

Canadian Group
Inter-Parliamentary Union



Groupe canadien
Union interparlementaire

**Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation
respecting its participation at the 56th Session of the
Commission on the Status of Women**

Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

**New York, New York, United States of America
February 29, 2012**

Report

Introduction

A Canadian delegation participated in a parliamentary meeting that is held every year when the UN Commission on the Status of Women meets in New York. This meeting was hosted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) on the topic of *Empowering Rural Women: What Role for Parliaments?*

The morning sessions focused on the political empowerment of rural women, while the afternoon sessions covered ways to address discrimination against women in legislation, particularly regarding access to land, property, credit and inheritance. Access to health care was also discussed.

Canadian delegation

The following Canadian parliamentarians participated in this meeting:

- The Honourable Suzanne Fortin-Duplessis, Senator for Rougemont;
- Mr. Ted Opitz, MP, Conservative Party, Etobicoke Centre; and
- Ms. Djaouida Sellah, MP, NDP, Saint-Bruno–Saint-Hubert.

The delegation was accompanied by Mr. Serge Pelletier, Administrative Secretary, International and Interparliamentary Affairs Division, and Ms. Sandra Gruescu, Analyst, Social Affairs Division, Library of Parliament.

1. The Conference

a) Introduction

The President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Executive Director of UN Women gave the opening remarks.

We heard that women are active in small and medium-sized businesses. They help drive the economy, but their abilities are underused. Furthermore, women hold only 19.5% of seats in national parliaments. Equality between men and women is not yet a reality. This means that legislation, financial policies and family rights must be examined in greater detail with a view to stopping discrimination against women and improving their access to land, credit and inheritances.

One way to address discrimination is through legal measures. For example, it is important to develop measures that would ensure that women have equal status and are given access to technology. This would give them more time to invest in social and political activities.

Rural women also need to be encouraged to participate in society more actively. This can be accomplished by creating policies that include gender equality measures and by improving infrastructure to increase accessibility for women and ensure that they are no longer marginalized. Women must know what their rights and responsibilities are in politics, and they must believe that they are capable of holding decision-making positions.

b) Rural Women Today

i. Introduction

Women play a pivotal role in maintaining, developing and protecting rural areas. They contribute to culture, and their work must be recognized as important. However, it is difficult for these women, because they are discriminated against when they exercise their rights. They also become victims of violence and human trafficking. All the authorities must be made aware of their problems.

ii. Presentations

Ms. Winnie Byanyima is the Gender Team Director with the Bureau for Development Policy under the UN Development Program, politician and diplomat. She explained that women are often portrayed as a vulnerable population, but they are not. Worldwide, 43% of people who work in agriculture are women, and 50% of food production workers are women. Despite their significant contributions, women are constantly discriminated against, for example, where land ownership is concerned. Only 10% to 20% of women own land. Even though they are already major contributors to the economy, women could contribute more to land cultivation if they had access to the same resources that men do, such as fertilizers, which would increase their yields anywhere from 2.5% to 4%.

Having rural women become independent requires more than just being involved in the economy. They need institutions that give them power. We need to ensure that women are fairly represented in government, so that it is a true democracy. We need to distribute economic and political power fairly. Parliament should take these factors into account and open their doors to women's organizations to hear what they have to say. When budgets and legislation are being developed, we must consider them from a woman's point of view.

Ms. Lenita Freidenvall is a researcher with the Department of Political Science at Stockholm University. Her research interests include women's representation in politics, gender quotas, candidate selection, political parties, citizenship and feminist movements.

Ms. Freidenvall gave us an overview of women's representation in politics. She mentioned that we need more information and research on women's involvement in local politics. The number of women in parliament has increased, but much work remains to be done. There are significant variations at the regional level.

In order to increase women's participation in politics, the best practices to adopt are as follows:

- legal regulations, legal quotas such as reserved seats, candidate quotas;
- party rules: party quotas, targets, goals and formalized candidate selection rules;
- capacity building: training in communication and leadership skills, media relations to combat stereotypes, fundraising, campaign management and mentor programs; and
- gender-sensitive rules in elected bodies: childcare, regulated sitting hours, bans on night sitting, women's caucuses.

Ms. Carmen Quintanilla Barba, Group of the European People's Party, talked about how women are a driving force both culturally and economically. When they live in rural areas, they face major challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, poor transportation and lack of basic services in health care and education. These women cannot fully enjoy their rights and are constantly discriminated against. This exacerbates the depopulation process of rural areas.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe noted that there are a number of concerns regarding the situation of rural women. They are not properly accounted for in national statistics, and their employment options are limited, as is their access to credit, social services and health care. They also face obstacles regarding property and inheritance rights.

As a result, the Assembly made a number of interesting recommendations to the member states of the Council of Europe, advising them to do the following:

- devise legal measures and policy specifically focusing on the situation of rural women and aimed at achieving progress in equal opportunities so as to create the conditions to enable women to remain in rural areas;
- ensure a gender-sensitive approach in the elaboration and implementation of all the policies that have an impact on the situation of rural women;
- involve rural women in the elaboration and implementation of policies and decisions affecting them;
- promote greater participation by rural women in decision making, encouraging their presence in local political life, in the governing bodies of businesses, co-operatives, local agricultural boards and agricultural associations;
- monitor the proper implementation of the law by law enforcement officials and other public officials in rural areas, in the fields of justice, labour law and criminal law, in order to strengthen respect of the rule of law;
- set up or support visibility and awareness campaigns, as well as information services to inform rural women about their rights;
- apply gender-budgeting; and

- sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Human Trafficking.

2. Addressing Discrimination in Legislation

Mr. Jean-Claude Mignon, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, opened the afternoon session. He explained that discrimination persists in the four corners of the world, but that women living in rural areas are worse off than most. These women face major challenges: their rights are violated, they are vulnerable to violence, and unemployment is on the rise. These women can also be more vulnerable to human trafficking. They do not have independent income, because they work for family members. Their situation is dire enough that young women tend to leave the countryside for the city due to the difficult conditions. We like to think that women's rights have been recognized, but in fact much remains to be done.

Ms. Gaynel Curry, Gender and Women Rights Advisor, High Commissioner for Human Rights, continued the presentation. Women face many issues when it comes to land, not only as regards its ownership, but also as regards the use of its resources. Women control only a small percentage of all titled land worldwide. Human rights experts have suggested that the low percentage of ownership is often the result of low levels of inheritance of property by women and the denial of other fundamental human rights for women. The situation is more critical for women who live in poverty, in rural regions and in minority situations, and for older women.

Human rights experts have also mentioned that women's rights should be inserted in the design and implementation of poverty eradication policies, rural development strategies and land reform programs. This requires adopting a human rights-based approach.

A human rights-based approach is defined as:

... a conceptual framework from the process of human development that is based on international human rights standards. It analyses inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development.¹

To allow for the application of this human rights-based approach, the following principles need to be applied and incorporated in policies, programs and projects related to women and land.

a) Equality and Non-discrimination

All human beings have a right not to be discriminated against.

¹ Presentation by Gaynel Curry on the occasion of the 56th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 29 February 2012, Conference Room 3, NLB, UN Headquarters, New York.

There must be formal and substantive equality. Formal equality requires the reform of the laws and policies containing discriminatory provisions. Substantive equality is concerned with the effects of the laws, policies and practices and ensures that they do not maintain but instead alleviate the inherent disadvantage that particular groups, such as women, experience.

b) Participation

Women are excluded from decision-making processes regarding the distribution of land. Women should have the same rights as men in the redistribution of the land.

c) Accountability and the Rule of Law

States and other duty-bearers are answerable for the observance of human rights. Aggrieved rights-holders should be able to institute proceedings when rights are infringed upon to obtain redress. States should be equally responsible for protecting women against infringement of human rights committed by non-state actors like family and community members.

In summary, women's rights need to be considered in land-related laws, policies and programs.

Professor L. P. Freedman, Director, Averting Maternal Death and Disability Program, Columbia University, also spoke. There is a consensus on the principle that underlies international aid to be given to rural women. The question is: where does the problem lie exactly? There is a need for basic clinical interventions that should be available in the primary care system. We need available, accessible and affordable health services. The biggest challenge is the huge gap between what we know and what we do; between what is being reported and what women really experience in their group. They experience a completely dysfunctional system.

Certain problems were referred to by Professor Freedman. Care is inequitable and abusive. It was described by the Health Bank as a "quiet corruption." Rampant absenteeism was reported. Health workers are not where they should be. There is also an extensive disrespect of women during childbirth.

To remedy these issues, the power of the front line providers should be looked at. Getting the policies right is critical but not sufficient. The actual functioning of the system needs to be examined. The right to demand an efficient health care system is part of the very core of building a strong social institution or a very democratic society. There is a huge opportunity for parliamentarians to do problem solving and to challenge the status quo. There is accountability at the front line of services where women meet the system.

Professor Freedman concluded with three lessons and one hard truth:

1. Accountability at the front line of services requires both top-down and bottom-up accountability. We need the right policies. Rural women should be able to hold bottom-up accountability.

2. Rural women's issues cannot be solved by taking best practices imposed from outside. It has to come from a local level.
3. The right to information is key to the accountability dynamic. There is also a need for transparency to know what is happening exactly.
4. The hard truth is that nobody gives up power or opens their power to questioning easily. There is a need for that kind of commitment; we need to take a risk on vulnerability; taking the risk inherent to the rearrangement of power is necessary to implement change.

Respectfully submitted,

The Honourable Salma Ataullahjan, Senator
President, Canadian Group of the IPU

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
ACTIVITY	56th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women
DESTINATION	New York, New York, United States of America
DATES	February 29, 2012
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Hon. Suzanne Fortin-Duplessis
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Mr. Ted Opitz Dr. Djaouida Sellah
STAFF	Mr. Serge Pelletier, Executive Secretary Ms. Sandra Gruescu, Advisor
TRANSPORTATION	\$ 3,976.53
ACCOMMODATION	\$ 2,370.94
HOSPITALITY	
PER DIEMS	\$ 901.07
OFFICIAL GIFTS	
MISCELLANEOUS / REGISTRATION FEES	\$ 2.99
TOTAL	\$ 7,251.53