

Canadian Group
Inter-Parliamentary Union



Groupe canadien
Union interparlementaire

**Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation
to the Parliamentary Meeting on the Occasion of the
54th Session of the United Nations Commission on the
Status of Women: the Role of Parliaments in Enforcing
Gender Equality and Women's Rights,
15 Years After Beijing**

Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

**New York, New York, United States of America
March 2, 2010**

Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation to the Parliamentary Meeting on the Occasion of the 54th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women: the Role of Parliaments in Enforcing Gender Equality and Women's Rights, 15 Years After Beijing

Conference Theme

A Canadian delegation participated in an event at the United Nations (UN) organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW). This event took place on the occasion of the 54th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW). The theme was: "The Role of Parliaments in Enforcing Gender Equality and Women's Rights: 15 years after Beijing."

Agenda

The Conference took place at the UN Headquarters in New York City on 2 March 2010.

In parallel with the priority theme for the UNCSW, the IPU event focused on achievements that have been made at the national level with respect to women's rights, fifteen years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Sessions examined how parliaments have supported change at the national level and what parliamentary mechanisms have been used to pursue enforcement of commitments made at Beijing. Parliamentarians had the opportunity to exchange views, national experiences and good practices in implementation. Overall, these meetings provided an important opportunity for Canadian parliamentarians to raise awareness among colleagues from around the world of Canadian positions on key issues, as well as to learn about debates and developments in other countries and at the UNCSW.

The Conference was organized around the following themes:

- Women in parliament: the first step for progress;
- Building a gender-sensitive national legal framework;
- Respecting women's rights: from de jure to de facto equality; and
- Building partnerships to achieve gender equality.

Members of the delegation also participated in discussions at an event organized by the Canadian Mission on financing mechanisms related to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

The Canadian Delegation

The Canadian delegation included the following parliamentarians:

- Senator Nancy Ruth, Head of the Delegation;
- The Honourable Rose-Marie Losier-Cool, Senator;
- Ms. Nicole Demers, MP;

- The Honourable Anita Neville, MP; and
- Ms. Irene Mathysen, MP.
- Mr. Serge Pelletier, Executive Secretary, Canadian IPU Group;
- Ms. Allison Goody, Analyst.

Conference Proceedings¹

Ms. Margaret Mensah-Williams, Vice-President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians welcomed the conference participants.

Ms. Rachel Mayanja, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, then delivered a keynote address. Ms. Mayanja provided an overview of the achievements that have been made to date on implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) now has 186 state parties, and more states are devoting resources to gender equality programs and adopting mainstreaming strategies.

However, progress has been uneven across regions and within countries. Specific groups, such as immigrant women and women in rural areas, face particular challenges. Moreover, women remain more likely than men to be living in poverty and account for nearly two-thirds of illiterate adults. Ms. Mayanja pointed out that the persistence of gender stereotypes, the prevalence of violence against women, the underrepresentation of women in decision-making processes, the burden of unpaid work borne by women, and the limited engagement of men in the advancement of gender equality have all hindered progress. She also took stock of measures that have made a difference. Many countries have adopted legal frameworks and national plans on gender equality.

Session 1: Women in Parliament

The first session focused on the progress and setbacks that women have experienced in politics over the past fifteen years.

Ms. Julie Ballington, programme specialist at the IPU, provided a canvas of the situation. There has been a six-fold increase in women's participation in parliaments since 1945, reaching 18.8% in 2010. This pace accelerated after Beijing. However, progress has been uneven. While some 44 chambers have attained the UN goal of having 30% or more women members, another 71 have less than 10% women members. Overall, women have made less progress in attaining ministerial positions and in becoming heads of state or government or heads of parliaments.

Next, Professor Drude Dahlerup of Stockholm University discussed measures that can be taken to accelerate progress in women's participation. She noted the positive advancements from earlier decades, but argued that further changes in procedures and political culture are required. Political parties in particular have the power to influence nomination processes and to place candidates in electable ridings. Most countries with high numbers of women parliamentarians have proportional representation systems and

¹ A detailed summary report of the Conference proceedings was prepared by the IPU. It can be accessed at: <http://www.ipu.org/splz-e/csw10/report.pdf>.

have adopted some form of a quota system. For example, Rwanda has instituted a reserved seats system where two women must be elected from each district. Overall, Professor Dahlerup concluded that while quotas do not solve all of the problems, they can facilitate increases in political representation under the right conditions.

A plenary debate ensued on these topics.

Session 2: Building a Gender-Sensitive National Legal Framework

Delegates heard about mechanisms that are available to review discriminatory legislation and the ways in which legislation can be developed to implement commitments undertaken in Beijing.

Ms. Rebecca Kadaga, the Deputy Speaker of Uganda, discussed tools that can monitor the implementation of CEDAW. Parliamentary mechanisms such as women's caucuses and specialized committees can identify priority areas for action. In Uganda, after some of these mechanisms were put in place, private member's bills were introduced on trafficking, domestic violence, and the prohibition of female genital mutilation. Uganda is also developing a system where bills would include a certificate of compliance with CEDAW and the Beijing Platform. However, she argued that parliaments could be doing more to monitor gender budgeting and the government's implementation of international instruments.

Next, Ms. Youla A. Haddadin from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights spoke on the persistence of laws that discriminate against women, despite their prohibition under international human rights law. In 2007, the Office of the High Commissioner produced a report on this issue and looked at the feasibility of establishing a dedicated mechanism to examine discriminatory laws. Ms. Haddadin noted the important oversight role that parliamentarians can play in monitoring their government's compliance with CEDAW, including the budgeting of national plans and the institution of permanent gender-specific legislative measures.

The presentations were followed by a plenary debate.

Session 3: Respecting Women's Rights – From de Jure to de Facto Equality

The afternoon session began with a presentation from Mr. Garen Nazarian (Armenia), Chair of the UNCSW. He told delegates that priority must be placed on closing the gap between commitments and implementation. Parliamentarians must work to ensure that new impetus is given to efforts to advance women's rights.

The third session focused on the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of gender equality measures. Ms. Sabine de Bethune, an MP from Belgium, described the key mechanisms in her country that provide oversight of the executive's work on women's rights. First, Belgium has a Senate Advisory Committee on Gender Equality, which has looked at the government's reports to the CEDAW Committee and debated the conclusions of the CEDAW Committee. Second, the government must report to parliament annually on the policies of all ministries related to the Beijing Platform. Ms. Bethune noted that this requirement will be overtaken by a more comprehensive law on gender mainstreaming.

Ms. Rachel Shebesh, an MP from Kenya, presented on the situation in her country. Women still face many challenges to their status as a result of legal impediments and economic disparities. Nevertheless, there have been some legislative and policy advances in Kenya related to women's rights. For example, the Work Injury Benefit Act, enacted in 2008, ensures insurance benefits for all employees without discrimination, and the 2006 Sexual Offences Act introduced punitive measures for rape. Finally, free primary education since 2003 has enhanced the participation of young girls.

A plenary debate ensued on these topics.

Session 4: Building Partnerships to Achieve Gender Equality

The Conference concluded with a discussion of the interface between parliaments and national machineries for gender equality. Presenters also touched on the importance of collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs).

The first presenter was Ms. Fatema Khafagy, the regional consultant on gender issues for the UN Development Programme. She focused her remarks on examples from the Arab region and explained the various forms of national machineries that countries have adopted, including specialized government departments mandated to address women's issues and gender equality, gender commissions, and women's councils. These entities help to apply pressure for movement on issues affecting women. There remains, however, room for greater collaboration between national machineries and parliaments.

The final presenter was Ms. Colleen Lowe Morna, the Executive Director of Gender Links, a South African CSO. She focused on the integral role that CSOs can play in advancing women's issues. Ms. Morna discussed the advances in the Global South in terms of women's representation. This has been aided by civil society efforts, which have called for women's full parity in decision-making positions, instead of the oft-cited 30% target. CSOs had focused on capacity-building for women politicians, but are increasingly working on research and legislative drafting assistance and tools to handle the media.

The presentations were followed by a plenary debate.

Conclusion

On 3 March 2010, the President of the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians, Senator Pia Cayetano (Philippines), delivered a statement to the plenary of the UNCSW on behalf of the delegates who had participated in the one-day session.²

Respectfully submitted,

Senator Nancy Ruth
Canadian Group IPU

² Full text of the statement: <http://www.ipu.org/Un-e/sp-csw030310.pdf>.

Travel Costs

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| ASSOCIATION | Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) |
| ACTIVITY | Parliamentary Meeting on the Occasion of the 54 th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women: the Role of Parliaments in Enforcing Gender Equality and Women's Rights, 15 Years After Beijing |
| DESTINATION | New York, New York, United States of America |
| DATES | March 2, 2010 |
| DELEGATION | |
| SENATE | Senator Nancy Ruth, Head of the Delegation Honourable Rose-Marie Losier-Cool, Senator |
| HOUSE OF COMMONS | Ms. Nicole Demers, M.P. Honourable Anita Neville, M.P. Ms. Irene Mathysen, M.P. |
| STAFF | Mr. Serge Pelletier, Executive Secretary, Canadian IPU Group Ms. Allison Goody, Analyst |
| TRANSPORTATION | \$ 8,008.68 |
| ACCOMMODATION | \$ 1,546.94 |
| HOSPITALITY | |
| PER DIEMS | \$ 1,148.19 |
| OFFICIAL GIFTS | |
| MISCELLANEOUS / REGISTRATION FEES | \$ 5.34 |
| TOTAL | \$10,709.15 |