



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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IPU written submission to Ireland's Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality

Response to recommendations by
the Citizen's Assembly on Gender
Equality

Geneva, 5 October 2022

Executive summary

The present submission of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) focuses on two recommendations of the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality that are most relevant to its work.

First, it responds to **Recommendation 20**, which reads as follows:

By the end of 2022:

- (a) Extend the gender quota for party candidates at general elections to local elections, elections to the Seanad and European Parliament elections and review every 5 years.*
- (b) Increase penalties for parties that do not meet the statutory gender quotas.*
- (c) The 30% threshold should be increased to 40% for women (and 40% for men) for all elections.*

IPU research shows that gender quotas are an effective means to enhance women's representation in politics. In 2021, countries that applied some form of quota elected on average 31.9 per cent women to their lower and single houses and 29.1 per cent to their upper houses, versus 19.5 and 23.9 per cent respectively in countries that applied no quotas. For them to work, quotas must be ambitious, well-designed and duly enforced through sanctions for non-compliance. Beyond a minimum threshold of women, quotas increasingly set gender parity as the objective. In 2016, IPU member parliaments adhered to this objective, which is now also supported by the United Nations. We therefore support the above recommendations. Namely, we encourage Ireland to ensure strict penalties for non-compliance with its quota provisions, to extend it to all elections, and to strive to incrementally increase the quota to ultimately achieve gender parity at all levels of governance. We also call on Ireland to consider other supporting measures to create a more gender-responsive political environment.

Second, the IPU submission responds to **Recommendation 23** that reads as follows:
Improve family-friendly practices for all representatives elected to public office by:

- (a) Making maternity, paternity and parental leave available to all elected representatives, including Ministers (through legislation or constitutional amendment as required).*
- (b) Providing flexible working options including remote working and voting and adjusting meeting times and rules to suit caring responsibilities (through legislation or constitutional amendment as required).*

In 2012, IPU Member Parliaments unanimously adopted a Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments (GSP). The Plan of Action includes a focus on family-friendly working arrangements. Several parliaments have taken steps in this regard, such as rearranging their sitting hours; setting up a childcare centre and a family room in parliament; allowing for parental leave for all members, men and women alike, and considering alternatives such as accepting parental leave as a legitimate reason for missing a sitting day; and giving parliamentarians who are still breastfeeding the opportunity to use a proxy vote or vote pairing so that they need not attend the sitting. Covid-19 has further demonstrated that remote participation and voting are possible avenues for the work of parliaments, which can benefit in particular parliamentarians with caring responsibilities.

Indeed, a gender-sensitive, inclusive parliament is not only a matter of numbers. To be truly inclusive, parliament must be a place where men and women from all age groups and all walks of life can and want to participate fully. It is also a parliament that models behaviour and norms for society. The IPU therefore supports the above recommendations and further supports the recommendation of the Forum for a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament to conduct a self-assessment of the institution's level of gender sensitivity, based on the IPU methodology.

Introduction

1. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is the global organization of parliaments. It was founded in 1889 as the first multilateral political organization in the world, encouraging cooperation and dialogue between all nations. Today, the IPU comprises 179 national Member Parliaments and 12 regional parliamentary bodies. It promotes democracy and helps parliaments become stronger, younger, gender-balanced and more diverse.
2. The IPU recognizes gender equality as a key component of democracy and works to achieve equal participation of men and women in politics. It promotes gender-sensitive parliaments, namely parliaments that embody and deliver gender equality. It does so through research, policy guidance, technical assistance and parliamentary activities at the national, regional and international levels aimed at leveraging knowledge, experience-sharing and political will to promote change.
3. The present submission is presented in response to a letter by the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality inviting the IPU to respond to the recommendations by the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality that are relevant to its work. The IPU hereby responds to recommendations 20 and 23 from the Citizen's Assembly report, based on IPU data and research findings, international standards, and IPU guidance and expertise in advancing gender equality in parliaments across the globe.

IPU response to Recommendation 20

By the end of 2022:

- (a) Extend the gender quota for party candidates at general elections to local elections, elections to the Seanad and European Parliament elections and review every 5 years.**
- (b) Increase penalties for parties that do not meet the statutory gender quotas.**
- (c) The 30% threshold should be increased to 40% for women (and 40% for men) for all elections.**

4. Since 2016, the IPU has consistently called for gender parity as the ultimate goal in parliamentary representation, following the adoption of a resolution that: “*Strongly urges parliaments to set a deadline by which at least 30 per cent of parliamentarians should be women and to set a further deadline by which that proportion should reach 50 per cent*”.¹
5. This call has been echoed by the United Nations (UN). The IPU and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) jointly called for achieving gender parity in political decision-making by 2030.² Shortly after, this objective was also set at the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).³ Both UN bodies also acknowledged the importance of special measures such as quotas to reverse the historical underrepresentation of women in politics.
6. Yet, according to IPU data, as at 1 August 2022, 26.4 per cent of the world’s parliamentarians were women.⁴ At the current pace of progress, it would take another 40 years to reach gender parity.
7. IPU data also shows that countries that apply gender quotas at parliamentary elections tend to have higher representation of women. In 2021, countries that applied some form of quota elected 31.9 per cent of MPs to their single and lower chambers of parliament, compared to 19.5 per cent in countries with no form of quotas. In upper houses, 29.1 per cent of MPs elected in 2021 in countries that applied some form of quotas were women, compared to 23.9 per cent in countries without any such affirmative action.⁵
8. For them to be effective, quotas must be mandatory, duly enforced, ambitious and adapted to the electoral system in place. Effective quotas often mandate alternation of male and female candidates on political party lists, require parity among heads of such lists and/or parity on winnable seats and reject non-compliant party lists. Recent experiences have shown that weakening quota enforcement mechanisms can lead to sharp a decrease in women’s representation.⁶
9. An incremental approach has led more and more countries to adopt legislation that sets a gender parity requirement for candidate quotas, such as Argentina, Belgium, Mexico and Senegal. All these countries are now in the top 20 of the IPU ranking of women in national parliaments. Their quota provisions mandate strict alternation of men and women candidates on party lists and carry penalties for non-compliance.⁷

¹ IPU, “The freedom of women to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference: Building partnerships between men and women to achieve this objective”. Resolution adopted unanimously by the 135th IPU Assembly (Geneva, 27 October 2016). Available at <http://archive.ipu.org/conf-e/135/item4.pdf>.

² “Joint Call by IPU and CEDAW Committee on International Women’s Day 2021”, 8 March 2021, <https://www.ipu.org/iwd-2021-statement>.

³ Agreed conclusions, Commission on the Status of Women, 65th session, 30 March 2021, UN Doc. E/CN.6/2021/L.3. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw65-2021>.

⁴ IPU Parline, Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, situation as of 1 August 2022: <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=8&year=2022>.

⁵ IPU, Women in Parliament in 2021: A year in review, 2022, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2022-03/women-in-parliament-in-2021>.

⁶ IPU, “When quotas go wrong - and what to do about it”, 10 March 2022, <https://www.ipu.org/news/case-studies/2022-03/when-quotas-go-wrong-and-what-do-about-it>.

⁷ For further details, see <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/>.

10. Beyond quotas, effective measures include capping of campaign expenses and ensuring equitable distribution of such expenses among men and women candidates as a means to level the playing field. Building a more gender-responsive political environment is equally important, such as combatting any forms of sexism, harassment and violence against women candidates and political officers, and building gender equality policies and mechanisms within political parties and political institutions.
11. The IPU therefore support the above recommendations. Namely, we encourage Ireland to ensure strict penalties for non compliance with its quota provisions, to extend it to all elections, and to strive to incrementally increase the quota to ultimately achieve gender parity at all levels of governance. We also call on Ireland to consider other supporting measures to create a more gender-responsive political environment.

IPU response to Recommendation 23

Improve family-friendly practices for all representatives elected to public office by:

- (a) Making maternity, paternity and parental leave available to all elected representatives, including Ministers (through legislation or constitutional amendment as required).**
- (b) Providing flexible working options including remote working and voting and adjusting meeting times and rules to suit caring responsibilities (through legislation or constitutional amendment as required).**

12. In 2012, IPU Member Parliaments unanimously adopted a Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments (GSP).⁸ The plan sets out international standards based on existing good practices in various parliaments across the globe. The plan focuses on the following:
 - Numbers and positions: have an equal number of women and men in parliament and across all parliamentary bodies, including in leadership positions.
 - Frameworks: establish a strong legal and policy framework for gender equality.
 - Processes: introduce mechanisms and expertise to mainstream gender in parliament's work.
 - Culture and working arrangements: apply zero tolerance towards sexism and promote a work-life balance.
 - Partners: work with political parties, and ensure men and women, members and staff, share responsibility to promote gender equality.
13. The IPU defines a gender-sensitive parliament as one "that responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its composition, structures, operations, methods and work" and where "there are no barriers – substantive, structural or cultural – to women's full participation". It is a parliament that sets a positive example and promotes gender equality and women's empowerment among society.

⁸ IPU, Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive parliaments, adopted in October 2012 on the occasion of the 127th IPU Assembly, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/plan-action-gender-sensitive-parliaments>.

14. Numerous parliaments have taken measures to take stock of their level of gender-sensitivity, often based on the IPU self-assessment methodology and toolkit.⁹ Such stock-taking exercises aim at identifying the institution's strengths and weaknesses, and developing a plan for reform. In this regard, the IPU welcomes the work of the Forum for a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament appointed by the Speaker of the of Dáil Éireann, Mr Séan Ó Feargháil TD, that has covered many of the areas identified in the IPU GSP Plan of Action. Among its recommendations, the Forum has called for the Houses of the Oireachtas to conduct a self-assessment based on the IPU toolkit which may serve as a good starting point for identifying priorities and planning for institutional reform.
15. The IPU GSP Plan of Action includes a focus on working arrangements, so that they take into account the specific needs of MPs with family and caring responsibilities, and facilitate the balancing of such responsibilities and parliamentary work. Indeed, a gender-sensitive, inclusive parliament is not only a matter of numbers. To be truly inclusive, parliament must be a place where men and women from all age groups and all walks of life can and want to participate fully. It is also a parliament that models behaviour and norms for society.
16. Recommended measures in the Plan of Action include:
 - Rearrange their sitting hours (e.g. by establishing compressed sitting weeks, creating schedules that start early, avoiding late voting, and aligning sitting times with the school calendar) so that parliamentarians can return to their electorates and spend more time with their families.
 - Allocate space in the parliamentary building for a childcare centre and a family room so that parliamentarians can be close to their children during sittings.
 - Ensure that parliamentarians – both men and women – are entitled to parental leave on the birth of their children.
 - Consider alternatives where long-term parental leave cannot be implemented, such as accepting parental leave as a legitimate reason for missing a sitting day, in addition to that of “official business”.
 - Give parliamentarians who are still breastfeeding the opportunity to use a proxy vote or vote pairing so that they need not attend the sitting.
17. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown the level of adaptability of parliaments.¹⁰ While posing a challenge to business continuity, it has also offered new opportunities for MPs to balance their work and private life, with sessions, voting or committee hearings being held online. This allowed men and women MPs continue to contribute to parliamentary work even in exceptional circumstances. Going forward, this may apply to MPs with restrictions in their travel ability due to caring responsibilities, the birth or adoption of a child, or other private circumstances.
18. There are both policy and procedural changes that parliaments can make to provide all MPs with parental leave: policies seem to be rarer (New Zealand provides one such example), whereas procedural changes (such as proxy voting, or even allowing remote voting) are more common. Andorra's

⁹ IPU, Evaluating the gender sensitivity of parliament: A self-assessment toolkit, 2016, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/toolkits/2016-11/evaluating-gender-sensitivity-parliaments-self-assessment-toolkit>.

¹⁰ IPU, Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic. Available at <https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-parliamentary-responses-pandemic>.

Parliament advised that an amendment was made to its rules of procedure in 2019 to allow MPs to cast their vote remotely, "on grounds which would prevent an MPs' usual ability to attend the parliament, such as pregnancy, parental leave, serious illness or hospitalisation".¹¹

19. The real challenge for parliaments in facilitating parental leave - and family-friendly parliaments more generally - lies in their ability (and willingness) to address broader, structural, systemic barriers to balancing work and family, evident in the way parliaments organise their working hours and conditions. Addressing parental leave would be easier if parliaments also changed their working hours and maximised the predictability of the work week and MPs' schedules, such as calling for votes at similar times each day/week. Some Nordic parliaments provide interesting examples. The Norwegian Storting fixes voting times on Tuesdays at 3pm and Thursdays at 4pm and actively works to avoid late sittings. Sweden has a similar model.¹² Some scholars have suggested implementing a 'shared representation' model, so that if one person needed to take leave, the other could cover the work and voting.¹³
20. The IPU therefore supports the above recommendations. It further encourages the Houses of the Oireachtas to consider the recommendation of the Forum for a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament to conduct a self-assessment of the institution's level of gender sensitivity based on the IPU methodology, which may help identify additional measures to create favourable conditions for MPs with caring responsibilities.

Conclusion

21. The work of the Citizen's Assembly for Gender Equality – combined with the Forum for a Family Friendly Parliament – provides Ireland with a unique opportunity to transform parliament into a more inclusive and effective institution. In particular, the IPU considers that recommendations 20 and 23 of the Citizen's Assembly aim to align Ireland with existing standards and good practices on democratic functioning and the promotion of gender equality in political decision-making and, ultimately, in society. The IPU encourages such efforts and stands ready to provide any advice or support that might be required.

¹¹ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Realizing Gender Equality in Parliament. A Guide for Parliaments in the OSCE Region, Warsaw, 2021: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/b/506885_2.pdf.

¹² IPU, Gender-sensitive parliaments: A global review of good practice, 2011, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-07/gender-sensitive-parliaments>.

¹³ See <https://www.broadagenda.com.au/2020/sharing-the-load-why-cant-two-people-represent-a-single-electorate/>.