

Gender-sensitive Parliaments

Domain 1 – Gender mainstreaming structures

This domain assesses the presence and function of dedicated gender equality bodies, their resources and influence.

Reserving dedicated structures for gender mainstreaming is one of the most effective ways to systematically address and monitor gender equality in political institutions. Gender mainstreaming impacts on public policies that effectively respond to women's demands and interests, positively influences the consolidation and progression of women's political leadership (Agora: 2014), and enables critical acts. The IPU Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive parliaments (2012) stresses the relevance of establishing gender mainstreaming structures and mechanisms. The two main types of such infrastructures are gender equality committees and women's caucuses.

Gender equality committees, councils or groups, as well as technical supporting bodies, are structures dedicated to placing gender equality and equal opportunities on the agenda of all parliaments. 'Women's parliamentary bodies can play a critical role in shifting the responsibility of making parliaments more gender-sensitive from women MPs alone to parliaments as a whole, including parliamentary leadership' (OSCE: 2013).

Such bodies may have different formal positioning in the parliamentary organisation, with their functions ranging from advisory roles to decision-making capacity. Gender equality committees may:

- Lobby and draw attention to equal opportunities;
- Advise on gender equality;
- Carry out gender analysis of draft legislation;
- Monitor the implementation of enacted laws;
- Request reports and briefings on gender issues from ministers or government departments;
- Create and develop external partnerships (IPU: 2011).

The European Parliament, for example, has a dedicated Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM Committee). Its tasks include the protection and promotion of women's rights in the Union and in third countries, the removal of all forms of discrimination based on sex, equality policy and the implementation of gender mainstreaming in all policy sectors, as well as the follow-up and implementation of international agreements and conventions on women's rights (European Parliament FEMM Committee).

Women's caucuses are cross-party forums, generally initiated by women MPs to promote solidarity among women politicians, enhance their parliamentary capacity and place women's interests on the agenda. They can assist women MPs in knowing the parliament's functioning and developing a common platform for lobbying and legislative action (OSCE: 2016). Women's caucuses may differ in structure (e.g. more or less formal) and in organisational positioning.

Read more about women's caucuses and the involvement of men and civil society

When looking at women's caucuses, the involvement of men and civil society should also be considered. Women's caucuses have had considerable success in outreach activities, such as informing and engaging civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with political decision-making and legislative gender equality efforts. The OSCE (2017) recommends that parliaments should strengthen coalitions for women's political empowerment, including networks of women leaders, women's movements, and male allies. In some countries, men can take part in women's caucuses, in an effort to ensure that gender equality does not remain a 'women's' issue. Women's caucuses can initiate outreach activities by involving civil society and gathering different organisations around a common table.

Women's caucuses have been recognised as effective in advancing gender equality issues, fostering a gender perspective on the political agenda and facilitating cross-party cooperation on relevant legislative issues (OSCE: 2013). Women (or gender) caucuses often sponsor programmes and activities to support women in parliament, and to bring about change in male-oriented political cultures and practices, thus influencing parliamentary culture more broadly (Agora: 2014).