



**Report of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth
Parliamentary Association**

**Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Workshop on
Champions for Gender Equality: Achieving Equal
Participation in Commonwealth Parliaments**

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

December 6 to 8, 2023

Report

In her capacity as the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's (CPA) representative of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network, Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, Member of Parliament, participated in the CWP workshop "Champions for Gender Equality: Achieving Equal Participation in Commonwealth Parliaments", held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, from December 6 to 8, 2023.

Session 1: Introduction to the concept of a Commonwealth Gender Sensitive Parliament

The opening session allowed attendees to gain an understanding of the concept and importance of having a gender sensitive parliament (GSP) from Bénite Dibateza, CWP Network Coordinator.

For many years the responsibility of protecting and securing both women's rights and gender equality in parliaments was primarily left with women parliamentarians, however many parliaments now recognise that the necessary shifting of cultures, behaviours and norms require a whole-of-institution approach. The achievement of gender equality in parliament requires full support from across the political membership and administration of parliament and should not be a task that is solely left to individuals or groups which do not have the necessary resources or influence to bring about transformative change. As institutions that represent the interests of all citizens, parliaments should be gender equitable to offer a positive example to society at large. Parliaments should make sure that there are no barriers that curtail full participation and equality between men and women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

Ms. Dibateza highlighted that, according to research gathered by the CPA Headquarters Secretariat in September 2023, 55 parliaments and legislatures had reached the target, as established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1997, of at least 30% representation of women in either their lower or upper house. However, there remains significant political under-representation of women relative to their population across the Commonwealth. The same data gathered by the CPA Headquarters Secretariat also demonstrated that 22 parliaments and legislatures have under 5% representation of women, of which eight have no women parliamentarians at all. While the number of women who participate in politics has broadly increased over the years in parliaments across the world, women are still confronted by the pre-existing cultures, patriarchal attitudes, out-dated structures, informal and formal rules that were created by men that guide how parliamentarians should behave and shape the parliamentary agenda.

A GSP considers the diverse needs and experiences of women and men. Research indicates that when policies do not consider the needs and perspectives of all women and other under-represented groups, inequality persists as policies, programmes and services cater to the needs of the 'dominant' group in society, and are indifferent, inappropriate and even harmful to other groups within society.

Session 2: Institutionalisation and the Importance of Gender Champions in Parliament

The session drew perspectives from Bénite Dibateza, CWP Network Coordinator; Hon. Lechesa Tsenoli, M.P., Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of South Africa; and Hon. Cecil David Mwambe, M.P., Tanzania.

As was also mentioned in the session on GSP, the responsibility to gender sensitise Parliaments can no longer be an additional burden for women parliamentarians, nor to willing women and men parliamentarians; it is for the parliament as an institution, both political and administrative to enact changes.

Delegates were given insight into what makes an effective Gender Champion. Delegates were also informed of activities male parliamentarians as allies and champions of gender equality are doing across the Commonwealth to engage parliamentarians on gender positive initiatives and policies.

Delegates gained insight from the perspective of a Speaker of Parliament who stressed that Presiding Officers have a duty to change the culture of parliament and transform policies, rules and systems that subjugate women, perpetuate patriarchy and prejudices or encourage a gender insensitive environment. It was emphasised that women have been and continue to be effective leaders in society and that South Africa is evidence of this, as all but one of the nine provincial legislatures have a female Presiding Officer.

Actively involving men in gender equality initiatives encourages a participatory approach to dealing with challenges that affect women as it is only when stakeholders of all genders unite that Parliament is able to achieve gender equality for all.

Outside of Parliament, Gender Champions can increase awareness of specific gender-related issues and act as ambassadors and role models to the wider communities.

Session 3: Combatting Harassment and Violence in Parliament and Navigating Mental Health of Parliamentarians

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, the Canadian Region's CWP representative, shared her perspective during this session, which allowed participants to consider the various forms of harassment they and/or their peers may have experienced and the impact of harassment on the mental health of parliamentarians. The other presenters were Dr. Lulu Mahai, Director at the Institute of Gender Studies, and Kimberly McArthur, Chief Operating Officer at the Apolitical Foundation.

Harassment and violence against parliamentarians and parliamentary staff is a complex problem that requires multiple, complementary approaches. Therefore, parliaments, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff should be aware and able to understand the concept of harassment, violence and the negative role it can play. The causes and underlying issues behind harassment may vary across one country to another; however, most commonly, harassment is present because of:

- Abuse of power and environments which enable and overlook such abuses.
- The predominance of political masculinities (ideas about and practices of masculinity that shape and are shaped by political actors, processes and institutions).
- Limited knowledge, skills, competencies and time dedicated to developing or implementing anti-harassment policies.
- Gender stereotypes and discrimination.

- Unfavourable or nonexistent laws/policies/regulations.
- The existence of certain social norms, myths and beliefs.
- Cultures of silence and fears about repercussions if/when reporting harassment.

There are various ways legislatures can combat harassment and violence in parliament:

- Create a gender-sensitive, discrimination - and recrimination - free parliament.
- Be a role model in the fight against harassment and engage men in leadership roles.
- Provide well-established forums where women members of parliament may talk about the issues they face, including harassment of any kind, and work out solutions.
- Invest in capacity building and resource sharing to assist parliaments in their efforts to prevent harassment.
- Develop and strengthen frameworks and policies that support women's participation and engagement in politics.
- Develop strategic measures to control online space, remove inappropriate content, and uphold the right to free speech.

Mental Health in Parliament

Parliamentarians face unique challenges because of their public role, high levels of scrutiny and accessibility by the media and the public. Parliamentarians have to manage high workloads which includes balancing their role as legislators and being accessible to constituents for casework which may include sensitive and distressing topics. Trends show that increased harassment against parliamentarians, in particular against women online, increased levels of stress and vulnerability.

Ms. Gaudreau informed delegates of some of the challenges parliamentarians have faced in the House of Commons of Canada, such as stress and burnout when struggling to maintain a work-life balance. Specific focus was given to women who, through biases and norms in society, feel pressure to meet certain expectations. Stakeholders, both male and female, have a responsibility to challenge and remove patriarchal conditions and expectations that may worsen the mental health of parliamentarians.

Delegates were also given some insight into work the Parliament of Canada is doing to promote and protect mental health within parliament including the provision of a [Mental Health Toolkit for Parliamentarians and Staff](#). Created at the request of the Parliament of Canada's All-Party Mental Health Caucus, the Handbook seeks to help parliamentarians and parliamentary staff understand mental health concepts and integrate them into policymaking and everyday practices. Education on positive mental health and well-being policies, strategies and practices can equip parliamentarians and parliamentary staff with the relevant knowledge and skills needed to better cope with the normal stresses and daily challenges of life.

Session 4: Deepfakes: A New Online Gender-Based Violence?

In this session, delegates joined the CPA Virtual Conference on the 4th Industrial Revolution during a session on 'Deepfakes: A New Online Gender-Based Violence'. The

purpose of the session was to provide attendees with an approach to deepfake content framed as tech-facilitated gender-based violence. The session further outlined the challenges in detection and regulation for policy makers and offer a gendered approach to addressing the negative effects of Online Gender-Based Violence.

During this session, delegates heard research, trends and statistics from expert panellists Suzie Dunn, Assistant Professor at Dalhousie University's Schulich School of Law; Dr Kiran Hassan, Co-ordinator of Freedom of Expression and Digital Rights at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies; and Varaidzo Magodo-Matimba, Grants and Growth Coordinator at POLLICY.org.

There is a growing awareness of the devastating personal and reputational damage that deepfake content can inflict. The impact of this is deeply linked to broader issues of gender inequality and misogyny online. The effects of deepfakes are compounded for those already marginalised groups who may experience discrimination based on gender, sexuality, or racial difference. Recent research highlights a silencing effect where individuals choose to withdraw from online spaces to avoid this abuse. The consequence of this effect is a stifling of freedom for many women to participate freely in politics online for fear of harm.

Women parliamentarians are increasingly becoming the target of misogyny, violence and sexual abuse online. Research shows that deepfakes are a new form of gender-based violence as this type of online abuse and harassment disproportionately affects women. Parliaments across the Commonwealth and beyond struggle with dealing with deepfakes and synthetic media but when they do, this is done in a reactive manner in response to something that has occurred.

For example, following a report on the rise of antisemitic and Islamophobic rhetoric on X (formerly known as Twitter), the Australian Government has begun the process of updating [The Online \(Basic Safety Expectations\) Determination 2022](#). Likewise, following the increase of high-profile deepfake scandals, the House of Commons of Canada has introduced the [Online Harms Act](#), that addresses the issue of deepfakes being used as sexually explicit intimate content that is communicated without consent.

Parliamentarians now more than ever need to be proactive in thinking about how they can mitigate the negative effects of deepfake content for themselves and their peers.

Session 5: Support and Action: Parliamentary Networking Session

In many countries, relevant Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a critical role in working towards achieving gender equality and advancing the rights of women. They represent, support, and defend vulnerable groups of women and keep gender equality, women's rights and other related issues on policymakers' agendas, while also gathering and disseminating research. CSOs can be a key avenue to holding governments, parliaments, and other stakeholders to account over their implementation of gender-related commitments and serve as a dynamic source of ideas, policy perspectives, partnerships, and support.

The fourth dimension of a GSP, as outlined in the Gender Sensitising Parliaments Guidelines: Standards and a Checklist for Parliamentary Change, indicates that parliaments should have formal, routine, and substantial links between parliamentarians,

parliamentary staff, and women's civil society organisations. This is a means of maintaining ongoing dialogue with gender experts while also ensuring that the voices of those impacted by gender insensitivities are not ignored.

This networking session provided delegates with an opportunity to gain insight into the work that organisations within Tanzania are doing to promote gender equality. During the session, delegates had the chance to engage in one-to-one discussions and network with representatives from these organisations to ask questions, exchange information and share insights from their parliament. The purpose of this networking session was to explore avenues of engagement between elected representatives and CSOs which can result in mutually beneficial relationships.

Session 6: Gender Quotas

This session aimed to build upon the conversations held during the 66th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Ghana in 2023, where participants had an open discussion about the effectiveness and desirability of quotas. Delegates learned from the experiences and success stories of parliaments across the Commonwealth while also gaining knowledge of alternative strategies for furthering women's representation in parliaments. Attendees heard firsthand experiences from fellow parliamentarians: Hon. Rosemarie Bangura, M.P., Sierra Leone, Hon. Talita Monnakgotla M.P., Botswana, and Stella Manda, Senior Gender Advisor, UN Women Tanzania.

Delegates heard that gender equality and freedom from discrimination is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development. For parliaments and legislatures to function as truly representative institutions and safeguards of democracy, gender equality must be advanced.

Barriers to women's political participation and representation often include:

- Structural issues (e.g., political parties are the gatekeepers, lack of financial resources for campaigning).
- Lack of political will (e.g., politics is historically dominated by men, resistance to changes).
- Harmful norms and violence (e.g., gender-based violence against women politicians, harmful stereotypes).

Despite progress made in many areas, women's representation in most parliaments remains inadequate. To address this disparity, gender quotas have emerged as a promising strategy. Gender quotas create opportunities for women to enter politics, breaking the barriers that hinder their participation. They lead to inclusive governance and gender diversity in parliaments, leading to better decision-making, and bringing a broader range of perspectives, experiences, and expertise. This diversity fosters innovative solutions and more comprehensive debates on crucial societal issues.

Gender quotas are intended to be temporary mechanisms; the goal is to normalise women's participation and create an equitable political landscape. Parliaments across the Commonwealth have implemented gender quotas in one of two ways. The first is through legislative measures: Governments can enact legislation that mandates gender quotas in parliaments, thereby creating a legal framework for gender equality in politics. The second

is through voluntary party mechanisms: Political parties can adopt internal policies, voluntarily committing to gender quotas in their candidate selection processes.

Session 7: Strategic Media Communications

Being a strong and confident voice in local and national media is an important step in ensuring the representation of women parliamentarians in both the media and in politics. This means being an effective communicator and providing a greater platform for women parliamentarians to advocate for gender equality. The better and more confident a communicator a parliamentarian is, the more likely they can grow a platform to advocate from.

This session informed parliamentarians of methods to develop their media capabilities and increase their confidence and ease in fielding questions from journalists. Delegates heard firsthand from expert presenters on how to engage with local and national media most effectively to promote gender equality and greater women's representation through their engagements. Delegates were provided with tips for how to engage with the media.

Session 8: Establishing a Successful Women's Caucus

This session allowed delegates to hear first-hand about the importance of establishing a women's caucus, its function, impact, and how the caucus can feed into the parliamentary agenda.

Discussion focused on the idea that successful women's parliamentary caucuses are important mechanisms for empowering women parliamentarians. They help to build parliamentary working environments that advocate for equality between male and female parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. It has been recognised that caucuses can advance the equal and meaningful participation of women in parliaments and encourage gender sensitisation of the institution. Currently, just under 100 parliaments around the world have functioning women's parliamentary caucuses.

Session 9: Gender Mainstreaming

The final session of the Workshop allowed delegates to gain a concrete understanding of gender mainstreaming and it being a core element of a gender sensitive parliament.

Delegates heard that there are many benefits of gender mainstreaming such as encouraging a critical understanding of the full impact and implications of policymaking and reform, increasing public trust in government and parliamentary democracy, remedying and/or mitigating existing discrimination in certain sections of society, avoiding creating new and unnecessary disadvantages, and allowing for more robust and effective legislation.

It is the responsibility of parliament to ensure that it does not subscribe to constructed stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality. Gender blind policies can be ineffective as they do not address the diverse needs and experiences of communities which are not always the same.

Conclusion

Through their participation in the workshop, delegates enhanced their understanding of how to champion the equal participation of women and gender equality in the context of

their own jurisdictions. They learned about best practices and case studies from highly experienced experts in the area of gender sensitive parliaments, gender equality, harassment and violence in parliament, gender mainstreaming and the media. Importantly, delegates established and strengthened networks and partnerships with other parliamentarians and stakeholders present.

Respectfully submitted,

Alexandra Mendès, M.P.
Chair of the Canadian Branch of the
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs*

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
ACTIVITY	Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Workshop on Champions for Gender Equality: Achieving Equal Participation in Commonwealth Parliaments
DESTINATION	Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
DATES	December 6 to 8, 2023
DELEGATION	
SENATE	
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Marie-Hélène Gaudreau
STAFF	
TRANSPORTATION	
ACCOMMODATION	\$0.00
HOSPITALITY	\$0.00
PER DIEMS	\$0.00

OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$0.00
MISCELLANEOUS	\$0.00
TOTAL	\$0.00

**All related expenses were reimbursed by the Canadian Region's Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians network.*