights.

Session 3: Article 26 of the UDHR: The role of parliament in promoting gender equality in and through education

Overview of the session

This session focused on the importance of ensuring equal access to education for girls and women, particularly in the context of technological advances and digitalization. Speakers discussed digital equity, meaningful participation, addressing online gender-based violence, promoting inclusive and good quality education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), removing barriers to girls' education, improving access to education in rural areas, and leveraging access to technology to advance women's empowerment. The session emphasized the need for strengthened cooperation, international frameworks, and legislative measures so as to promote gender equality in education, and ensure that the benefits of technology are shared by everyone, while enhancing the awareness of gender issues and addressing stereotypes.

1. Presentation: Promoting gender equality in and through education

Ms. Gabriella Borovsky (UN Women, on behalf of Ms. Adriana Quinones) acknowledged the longstanding cooperation with the IPU and OHCHR. She said that the discussions held at the latest annual Parliamentary Meeting (organized by the IPU and UN Women at the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women) were illuminating, and underlined the growing digital gender divide. She pointed out that men predominantly hold decision-making positions in the field of technology, and stressed that the sector needed to invest more in fostering equality of opportunities. The pace of digital transformation remains uneven, and women and girls in particular are being left behind in a number of ways. They are also less likely to be connected online safely and affordably. While men significantly dominate innovation ecosystems, women are

very rarely seen as technology creators, designers, promoters or decision makers. Online gender-based violence remains a key challenge. It deepens the digital gender divide and further marginalizes women and girls. To address these challenges, Ms. Borovsky stressed the need to prioritize digital equity, promote the equal and meaningful participation of women in STEM-related areas, enhance transparency and accountability, strengthen data science capabilities, and open up the field to more women in innovation. Investing in inclusive and good quality STEM education remains key to incentivizing more women to pursue a career in those areas.

Mr. Kletus Karondo (MP, Namibia) shared Namibia's examples of removing barriers to girls' and women's access to education, particularly in non-traditional fields. He highlighted the potential for empowering women through good quality and well-resourced education systems. Focusing in particular on rural areas, he noted the specific challenges faced by these communities, such as high dropout rates, lack of infrastructure, and insufficient sanitary facilities, which particularly impacts girls. Mr. Karondo highlighted the progress towards improving access to education, which had led to an increase in female enrolment in technical education and training. He emphasized the centrality of parliaments in ensuring an equitable distribution of the education budget, and improving access to education for girls, especially in rural areas. These elements were also in line with the SDGs.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (MP, Canada) shared Canada's example of addressing the gender dimension of digitalization and artificial intelligence. She emphasized the importance of promoting women's and girls' rights in the digital era through the development and use of technology in education. She referred to Canada's Digital Inclusion Lab, and the country's efforts to ensure equal access to digital technologies. Meaningfully addressing sexist and patriarchal norms, as well as promoting and investing in good quality and well-resourced education, were also emphasized as important steps towards combating gender-based discrimination.

Ms. Koutrakis further stressed the need to champion digital inclusion, both nationally and internationally. She recognized that responsibly harnessing technological progress can substantially advance women's empowerment, and is critical for achieving SDG 5 (gender equality). However, technology alone cannot resolve the root causes of discrimination related to gender stereotypes. She emphasized the importance of considering the specific needs and experiences in the digital world of women from minority groups and of gender-diverse people. Parliamentarians have a role to play in ensuring that everyone shares in the benefits of technology, and that laws facilitate equal access while preventing technology from harming women and girls.

2. Interactive discussion

Ms. Janet Taban (MP, South Sudan) highlighted entrenched cultural norms as being a major challenge faced by parliamentarians when trying to advance girls' education, particularly in rural areas. Cultural barriers were the main cause of girls' non-enrolment in school and high dropout levels. Girls tend to drop out after primary school, mainly due to safety, sanitation, distance to and from school, and cultural beliefs related to girls' menstruation.

Ms. Karin Jiroflée (MP, Belgium) highlighted legislative efforts in Belgium to guarantee early school enrolment (from the age of 3), as addressing gender stereotypes early in the education cycle was considered crucial. Such efforts are relevant to enhancing girls' enrolment in STEM education, where they are often portrayed as less involved than boys. Ms. Jiroflée stressed the need to promote a gender-neutral vision of society, breaking down stereotypes from a young age. She emphasized the importance of addressing the

perpetuation of stereotypes through gendered images in school manuals and educational material, such as pictures of a father reading a newspaper and a mother doing the housework. Stressing the importance of investing early on in the development of an egalitarian society, she referred to the implementation of a new law in Belgium on sexual education. The law provides for specialists to provide age-appropriate and comprehensive information to children. She also highlighted the necessity of maintaining regular and meaningful international parliamentary exchanges to strengthen national policies in parliament.

Ms. Tulia Ackson (Speaker of the National Assembly of the United Republic of Tanzania) stressed that education is a fundamental tool to challenge prejudice, stereotypes and structural inequality. She highlighted the importance of women political leaders in setting a social example of women's empowerment through education; for example, the current President of Tanzania is a woman. Ms. Ackson said that lawmaking needs to address structural discrimination and cultural norms that prevent girls from attending school. For instance, legislation can ensure the prohibition of child marriage for enrolled children, targeting patriarchal norms and social roles attributed on the basis of gender. She emphasized the importance of access to education for women with disabilities and young people.

Mr. Ueutjerevi Ngunaihe (MP, Namibia) highlighted the importance of constitutional provisions that ensure equal access to schooling, while addressing the gendered aspects of girls' enrolment, including gender-based discrimination and violence. Additionally, he discussed the adoption of a plan to eradicate trafficking in persons, and recognized the importance of addressing this form of exploitation that is highly gendered in nature.

Ms. Elisabeth Ofosu-Adjare (MP, Ghana) highlighted the importance of addressing all types of violence, including economic and emotional violence, and physical abuse. She emphasized the need for equal access to education, and highlighted some important factors in ensuring girls' educational enrolment, including adequate and accessible infrastructure, access to food, and provision for sanitary pads. She also underlined the importance of ensuring full inheritance rights for wives and children, to make sure that children would continue to be schooled if they lost a parent.

Ms. Veronica Maina (MP, Kenya) acknowledged that there are still challenges to be addressed regarding women's participation in political spaces. She recognized that many girls face significant barriers to their education, such as the lack of proper sanitation facilities in schools and the impact of poverty. She acknowledged that these challenges contribute to systemic discrimination, as limited access to education can lead to limited opportunities for well-paid jobs.

Lessons learned:

- Education plays a crucial role in promoting women's empowerment and creating a more equitable and inclusive society. It is a pathway to gender equality, and a vehicle to end violence against women.
- The pace of technological advancement is uneven, and women often have less access to the benefits of technology.
- Tearing down gender stereotypes requires comprehensive and gender-sensitive lawmaking that prioritizes the needs of girls, and addresses all barriers to accessing good quality education, especially in rural areas.
- The consideration of the specific needs and experiences of women from minority groups remains a highly important part of ensuring universal education.

- Investing in raising awareness of gender issues and challenging traditional norms and biases are key elements for enhancing girls' access to and retention within education.
- Removing the barriers that prevent girls from accessing education is of primary importance to ensure equality in education. Barriers include high dropout rates, lack of infrastructure and insufficient sanitary facilities. Girls in rural areas are particularly affected.
- National commitments, plans and policies should be developed and implemented to ensure progress towards achieving SDG 5 (gender equality).

Recommendations:

- Parliaments need to make sure that access to free, good quality education is not only provided for everyone, but also properly enforced, by ensuring proximity to quality infrastructure.
- Addressing gender stereotyping in school curricula must be prioritized as an important first step towards ending the perpetuation of traditionally applied gender roles.
- Taking into account the gendered nature of high dropout levels among girls in rural areas, legislatures need to invest in comprehensive plans of action and intersectional approaches to address the multiple dimensions of discrimination and chronic and structural cultural barriers that push girls out of primary and secondary education.
- Inclusive and good quality education in STEM subjects must be promoted.
- Parliaments should make efforts to bridge the gender digital divide, and provide equal opportunities for girls and women in the digital era. Parliaments should ensure that technological innovation is led by women and serves to empower them.
- Regulations must be adopted to combat new risks related to technological advances, especially when technology provides new platforms for violence.

Wrap-up, pledges and closing remarks

Mr. Jeroen Klok (Universal Periodic Review country coordinator, OHCHR) explained that a central element of the *Human Rights 75* initiative was the collection of pledges for transformative action. For this purpose, a draft pledges document was to be proposed to the participating MPs for their endorsement. Endorsed pledges would be presented to the *Human Rights 75* high-level event, scheduled for 11 and 12 December 2023 in Geneva. Mr. Klok emphasized the link between the OHCHR-led pledging process and the Summit of the Future, planned for 2024. He invited parliamentarians to make transformative, innovative and catalytic pledges for action, to inform a comprehensive dialogue on human rights.

The Chairperson highlighted the importance of including parliamentary perspectives in the process, and called on parliamentarians to lead by example and contribute substantially to advancing human rights and gender equality.

Following a round of comments, round-table participants endorsed a document with proposed pledges⁸ focusing on the three areas addressed at the round-table sessions: equality in political decision making; equal right to decent work; and equality in and through education. They committed to taking action on some or all of the proposed pledges, and were invited to input the pledges into the OHCHR pledging platform.⁹

⁸ See: www.ipu.org/file/17100/download

⁹ See: ee.humanitarianresponse.info/x/c8zBZ2hL

Conclusion

The round table confirmed the relevance of the UDHR and the CEDAW Convention in addressing multifaceted ongoing challenges to democracy and gender equality. Women's political participation and leadership were described as issues that mattered to everyone, not just women. This is because these issues are inherent to strong democratic institutions, and essential both to achieving the SDGs as a whole, and ensuring sustainable peace. There was also discussion about the ways in which parliaments are leading institutions to embrace, advocate for and ensure parity and diversity in their membership. Gender-based violence, including online, was identified as a critical challenge to women's full enjoyment of rights and freedoms. Enhancing awareness of gender issues in society through civic education and technology was also seen as needed. Legislative procedures must be up-to-date and gender-sensitive, so that they remain relevant and can benefit everyone. Participants emphasized the importance of addressing structural discrimination against women in the workforce, and touched on the elimination of the gender pay gap as a fundamental first step towards gender equality. The debates further highlighted the role of education in ensuring equality across the board.

Launch of the 2023 OHCHR-IPU handbook for parliamentarians on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Overview of the session

This session launched the second edition of *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol: Handbook for Parliamentarians*. It is a joint project between the IPU and OHCHR. The role of national parliaments in ratifying and implementing CEDAW, as well as ensuring appropriate follow-up to the reporting procedure, was emphasized. The launch session highlighted the central position of the IPU in supporting parliaments to implement CEDAW. The close cooperation between the CEDAW Committee and the IPU was welcomed. Parliamentarians from Maldives and Mexico shared what they had achieved through their national implementation of CEDAW, and highlighted the importance of parliamentary involvement in the CEDAW Committee's review of the State.

1. Interventions

Ms. Nicole Ameline (Member of the CEDAW Committee) emphasized the role of national parliaments in ensuring that parity becomes a universal value on which effort is spent. She shared three key words that parliamentarians could reflect on: *acceleration*, as still only 25% of parliamentarians worldwide are women; *innovation*, as CEDAW is a living tool that can provide solutions to current global challenges; and *mobilization*, as parliamentarians across the globe should mobilize to ensure that legislatures are more involved in CEDAW implementation.

Ms. Kareen Jabre (Director of the Division of Programmes, IPU) emphasized that since the 1990s, when cooperation between the CEDAW Committee and the IPU began, the IPU has been providing support to parliaments so that they are aware of the CEDAW Convention and the reporting system of the Committee. The IPU has encouraged and supported parliamentary efforts to implement the CEDAW Committee's

recommendations at the national level. She said that the new edition of the handbook presents good practices and observations designed to assist parliaments in their efforts towards implementing CEDAW, while also serving as a call for action to accelerate progress on women's rights.

Mr. Mahamane Cissé-Gouro (Director of the Human Rights Council and Treaty Mechanisms Division, OHCHR) highlighted that the important role of parliamentarians in implementing the Convention is well reflected in the handbook. It addresses CEDAW implementation in various contexts, such as in relation to protracted armed conflicts, climate change and health crises. He also shared concrete methods through which OHCHR can support parliamentarians, by making use of the handbook in three ways: as a reference for CEDAW's ongoing work on women's participation in decision making; to support the CEDAW Committee's capacity-building activities; and as a dissemination tool, both within OHCHR and more widely across the UN system. Finally, he called on parliaments to (i) contemplate the idea of quotas to increase women's participation, and (ii) advocate for the implementation of both a code of conduct and a complaints mechanism, so as to work towards a zero-tolerance policy on (online) harassment in the political sphere.

Ms. Ana Peláez Narváez (Chair of the CEDAW Committee) stressed that parliamentarians have an essential role in ensuring equality of rights between men and women, both in law and in practice. She recalled that the CEDAW Committee adopted a statement in 2010 recognizing the importance of national parliaments' inputs and their participation in the framework of the Convention.¹⁰ The statement highlights the essential nature of the role of national parliaments, both during the reporting process before the Committee, and in the implementation of the concluding observations.

She recalled that the 2010 statement also expands on the IPU's efforts to support: the ratification by different States of the CEDAW Optional Protocol; and the establishment of a communication channel with Speakers of national parliaments about CEDAW's ratification status and the follow up to concluding observations. The IPU has also been providing the Committee with key data on women's participation in politics, particularly regarding the States under review.

Ms. Jeehan Mahmood (MP, Maldives) emphasized how essential the handbook is for parliamentarians, drawing from her experience as Chair of the Gender Committee in the Parliament of Maldives. She shared her experience of having contributed to the review of Maldives before the CEDAW Committee in 2021. Her contribution allowed the Parliament to provide the State delegation with meaningful inputs and answers to questions and recommendations from the Committee members. Ms. Mahmood made some recommendations to the MPs participating: all parliaments should have a standing committee on gender; those committees should be given standing powers to ensure that parliament has a role during reporting procedures before the UN treaty bodies; parliamentary committees on gender should actively work in that regard, and oversee activities in a qualitative, quantitative and visible manner.

Ms. Cynthia López Castro (MP, Mexico; President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians) said that Mexico is one of the seven countries with gender parity in parliament. Although Mexico had started implementing 20% quotas, the goal since the constitutional reform of 2014 has been that 50% of parliamentarians should be women. There were two legislative initiatives among the measures that the Mexican Parliament took as a result of the CEDAW Committee's recommendations: the "*Olympia laws*" which criminalize digital domestic violence; and the *General Act on the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents*. The

¹⁰ See: www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/Statements/Parliamentarians.pdf

Act creates the *National Register of Maintenance Obligations*, which provides information on child maintenance payments. Those who have not kept up with payments are not eligible to run for election.

2. Interactive discussion

Mr. Akmal Saidov (First Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Chamber, Uzbekistan) said that the handbook is a very useful tool for parliamentarians in his country. He stressed that the handbook is well regarded, and that it is included in Uzbekistan's initiative to translate various IPU handbooks into Uzbek.

Ms. Kareen Jabre (Director of the Division of Programmes, IPU) concluded by highlighting the importance of making pledges on women's rights and human rights in general. She invited all parliamentarians to submit their pledges and follow up on the handbook.

Mr. Mahamane Cissé-Gouro (Director of the Human Rights Council and Treaty Mechanisms Division, OHCHR) encouraged all parliamentarians taking part in the event to make pledges in preparation for the high-level event on 11 and 12 December 2023.
