

## **How does the formation of women's parliamentary caucuses affect the political culture of our countries? What motivations exist for organizing a women's caucus in Congress?**

Extracts from J. Ballington (IPU), *Equality in Politics: A survey of women and men in parliaments*, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva, 2008, Chapter 5.

<http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#equality08>

Women's parliamentary caucuses (and specialized committees on gender equality) offer an opportunity to mainstream gender issues in the work of parliament, not only in developing legislation but also in terms of oversight of government action. Many women parliamentarians work through committees to voice their concerns and interests and raise the profile of gender issues. Women's caucuses also provide a meeting place for women to meet and network across party lines.

### **Women's Caucuses**

Women in several countries have realized that as a minority in parliament, it is advantageous to form alliances and coalitions to affect change. Of the 77 countries for which the IPU has data, just under half of the parliaments reported the existence of a caucus of women parliamentarians. Such bodies have been formed on the understanding that they are important forums for bringing women together across political party lines to channel the interests and concerns of women. They are also important forums for working with other partners and engaging members of civil society, as a parliamentarian from Uganda explained:

We have formed the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association through which we promote gender issues in parliament. We have also learned to lobby male parliamentarians to support gender issues. We also reach out to civil society organizations and all those who can help us push gender issues effectively.

Women's caucuses undertake a range of functions, such as conducting studies to "examine the gender gaps in all our legislation pertaining to women and children" as a parliamentarian from Zimbabwe explained. In those countries with women's caucuses, 61 percent of the respondents believe that such caucuses have been successful at influencing parliamentary or legislative activities and providing oversight. A women parliamentarian explained the successes of the women's caucus in Burkina Faso:

Women parliamentarians have proved that they can assume their role at least as well as men, if not better. They have had to act in united and concerted fashion, giving the men pause for thought. They have shown that when they have a common interest, they can pave over their ideological differences to fight together and obtain remarkable results.

### **Case Study: Namibia's Women's Caucus**

*Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams, Vice-President of the National Council of Namibia, highlights the role of the Women's Caucus in Namibia.*

The gender committee in Namibia concentrates on specific issues, such as HIV and AIDS, whereas the women's caucus plays a vital role in examining all acts for discrimination, and looking at the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The distinction that I make is that the committee looks at issues related to equity or equality to ensure enforcement, whereas the women's caucus actually elevates women to the position where they ought to be.

The caucus is like a watchdog and it pushes issues, whereas in the gender committee I feel that members are approaching the issue from a party political viewpoint. In the women's caucus, there is one objective which is for all of us to be equal and that, to me, is the main distinction: that we do not look at each other and where we come from; we look at each other as women and what we fight for is all the women in the country.

The issues that we address are: (1) the budget; (2) we look at CEDAW and its legislative implications; (3) we reach out and ensure that people understand their rights; and (4) we ensure that all the acts are enforced. The caucus may also come up with motions and issue collective statements on behalf of women where necessary.

The women's caucus is also a disseminator of information and encouragement for people to use and benefit from the laws passed. Otherwise, they just sit on the shelves: good laws, a democratic country, but with little enforcement—so that is very important. In parliament we exercise an oversight function over the executive; so we have an important role as the majority of them are male and will protect and defend what belongs to them.

*(Edited excerpts from interview, Geneva, October 2007)*

Two-thirds of respondents believed that women's caucuses have been successful in uniting women across party lines. For one-third of respondents, however, the problem of party loyalty remains. In many instances, women's caucuses do not receive parliamentary support, such as financial resources, support services or even the office and meeting spaces needed to organize their work. Meeting arrangements can be difficult and must be organized around the formal business of the parliament.

Additionally, parliamentarians have highlighted how the work of all bodies dealing with gender equality (parliamentary committees and caucuses) could be greatly facilitated and enhanced by the provision of timely and accurate sex-disaggregated data. Such data would also help parliamentarians to fulfil their watchdog role and oversee government action and progress.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> IPU, 2007. *Report on the Role of Parliamentary Committees in Mainstreaming Gender and Promoting the Status of Women*. p. 3.