

Gender-sensitive Parliaments

Domain 2 – Structure and organisation

This domain assesses the existence and implementation of formalised codes of conduct and policies against overt and covert discrimination, with related grievance procedures.

Organisational transparency is a basic condition that supports gender mainstreaming. It requires the formalisation, systematic implementation and monitoring of codes of conduct or similar instruments with the explicit purpose of regulating behaviour. Codes of conducts and formal anti-discrimination policies help to formalise priorities, working conditions and procedures, as well as to sanction unacceptable behaviour.

Read more about codes of conduct and formal anti-discrimination policies

Formal rules and procedures are a key feature in gender-sensitive parliaments and strongly support gender equality. Codes of conduct and formal anti-discrimination policies are thus key elements in supporting gender equality in political institutions. Most parliaments around the world have some form of code of conduct, either as guidelines for parliamentarians, formal rules or laws. The implementation of formal rules is similarly important, as are the informal procedures that generally underpin interactions and behaviours. However, formal anti-harassment policies and norms in parliamentary procedures are the least common gender equality policy implemented in political institutions (IPU: 2011).

In Europe, three main groups of codes of conduct exist in parliaments:

- 1 Formal ethical rules for MPs;
- 2 Parliamentary rules of procedures; and
- 3 Rules deriving from general legislation.

Formal anti-discrimination and/or anti-harassment policies contribute to making clear the behaviours that are unacceptable in the parliament. Codes of conduct and effective grievance procedures promote the responsibility and accountability of parliaments (IPU: 2011; Leone: 2017) and are considered significant for every democratic institution (Leone: 2017) that supports gender equality and human rights (IPU: 2018a).

As part of their symbolic function as national institutions, parliaments must formally prevent and prosecute sexual harassment (IPU: 2018a). This topic should be given particular attention, as, even where a complaints body exists in the parliament, reported episodes likely represent a smaller number than actual incidents (IPU: 2018a).

MPs in parliaments, like any other work organisation, need to balance work and family life. The domain also assesses the availability of family-friendly measures, such as limitations to working hours and sitting schedules, family leave options and procedures for substitution/proxy voting.

Read more about work-life balance and family-friendly leave arrangements

Parliaments can be challenging workplaces for parents with young children, particularly where no family-friendly measures are implemented. This is especially true for women MPs, who are more likely to be the primary family carers. The problem can be exacerbated by working in an organisation historically structured to meet the needs of men. The introduction of more family-friendly parliaments will encourage greater numbers of women to seek political office (Campbell and Childs: 2015). Gender-sensitive parliaments create a family-friendly working environment for parliamentarians and parliamentary employees alike, establishing accommodating measures that support the work-life balance of all members and staff. Ensuring family support and facilitating work-life balance are similarly recommended by the OSCE (2017).

Sitting hours in parliaments may be extremely long, with night sittings a common occurrence in many assemblies. Gender-sensitive parliaments define sitting hours that allow MPs to reconcile their personal and family lives, limit night sittings and avoid voting sessions in difficult hours. A useful measure to support parent MPs is scheduling sittings so that they are aligned with school calendars.

A measure that supports family-related care leave is the possibility for proxy voting, i.e. allowing MPs who are absent due to their care responsibilities to delegate their voting power to a representative, and enabling them to vote *in absentia*. Very few parliaments around the world allow proxy voting (IPU: 2011; London School of Economics Blog: 2019) or remote voting (IPU: 2018b).