

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 buildings where parliamentary assemblies are seated are historic and have been chosen prior to women entering the institutions as parliamentarians. These buildings often contain objects, rooms and decoration with highly symbolic meanings. In most cases, the organisation of the rooms and their names reflect a predominantly male past. Furthermore, political systems use women and men differently to symbolise the features and values the country is based on: leadership, strength, and courage are habitually attributed to men; while virtue, beauty, nurture, and justice are represented by women. In parliamentary buildings, this symbolism is represented, for example, in statues and paintings.

It is important that people become aware of the gendered symbolic meanings, and reflect on hidden and taken-for-granted messages and gendered features in the parliament. Highlighting these features is a pre-requisite to becoming aware of the gendered nature of a parliament and a way to draw attention to the need for an institutional transformation. Reappropriation of physical premises that address this historical imbalance, may include the provision of child care facilities, and obtaining gender balance in decorations and room names. It is also worth noting that physical premises may be inadequate for women, because parliamentary buildings were historically attended just by men. A clear example is the presence (or absence) of women's washrooms, in terms of number, space, facilities, and location.

Data sources: the parliament building; internal information from the parliamentary bureau.