



"Strengthening Women's Participation in the Inter-Parliamentary Union"

Kareen Jabre
Inter-Parliamentary Union

A paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/CEE Network for Gender Issues Conference

The Implementation of Quotas: European Experiences

Budapest, Hungary, 22–23 October 2004

Introduction

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) works to enhance and promote democracy by strengthening the institution of parliament. Created in 1889, it brings together more than 140 national parliaments from across the globe.

The IPU believes that the balanced participation of men and women in the management of public affairs is central to any democracy. Article 4 of its 1997 *Universal Declaration of Democracy* states that:

The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarity, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences.

This principle guides the organisation's work; over the past 30 years, the IPU has developed numerous activities aimed at promoting women's participation in, and bolstering the contribution that they can make to, parliament. It conducts surveys and produces research on women in parliament; it monitors the percentage of women in national parliaments and publishes a monthly status report; it facilitates contact between women parliamentarians and encourages them to share their experiences; and it organises technical assistance projects in specific countries. Finally, it promotes the participation of women parliamentarians within its own structures, the ultimate goal being equality in participation, as enshrined in its statutes.

Indeed, the IPU is one of the few international organisations – if not the only one – to have adopted specific measures and mechanisms to promote gender equality within its ranks. In December 2004, women made up a mere 15 percent of parliamentarians worldwide. In contrast, at the last IPU Assembly, held in Geneva, Switzerland, in October 2004, 28.7

percent of participants were women, close to the 30 percent target set by the United Nations (UN).

The participation of women within the IPU has never been as strong as it is today. This is due to the existence of a strong movement complemented with specific actions, which can be regarded as affirmative action measures or quotas.

The IPU's Position on Quotas

The IPU does not see quotas as the prime means of enhancing women's participation in politics. It prefers gradual change to mandatory measures. However, the organisation recognizes that, when faced with deadlock and slow change, quotas, insofar as they are temporary special measures, are sometimes the only way forward.

The organisation's position on affirmative action and quotas is set out in its *Plan of Action to correct imbalances in the participation of men and women in political life*, adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Council in 1994. The *Plan of Action* states that:

On a strictly interim basis, these measures may include affirmative action measures. Wherever the measure chosen is a quota system, it is proposed that the quota should not target women but that, in a spirit of equity, it may be established that neither sex may occupy a proportion of seats inferior to a given percentage.

In 1994, this represented quite an important stand for an international organisation to take. The balanced approach to women's participation is noteworthy, and is consistent with the IPU's promotion of gender partnership. It is also in keeping with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which also introduces, in Article 4, the notion of 'temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women'.

Since 1994, the IPU's position on quotas has not changed. Its resolutions regularly mention affirmative action measures, and even set targets to achieve gender equality in politics. In a resolution adopted as recently as October 2004, on parliament's role in implementing the Beijing objectives, the IPU '*[s]trongly urges* parliamentarians to promote a stronger presence of women in political parties and at all levels of decision-making through the adoption, for example, of quota systems or other forms of affirmative action'.

Clearly, the IPU considers quotas and affirmative action measures to be useful mechanisms to make progress in areas characterized by gridlock and to encourage women's participation in parliament.

However, utilising such mechanisms within the IPU has required time, effort and persuasive argument. Indeed, when the idea was raised in the IPU, in the early 1990s, it led to much debate and opposition. This was also the case in 1999 when the subject resurfaced. Affirmative action at any rate can be a controversial issue, all the more so in the context of an international organisation.

At that time, though, one thing had become clear to the IPU: women's participation within the organisation was not increasing at a satisfactory pace.

In 1947, women made up only 1.2 percent of delegates at the conference in Cairo, Egypt. Some improvement had been made by 1975, with women comprising 7.8 percent of delegates at the 62nd conference in London. Progress remained slow up to 1990, when the figure stood at 12 percent.

Women's participation was also extremely weak and unsatisfactory in the IPU's other decision-making bodies, the Executive Committee and the Governing Council. The first woman to be elected to the Executive Committee was Marina Molina Rubio of Guatemala, in October 1987, almost a century after the organisation was established. It was not until 1999 that a woman, Najma Heptulla, Speaker ad interim of the Indian Upper House, was elected President of the IPU.

Furthermore, no significant progress was made in the number of women participating at the national level. Although the organisation had only a limited direct impact on women's participation in national parliaments, it was clear that reform within the IPU could also serve as an incentive to promote women's participation nationally and internationally. Ensuring greater participation of women parliamentarians within the IPU:

- set an example at the international level;
- encouraged change at the national level; and
- led to improvements in the functioning and work of the IPU.

What Affirmative Action Measures are in Place within the IPU Today?

Following a three-year consultative process, the IPU adopted, in 2001, a number of affirmative action measures and quotas intended to strengthen women's participation within the organisation:

- a straightforward quota system was introduced for elections to the Executive Committee – 20 percent of its elected members must now be women;
- a gender-neutral target was adopted for the Governing Council, which, if strictly applied ensures that representatives of each sex account for at least 30 percent of its members. Each delegation is entitled to three members (and, therefore, three votes), provided that men and women are included in the delegation. Where this is not the case, the Member Parliament's voting rights and number of delegates on the Council are reduced by one (i.e. one-third of the total); and
- delegations that attend IPU Assemblies without representatives of both sexes on three consecutive occasions lose some of their voting rights and see their officially registered numbers reduced.

It must also be pointed out that the IPU statutes also limit participation in the Executive Committee to MPs from states that have granted women the right to vote and to stand for election.

These measures seek to enhance women's participation in the IPU quantitatively and qualitatively.

A politically supportive context and a participatory process

What factors are behind the increase in women's participation in the IPU? Simply put, strong political will has been in evidence within the IPU, and there has been greater awareness of the need for, and the benefits of, gender equality within the parliaments of member states.

Several of the measures adopted in 2001 by IPU bodies had already been proposed in one form or another a decade earlier, mainly by women parliamentarians. At that time, these proposals were seen as too forceful and thus were rejected. Ten years later, the context was very different, and definitely more favourable to the adoption of such measures.

By 2001, there was a general framework that was conducive to change within the IPU. The existence of a strong women's movement and the necessary political will was crucial. The process was also an inclusive and transparent one.

A strong women's movement

The increased presence and influence of women within the IPU cannot be dissociated from the recent adoption of quota measures. The women's movement in the IPU has grown over the years and today is an important element in the IPU's decision-making process. It all began with the establishment of the **regular** Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, which was the product of some ten years of struggle. The first Meeting of Women Parliamentarians was held in 1985. This served as a concrete incentive to send more women to IPU meetings and, as a result, the percentage of women MPs in IPU meetings rose slightly in the late 1980s before slowing down again. The Meeting of Women Parliamentarians brings together women parliamentarians from around the world to discuss specific gender issues and to make an impact on the work of the IPU. Its action and support was vital to the adoption of quota measures by the IPU.

Political support at the highest level

At its highest decision-making level, the IPU could not be more politically supportive of greater participation by women within the organisation. Participation by women has been high on the agenda of all recent IPU presidents. Their approach has always been one of partnership and gender equality. The IPU President Sergio Pérez Verdugo (Chile), under whose leadership the affirmative action measures were adopted, stated that: 'Modern societies will only be more humane and more equitable when all of their subjects are actively involved in the decision-making process'.

It must also be noted that the question of women's participation within the IPU has become increasingly prominent over the years. Reports on the number of women participants, the number of 'single-sex delegations' and the qualitative participation of women, have been regularly presented and discussed in the plenary session of the Governing Council raising awareness among delegates.

Gender equality: the responsibility of both men and women

Many of the measures encouraging women's participation in the IPU were introduced as part of a broader reform package. Gender equality was one of several items proposed with a view to improving the functioning of the IPU. Hence it was discussed by all concerned, and was seen as the responsibility of all.

The Gender Partnership Group, itself comprising two men and two women members of the IPU Executive Committee, spearheaded the affirmative action measures linked to participation in the IPU Assembly. Set up in 1997, this body was charged with ensuring that the policies and functioning of the IPU took into account the needs of both men and women on an equal basis. It started by examining the participation of women in delegations to IPU meetings. At that time, the novelty of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians was beginning to wear off and the rate of women's participation at IPU events was starting to level off. Including men in the process to elaborate and adopt affirmative action measures proved critical. It made it possible to avoid marginalization of the issue and to incorporate the perspective of men.

An inclusive and consultative process

The affirmative action measures were adopted following an inclusive and consultative three-year process, ending in 2001. Initially, the Gender Partnership Group's recommendations were not far reaching, merely encouraging delegations to include women. Gradually, it began to discuss affirmative action measures and the possibility of imposing sanctions for non-compliance. These ideas were shared with the IPU membership at three assemblies. Members' comments were widely circulated and the Gender Partnership Group discussed them. Some suggestions were accepted while others were rejected. When a proposal was rejected, an explanation was given to all members.

The consultative process revealed a wide range of opinions on how best to ensure women's participation and gender balance at IPU events. Many IPU members were opposed to insisting that delegations to the conference/assembly have a specific gender composition, and instead called for a voluntary system. Others felt that only a more rigid and mandatory system (involving sanctions) would be effective. The IPU therefore devised a hybrid system, which would not impose a mandatory quota on each delegation, but would introduce sanctions if a delegation consistently ignored the need to ensure gender balance.

Consequently, a consultative and transparent process turned out to be key to the adoption of the quota measures. These could hardly be contested, as they were the product of the work of the entire IPU membership. The process also had to be consultative and transparent in order to take into account the various points of view of the IPU membership, and to reflect differences in cultures and traditions.

What has this changed at the IPU?

The affirmative action measures were adopted in 2002 and restrictions on voting rights and representation were applied as early as October 2003. While it is too early to draw any conclusions on the effect of these measures, the following observations can be made:

- the participation of women in IPU Assemblies and on the Governing Council and the Executive Committee has increased significantly over the past five years, or since the process was launched. The participation of women in the IPU Assembly almost reached 30 percent in 2004. However, what is most notable is the decrease in the number of 'single-sex delegations'. True, some parliaments send delegations with only one female member in order to avoid sanctions and the ultimate objective of equal representation within delegations has yet to be met;
- putting the question of women's participation in the IPU on the organisation's agenda (especially within the framework of its reform process) has raised IPU members' awareness of gender equality in politics. Today, gender equality is more prominent in IPU debates, although there is still room for improvement;
- these measures have had an indirect effect on the composition of elected bodies and positions within the IPU. Greater effort is now made to ensure that appointed posts are gender balanced (for instance, the members of drafting committees and the rapporteurs of standing committees).

Interestingly, the main reservations expressed vis-à-vis the mechanisms in place at the IPU focus on sanctioning as opposed to facilitating change. While the first option (sanctioning) was eventually adopted, the second approach was nevertheless considered necessary to encourage more long-term change at the IPU and in national parliaments.

To maximize the impact at the national level, the IPU has been active in different areas. The Gender Partnership Group has initiated a series of hearings with delegations from national parliaments that have no women members. The aim is to establish a dialogue, assess difficulties, encourage progress, evaluate needs and identify if and how the IPU can aid women's participation. Preliminary hearings have been held with parliaments from the Gulf States and those Pacific Island states where no women are present in parliament.

From the International to the National Scene

As mentioned earlier, quotas are not the only solution available. A number of other measures to facilitate women's participation should complement them, both within the IPU and in national parliaments. After all, that is the ultimate goal.

The IPU has thus attempted to encourage debate on the means of promoting women's participation in parliament. IPU meetings, particularly the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, serve as useful forums for the exchange of ideas and for debate on the effectiveness of steps taken at the national level. These meetings are also useful for disseminating data and ensuring that men and women are aware of tools that exist in this field. The quota database of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) is an excellent example of a tool that is of value to MPs, politicians and parliamentary staff considering what measures to develop in their own countries.

It is also important to provide MPs with a broader approach to quotas and to focus on how to justify such measures and implement them. A better understanding of the rights included in CEDAW can be helpful. The IPU has produced, with the UN, a handbook for parliamentarians *The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol - a handbook for parliamentarians* on that particular subject and organises seminars for MPs grappling with the issue.

Quotas must not be an objective per se, but a mechanism to ensure the participation of a greater number of women in politics or within the IPU. They provide for a quantitative leap, to attain the goal of effective gender equality in politics, and need to be accompanied by a series of other measures, which range from awareness-raising to the training of women and the development of gender-sensitive environments both within national parliaments and the IPU

The IPU has therefore developed more comprehensive programmes for women in parliament at the national level. These may include the development of quotas, but this is just one initiative. National technical assistance projects to support women in politics have also been established. Box 1 contains two examples of technical assistance projects—in a post-conflict country, Rwanda, and a normal evolution country, Djibouti.

Box 1

Technical assistance projects aimed at promoting the participation of women in parliament

The case of Rwanda

Institutional support: the project began in 2000 with the provision of technical support to the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (FFRP). A documentation centre on gender issues was set up and a librarian was trained to conduct research on gender issues.

Engendering the constitutional process: a three-day seminar on 'Engendering the new Rwandan Constitution' was organised by the IPU and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in August 2001, within the National Transitional Assembly of Rwanda.

- The seminar brought together all **women and men** parliamentarians, members of the Legal and Constitutional Committee tasked with drafting the new constitution and civil society organisations. International and regional experts also attended the session. The seminar provided a unique opportunity for Rwandans to consider practical ways to ensure that the constitution took account of gender matters, including a debate on affirmative action measures. The meeting concluded with the adoption of a series of recommendations aimed at ensuring that the constitution paid attention to gender questions. At the close of the seminar, participants agreed to work together to garner women's views on the constitutional process through a popular consultation process and to produce a document on women's rights to be submitted to the Legal and Constitutional Committee. The result was extremely positive: today Rwanda has a constitution that is highly sensitive to gender issues. A

record of the seminar was published in an IPU publication that can be found at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/studies.htm>.

Support to women election candidates: the IPU and UNDP, together with the Transitional National Assembly of Rwanda and the FFRP, organised a seminar on 'Rwandan Women and the Electoral Campaign', in Kigali, Rwanda, from 30–31 July 2003. Held on the eve of the launch of both the presidential and the legislative electoral campaigns, the seminar came at a timely moment in the Rwandan electoral process. Eighty women leaders with different backgrounds discussed a variety of subjects, including gender and the constitution, the funding of electoral campaigns and relations with the media and the electorate. They benefited from the input of national and international experts from France, Kenya and South Africa. The seminar proved that women in Rwanda have what it takes to be leaders, to ensure balanced representation in parliament and to articulate the views of the distinct groups they represent. The results of the seminar were published in an IPU publication that can be found at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/studies.htm>.

Conclusion

Several lessons can be gleaned from these experiences and others, especially concerning measures to accompany the quota process and the role of international organisations.

- Quotas must respond to a national need and demand. To develop quotas, political will is necessary.
- Support activities by international organisations need to be nationally driven, that is, they must respond to an internally identified need and they must be managed from within. Ownership of the project contributes to its overall success. International organisations can only provide assistance and options; the choice remains that of the nation.
- The development of quotas must not be seen as an objective per se. It is crucial that this is only one element of a more comprehensive plan of action aimed at promoting women in politics.
- To be efficient quotas need to be understood by the people and accepted as non-discriminatory. In addition, it is important to provide support to newly elected women officials, especially if a quota system is in place. Even after quotas are adopted and women are elected to parliament, it is important to keep the question of women in politics high on the public and political agenda.
- Support for women should not be perceived as separate from support for institution-building. Enhancing the capacities of newly elected women parliamentarians should complement the development of parliament's capacity to address gender issues.
- Activities should ensure the participation of men and avoid their exclusion, as this may ultimately prove counterproductive.

Quotas have acquired considerable political momentum over the past ten years. They are undoubtedly an option to consider in promoting women in politics, although not necessarily in isolation. Their efficiency still needs to be analyzed further, especially in terms of identifying the side effects that may sometimes hamper the work of women in parliament, if they are not properly addressed. The definitive aim, though, remains equal participation of men and women in politics. International organisations are not outside the confines of the gender equality debate. Indeed, they also have a role to play in ensuring equal participation within their own structures as a means of promoting equal participation in decision-making processes, whether nationally, regionally or internationally.