

Gender-sensitive Parliaments

Domain 1 – Symbolic meanings of spaces

This domain maps out policies that address the gender-sensitivity of physical spaces in the parliament, and evaluates gender equality in external communication.

Many parliamentary assemblies are seated in historic buildings that were chosen prior to women entering the institutions as parliamentarians. These buildings often contain objects, rooms and decoration with highly symbolic meanings referencing a predominantly male past. In addition, political systems use women and men differently to symbolise the features and values on which the country is based, with leadership, strength, and courage habitually attributed to men, while virtue, beauty, nurture and justice are assigned to women. In parliament buildings, this symbolism is represented in statues and paintings, for example.

Highlighting these features is a first step in raising awareness of the gendered nature of a parliament, drawing attention to the evident need for an institutional transformation. Re-appropriation of physical premises to address this historical imbalance may include obtaining gender balance in decorations and room names, or the provision of childcare facilities. It is worth noting that physical premises may be inadequate for women, given that they were historically attended just by men. The clearest example is the presence (or absence) of sufficient numbers of women's washrooms, suitably equipped and in appropriate locations.